

Luke 19:28-40

A BITTERSWEET DAY

In the movie, *City Slickers*, three best friends are tired of their jobs and bored with their lives so they decide to chase their troubles away with a fantasy vacation. They trade their briefcases for saddlebags and set out to find freedom and adventure herding cattle under the New Mexico sky. At one point, the three friends are riding their horses and talking. Ed says, “Look, it’s a beautiful day. I’m here with my two best friends and we’re driving a herd of cattle across the plains. One of the best days of my life.”

Phil says, “Okay, what’s one of the best days ever in your whole life. Mitch tells about his best day and then his worst day. Phil goes next, and then it’s Ed’s turn. At first, Ed declines, saying, “I don’t want to play this game.” As his friends look on, Ed changes his mind and says, “I’m fourteen and my father and mother are fighting again, you know, because she caught him again. This time the girl drove by the house to pick him up. And I finally realized he wasn’t just cheating on my mother, he was cheating on us. So I told him, I said, ‘You’re bad to us and we don’t love you. I’ll take care of my mother and little sister. We don’t need you anymore.’” He made like he was going to hit me but I didn’t budge. Then he turned around and he left. He never bothered us again. But I took care of my mother and my sister from that day on. That’s my best day.”

Phil responds by saying, “What was your worst day?” Ed answers, “Same day,” and he rode off to be alone with his thoughts. That was a bittersweet day for Ed.

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed colt, we can only imagine what a bittersweet day it was for him. This was the final phase of his ministry; it was the beginning of the end. Certainly, Jesus knew that he was obeying the Father’s will. He had prayed often and listened carefully and he had faithfully done his part in accordance with the divine plan. Ten chapters earlier, Luke tells us, “When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Lk. 9:51). Along the way, Jesus had told his disciples no less than three times that he must go to Jerusalem – for it was there that he would undergo great suffering, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

The time was now, and Jesus, the Son of God, surely felt a great deal of satisfaction in fulfilling God’s plan for the salvation of the world.

And yet, don’t you imagine that it was also a bittersweet time for Jesus? While he was fully God and delighted in doing God’s will, at the same time, Jesus was fully human, and what man (in his prime and in his right mind) is ready to die? I can’t help but wonder, as Jesus experienced all of the joy and revelry around him as people poured into Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, how difficult it must have been for Jesus to identify with the festive mood of the multitude. Jesus, who quite often was the life of any party, now had a death sentence hanging over him and that had to weigh heavy on his heart and mind. Surely Jesus was pulled in two opposite directions and, while he would choose the right course, it must have been difficult and bittersweet.

One feature about this Palm Sunday narrative that is unique to Luke’s telling of the story is that there is no greeting by the general crowds. Luke focuses solely on Jesus and his disciples. His disciples secured the colt. His disciples placed Jesus on the colt. And, it was a multitude of Jesus’ disciples, who kept spreading their cloaks on the road and praising God: ‘Blessed is the

king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”
This was not the same group, which, later in that same week, called for Jesus’ crucifixion.

And yet, while it must have been “music to Jesus’ ears” to receive the praise and adoration of his followers, surely, it was also bittersweet knowing that, during the course of this week ahead, these very same disciples would forsake him as they looked after their own interests and saved their own hides. Their joy consisted of an emotional high but it did not have “staying power” as each and every one of the disciples would deny their Master and desert him in his hour of humiliation and need. It was a bittersweet day, indeed.

Furthermore, Jesus came riding into Jerusalem – not on a great and powerful stallion as a conquering hero would have done – but on a lowly donkey that had never been ridden before for this one was set aside for a special use by God. In the past, when words had no effect and people refused to understand the Word of God, the prophets resorted to some dramatic action which put their message into a picture which none could fail to see. Likewise, Jesus entered into Jerusalem in this way so there could be no doubt that he was the Messiah, God’s anointed King. It was a deliberate fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 – “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” In humility, Jesus came to his people in love and in peace, and not as a conquering hero.

As intentional as Jesus was about coming in peace, his disciples saw only what they wanted to see. In their minds, Jesus was indeed the Messiah - but not one, who came in peace. They had every hope and expectation that, as God’s anointed One, Jesus would flex the divine muscle and, once and for all, strike a blow against Rome and drive these despised oppressors from their land. No matter how much and how often Jesus had taught his disciples that his kingdom was not of this world, his disciples were focused on their wants so they hailed him as a military leader. And, since Jesus didn’t live up to their expectations, I think this accounts for their missing in action during Holy Week when Jesus needed them most. His understanding of the Messiah as a suffering Servant and Savior over sin and death didn’t square with his disciples’ desires, and that must have made for one bittersweet day.

As Jesus drew closer to Jerusalem, amidst all of the loud praise and adoration, some Pharisees said to Jesus, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop!” It’s possible that the Pharisees were concerned for Jesus’ safety; after all, they had warned him earlier about the threat of King Herod. It’s more likely that they were stating their own disagreement or disbelief or jealousy concerning Jesus’ popularity with so many people. Or, even more to the point, they were concerned that such an uproar would arouse and upset the Romans and would lead to severe repercussions against the Jews.

Jesus responded to the Pharisees’ order that he quiet the crowd by saying, “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.” In other words, some things simply must be said. The truth will come out; it cannot be long silenced. One way or another, God will provide a witness though every mouth be stopped. As Jesus experienced one more confrontation with Israel’s religious authorities, surely it was a bittersweet day for Jesus. Here, these religious leaders were called to bring the people into the very presence of God, and yet, they were going in the wrong direction! By not recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, they were hindering the will of God!

It’s no wonder then, as Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it. It was truly a bittersweet day for our Lord as he was fulfilling God’s will and yet he was so misunderstood by so many. And, I can’t help but wonder – as I read and reflect on this Palm Sunday narrative and the Passion that follows – if Jesus doesn’t also look down through the centuries and sees our city

and weeps over it as well. After all, there are many of the same feelings and forces at work now as there were then.

We too will break his heart with our on-again, off-again kind of discipleship. Today and Easter Sunday especially, the multitudes of Jesus' disciples will be out in force praising and welcoming the King who comes in the name of the Lord. But, will the multitude remain in place the Sunday after Easter? What then? Will our collective enthusiasm, joy, and commitment remain or not?

Each one of us, in our own way – whether because of our “now-you-see-it-now-you-don't” brand of discipleship, or our desire to remake God in our own image to do our will, or our pharisaical faith that comes off as being self-righteous – has sinned, and thus, added our own bittersweet taste to this day and this Holy Week. If there is any consolation and comfort, it is this: Jesus came into the world to save us from our sins. If he had not done so, this day would be bittersweet for us as well!

By the help of the Holy Spirit, let us confess and repent of our sins. Then, empowered by the same Spirit of God, let us resolve to be Jesus' glad and faithful disciples. Let us follow the Leader by acting just like him.

In the last century, a couple returned to their missionary assignment in India. They left their twelve-year-old son with relatives in the United States so that the boy could continue his education. They expected to return shortly, but war erupted, and the parents were separated from their son for eight long years. Finally, the parents arrived on the West Coast and telegraphed their twenty-year-old son, who was now a student in college, to meet them at the train station. It was almost dark when the train finally pulled into the station. The missionary parents were the only ones to leave the train at that station. The son could hardly see them in the evening haze, and it was dusky enough that the parents could not see their son very well either. They embraced in the semi-darkness. Then, the three walked toward the railway station where there was more light. With tears streaming down her face, the mother looked into the face of her son and exclaimed, “Arnie, our boy's gone and looked like you. He looks just like you.”

Isn't that our calling as Christians? We are sent forth to be Jesus' witnesses in the world. And, hopefully, others will look at us and say, “Why, those people have gone and looked like Jesus! They look, speak, and act just like Jesus. They must be his disciples.” We have a choice to make on this Palm Sunday and every day for that matter. “Blessed is Jesus the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” Do we really mean that and live that affirmation in our daily lives? We need to know where we stand.

Another way of getting at that is to return to the movie *City Slickers* once again. Mitch is talking with Curly, the old cowboy, as they ride the trail together. Curly tells Mitch, “You city folks like to worry about a lot of stuff. None of you get it. Do you know what the secret of life is? One thing” (as Curly holds up his right index finger). “What's that one thing?” Mitch asks. And Curly responds, “That's what you have to figure out.” By movie's end, Mitch has found his smile once again because he has rediscovered what that one thing is for him and it's being with his family.

If we were to ask Jesus what that “one thing” was, he wouldn't hesitate to tell us: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit, if we make Jesus' answer the one thing we strive to do with our lives, then we will know the deepest joy and the greatest sense of fulfillment ever;

and, in turn, we will give eternal praise and glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

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