

“Acting on What We Hear”
March 24, 2024

Ezekiel 13:10-14
Matthew 7:24-29

Throughout this season of Lent, we have been both confronted with and comforted by the words of the Sermon on the Mount. This morning, we listened as Jesus concluded the Sermon with a parable.

Matthew then tells us that “When Jesus finished these sayings, the crowd was astonished at his teaching...”

Actually, the Greek word for their response suggests an even stronger reaction—something like: “they were *so amazed as to be practically overwhelmed*.”

You might know what that’s like, because of what we’ve heard on recent Sundays:

Your righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees.

You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world.

Don’t worry about tomorrow.

You cannot serve God and wealth.

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Hearing those words, anyone might feel amazed and overwhelmed.

There is even more, of course—and we’ve been sending you *more* each morning—reflections by members and friends inviting you to ponder the words of Jesus along with them: a little wake-up call throughout these forty days.

What we hear from Jesus, while sometimes puzzling and always challenging, is good news. Not easy news—but *good*. In a world that is filled with destruction, greed, and so much that would lead us to despair, we are offered a Way that strengthens us to face the dangers and, well, the evil surrounding us. We are offered a Way that can make us truly alive.

I once heard someone say, “Christianity isn’t complex, it’s just hard.” That seems to be a good way of describing the direct but difficult words of Jesus that have come to us in these weeks.

It’s been said of *this* congregation that we live *out of a belief* that “Christianity is demanding and *out of a desire* to understand its demands and to be encouraged and supported in responding to them.”

The Sermon on the Mount gives us the understanding and the encouragement that we desire, that we might live a liberal, open-hearted Christianity.

Having heard this Sermon, there are two important questions: “What will I do?” and “What will *we* do?”

To help answer these questions, Jesus tells a parable about two men—one wise and one foolish—and their building projects. It seems straightforward: the wise man built on a rock; the foolish man built on the sand in a dry riverbed. The rains came—one house stood and one house fell.

This parable isn't complex. It's just hard.

It keeps working on us, even after the Sermon is over.

It keeps asking us about what we are doing and what we are failing to do.

It keeps asking us where God's grace is sustaining us and where we are being swept away.

This simple parable is hard because it continues to confront us as we claim to be those who follow in the way of Jesus Christ.

And so, this parable might be one of the most important parts of the Sermon on the Mount. As with the rest of the sermon, it comes to us in our uncertain days and keeps questioning our actions even as it constantly calls us to action.

We are always challenged as we seek to follow in the way of Jesus Christ. Yes, we know sunny days and joy and strength. But we also know those times when the rain comes down in torrents, when the flood waters rise, and the gales blow against all we are doing to bring blessing and not curse into the world, all we are doing to increase goodness among people.

What allows us to prevail against the storms that inevitably come is not that we have *listened* to the teachings of Jesus—any fool can do that. What allows us to prevail against the storms that inevitably come is that we *act* on the words of Jesus. This is the Way that leads to life—even when we are threatened by destruction.

We may feel astonished, even overwhelmed. Still, we called daily to act in our time and in our place out of what we have heard from Jesus—to see right relationships, to let our light shine, to live out of simple trust in God's care, to serve God, to, well, to do unto others as we would have them do to us.

Keep this parable in mind, then, as we remember once more that day when Jesus enters Jerusalem as he nears his death.

Jesus creates a living parable, arriving in Jerusalem not in the full might and power of military victory, but on a donkey, as the One who brings God's peace and mercy.

“Those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna.’”

As you know, this is a word that means “save us,” which is not how we generally want to talk about life or even the life of faith.

To shout, “Save us!” suggests that we can't take care of ourselves, that we can't use our own ingenuity, or thoughtfulness, or scientific skills, or creativity to solve the problems that beset us.

To shout, “Save us!” suggests that we're not strong enough or tough enough or stoic enough to bear up under the rain and the flood and the gales. In other words, it says, “We can't do this on our own.”

To shout, “Save us!” is to be honest before God.

Unfortunately, in our time, such honest speech has been twisted in to a way of drawing a line between those who are in and those who are out, those who have made it and those who do not, those who are “saved” and those who aren’t. This is not a line we chose to draw in this congregation and we reject any attempts to do so.

On theologian asks: “What does it mean to be saved?” and answering his own question says that “In considering the matter some people focus on life after death, but it seems to me salvation is closer to daily life itself. Salvation means being saved *from* greed, hatred, and confusion; and being saved *for* kindness and creativity, wisdom and compassion. If someone asks us if we are saved, we should say: ‘Sometimes.’ In our more loving moments we are saved from hatred, even if only for fifteen seconds...”¹

Hosanna. Save us.

We might even say that the words of Jesus have a “saving” quality to them.

The events of Palm Sunday and the week ahead remind us—if we need reminding—that Christianity is not complex, it is hard. It is demanding. We will be challenged. We will face difficult choices. When we build on that foundation of both hearing *and* acting on the words of Jesus, we might be saved from the rain and the flood and the gales.

Look as Jesus enters the city.

If we are among those who are saved *sometimes*, if we at times hope to find ourselves saved *from* greed, hatred, and confusion and being saved *for* kindness and creativity, wisdom and compassion, this story of palm branches and “Hosannas” is the place to start. With eye and ears and hearts open we begin to get better picture of who this Jesus is and why we would dare to want to act on what he says.

The Palm Sunday parable speaks to us a people who seek to hear the words of Jesus and to act on them. In doing so, we discover the sustaining presence of God, the One who in Jesus Christ suffers with us. In Jesus we see not an unmoved, impassible god, but the One who responds to human pain, who enters into the very heart of suffering.

We see the One who saves us arriving humbly on a donkey. We see the One who gives us the courage to follow in his Way moving resolutely toward his own fearsome destination.

This Palm Sunday parable keeps working on us as well, telling us that God has entered our world, changing our world and our lives. That is what salvation is about. The word “salvation” speaks of wholeness of life, of health, of well-being in body and spirit. It’s a good, conventionally religious word, but we don’t use it much—and probably won’t use it much, because we’re not really a conventionally religious people.

We do know this: Illness must be walked through in all its pain and uncertainty and treatment and healing day by day. The anxiety about tomorrow keeps us awake in the night. The sorrow of grief is with us when we wake each morning. And we know quite well that we will not suddenly

arrive on the pleasant shores of racial harmony, interfaith understanding, or international peace. The perilous journeys to such lands are long and needing our best efforts each day.

On Palm Sunday, when we suddenly find ourselves, branches in hand, shouting “Hosanna,” it feels right because we sense that the water is rising, that the house is on fire, that we need a savior.

As I said, the parable at the end of the Sermon on the Mount reminds us, even warns us, that we will always be challenged as we seek to follow in the way of Jesus Christ. In some way, we encounter the betrayal and growing shadows of Maundy Thursday, we encounter the crucifixion and death of Friday, the emptiness of Saturday almost every day.

And we know this: In Jesus, God takes on human suffering, bearing it fully on the cross. That is our wholeness, our well-being, our salvation.

So, we are able through all of this, to be those who not only hear but also act upon the words of Jesus that are the very words of life.

¹ Jay McDaniel <http://www.jesusjazzbuddhism.org/the-religion-of-daily-life.html>