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“The Purpose of Conflict”

Palm Sunday tends to be one of the highest attended worship services of the year. It's the beginning of Holy Week. It's upbeat. And it's a little different. There are the palms. If you've been worshiping for some time, you've probably seen the children parade around the sanctuary with their palm branches, only to have them confiscated, a short time later, for using them for swordfights.

We tend to think about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, to the waving of palm branches, as a victorious parade. Today, I invite you to think of it, not as a parade, but as a confrontation. I'm going to suggest it was more of a spectacle or a protest than anything else.

Earlier in the gospel, he referred to Jerusalem as “the city that kills the prophets.” Then, he “set his face” to go to Jerusalem. And Jesus didn't just casually stroll into the city. He made a statement. He deliberately rode in on a donkey conjuring an image from the prophet Zechariah, who proclaimed, “Look, your King is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

It was an intentional contrast. The Roman Emperor would enter Jerusalem regally, in a chariot pulled by a majestic horse. Jesus would enter the city humbly, on a borrowed donkey. For the kings of this world, they'd roll out the red carpet. For Jesus, the crowd just spread out their coats on the road. Jesus could not have drawn a starker contrast between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God.

My preaching professor told us he once read the gospel of Luke, from beginning to end, in one sitting. If you read Luke in one sitting, you see the conflict between Jesus and the religious and political authorities build until it comes to a head. When my professor got to the part when Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem,

he said the hair stood up on the back of his neck. He wanted to yell, “Jesus, don’t do it! They’re ready to kill you.”

According to the Gospels, Jesus knew what was coming. More than once, he predicted he would be crucified, and on the third day, rise again. Nevertheless, he rode directly into the belly of the beast. Why would Jesus put up with conflict with the religious leaders throughout his ministry? Why would he enter Jerusalem knowing how dangerous it was and even provoking the authorities?

As uncomfortable as it will sound, I think the answer to those questions is that the kingdom of God becomes manifested through conflict. Conflict has a purpose. I have a friend who’s fond of saying, “The purpose of conflict is to bring clarity.” That is to say conflict is the way differing understandings of the truth become revealed and exposed.

I think we tend to be conflict averse. I certainly am. It’s uncomfortable. Also, there is a time and a place for it. When you’re gathered with your extended family around the table on Easter, it might not be a good time to broach the topic of abortion or immigration policy. Around the church, I’m always trying to decide. Is that a hill I want to die on, or should I just let it go for now?

I’m convinced that avoiding conflict can really diminish our lives. How many relationships flounder, because we’re too scared to have a difficult conversation? How much do we miss out on, because we’re too timid to speak up for ourselves?

I remember a disagreement I had with my ex-wife years ago. As we talked, the intensity kept getting ratcheted up. Finally, I blurted out, “What are you so angry about?” She said, “I’m not angry. I’m scared!” It was what Oprah used to call an “aha” moment.

Suddenly, I realized that which was called for, in that moment, was not to defend myself against an angry person. I needed to provide support to a scared person. But it took a confrontation to come to that realization.

And I think conflict avoidance is hurting the church universal today. On the first Palm Sunday, Jesus put his life on the line confronting the forces of evil and oppression. How many churches are risking everything in a life-and-death struggle against evil and injustice? For many, the goal is to be so bland and banal that no one will be offended.

In lieu of being out in the world fighting evil, we fight each other. Today, the fight is about the color of the carpet in the sanctuary, or whether we sit or stand for the postlude, or whether we wear nametags or not.

The Apostle Paul was clear. Our battle is not with one another. In his letter to the Ephesians, he wrote, “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

According to theologian Walter Wink, the truth is the gospel is not the absence of conflict, it’s the use of conflict to bring about God’s purposes. The peace Christ offers is not the kind of peace that comes from being left alone. It’s peace in the midst of adversity. It’s the peace that comes from a sense of purpose and engaging in what representative John Lewis called “good trouble.” He said, “Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and redeem the soul of America.”

Jesus did not make avoiding trouble and controversy the goal of his life. As followers of Jesus we can’t make it ours. I think Palm Sunday is a great opportunity to rethink our relationship with conflict. Is our fear of confrontation diminishing our lives and preventing us from having the kind of world we want?

The allowance for conflict is what makes our country great. Because conflict is inevitable, the genius of democracy is that it makes room for freedom of speech, freedom to assemble, and freedom to protest. As long as disagreement doesn’t rise to level of violence, it’s healthy.

On that first Palm Sunday, the most powerful force in the world was the Roman empire. The Roman army held the Mediterranean region under its thumb. Many of the Jewish religious leaders colluded with Rome. In fact, the way Rome

squashed dissent was to hang people on crosses. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowds shouted, “Hosanna” save us.

I believe I heard echoes of that cry this past Tuesday morning. As I flipping through the morning shows, one story dominated. All the focus was on the killing spree in Nashville in which three adults and three 9-year-old children died, as well as the shooter.

On every channel, the conversation was the same. Why does this keep happening? What is it about our nation that these events happen here, far more than anywhere else? I saw an interview with Bob Mendes, a member of the Nashville City Council. In his numerous conversations with citizens, one theme kept coming up: helplessness.

It seems helplessness is a theme repeating across our nation. Many feel helpless in the face of the complexity of the problem of gun violence, helpless regarding the depth of the trauma and devastation, helpless against forces seemingly too powerful to overcome by ourselves. When I saw that, I couldn’t help but think about the crowd on that first Palm Sunday shouting, “Hosanna,” save us.

Last year, I met with a group of folks, here in York, who were interested in doing something to protect children from gun violence. The group took on a small campaign to simply remind gun owners to lock up their guns at home. They worked to get a banner up over York Street. They also got an announcement in the school newsletters that went out to the parents.

Even though it was not a terribly controversial initiative, most of us, I think, had concerns about what the pushback would be. However, after thinking about it, if someone has a problem with an effort to save the lives of elementary school children, and middle school and high school youth, I’m okay with that. That’s a hill I will die on. Because whatever we’re not changing, we’re choosing.

The reality is we are not helpless. We have a savior who showed us the way. If anybody can be instrumental in curbing gun violence, it ought to be church folk. We don’t avoid conflict; we use it to bring about God’s purposes. We use it to

make our marriages and personal relationships stronger. We use it to revitalize the church. We use it to change the world.

Jesus didn't avoid confrontation. He used it to usher in the kingdom of God. Now, it's our turn.