

Palm Sunday. A day in the life of the Christian church to think about “Paradoxes” of our human life. A Paradox can be defined as seemingly contradictory elements that are somehow interrelated. Or a paradox can refer to a seemingly contradictory an illogical statement that is still somehow true. A simple example I found in a dictionary is the statement that “standing is more tiring than walking!” How illogical, but often true!

So Palm Sunday is a prime example of paradox in Jesus’ teachings and life. It is Praise Sunday (waving the palms to honor and welcome Jesus the teacher, the healer, the anointed one... and singing Hosanna, which means Please Save Us!) But it is also Passion Sunday. Passion comes from the root word that means suffering, as in the “Paschal” mystery... how Jesus being crucified can actually be “saving” for us... the paradoxical teaching of Jesus that one must “lose one’s life” in order to find it... or that a seed must fall to the ground and “die,” for it to break open into a new shoot in the Spring. In simple terms it can mean that only in “letting go” of something (or someone) can make room for new things in our life.

In the paradox of the cross we are talking about “*redemptive* suffering” which is suffering or sacrifice to give more life, especially for another. It can be as simple as parents or grandparents who give so much of their time, and may sacrifice some of their own needs, for the welfare of their children! Or it can be more extreme as with modern day martyrs who were imprisoned or shot, like MLK Jr. in United States, or Nelson Mandela in South Africa, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany, or the 11 year old girl in Pakistan (Malala) who gave a speech entitled “How Dare the Taliban Take Away My Basic Right to Education?” She was pursued and shot on a bus *coming home from school*, at age 15. In 2013. At age 16, she spoke at the United Nations, saying “The extremists are afraid of books and pens, and they are afraid of women.” At age 18, she said, “I demand of leaders that we must invest in books, not bullets.” She is now 27, and still speaking out for human rights, about education for *all children*, especially girls, and she has death threats against her for her activism.

In Jesus' teachings and life we find many paradoxes. One paradox we see in two symbols this morning: the Palms and the Cross. *Palms* of praise and enthusiasm and honor for Jesus. And then the coming *Cross*, that symbolizes the public humiliation and torture of this same Jesus (by the Romans.) Let's be clear that while a few Jewish religious leaders colluded with Roman authorities, it was the *Roman* militaristic government that suppressed uprisings and killed their leaders. The Palms of Praise and the Cross of Jesus' Passion are both coexistent in Jesus. A few of us have been studying the lectures of the famous historical Jesus scholar Dominic Crossan. He is emphatic that the paintings or icons in the early eastern orthodox churches show Christ coming out of the tomb with wounds on both his hands and his feet. The point is that the *resurrected* Christ *is* also the *crucified* Christ and vice versa. He appears to his disciples and is present in the world today as one who still has wounds. And the one who is wounded is also the one who is finding victory over the wounds. It's as if Jesus himself was and is in a constant state of being wounded and yet continually being healed and healing others.

Our hymns of Holy Week speak so eloquently about this paradox. Our opening hymn, "When I survey the *wondrous* cross,"... has a paradox right in the title itself! Then it says, "My richest *gain* I count but *loss*." "Did ever such *love and sorrow* meet?" (We know that at very basic relationship levels: Loving others can be a risk, the risk of betrayal, of loss, of sickness)... Or did ever "thorns compose so rich a crown?" A Blatant paradox: the crown of thorns on his head represents suffering and torture, yet we see Christ as also "Crowned" with Kingship and Glory and victory! Our final hymn is also full of paradox: "Lift high the *cross*, the *love* of Christ proclaim!" Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb is also the victorious One, who was able to conquer death.

One interesting detail in our historical Jesus studies is that as Jesus was approaching Jerusalem, the big city with the temple, and center of Jewish religious life, Dr. Dominic Crossan makes the point that Jesus pauses in Bethany, a small town outside the city. After all the palms and praise, late in the day, he left the city and went back out to smaller town of Bethany! Why?

Dr. Crossan reminded us that there was the home of his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus, in other words a safe place, a place out of the city where various leaders were looking for Jesus, looking for a way to eliminate this activist leader and all his preaching about nonviolence. So it's another paradox in Jesus final week: The city is where he must go, to face the oppressive powers, to speak truth to power; yet he returns at night to the village outside, to the safe home of his friends and close followers. Here we also see the paradox that Jesus may be fully one with God, but he is also fully human. Surely did not want to die. He knew the *risk and the probability* of being killed, but he was not seeking to be killed, so he delayed his death as long as he could, finding his own safe havens.

We celebrate today a Savior who is a "Crucified Savior." He is one who said we also must lose our life to find it... or more precisely: lose our *life for his sake* in order to find it. This is to say that if we lose our life *in dedicated service*, we will truly find our life. Paul called himself a "slave to Christ" by which he found true freedom. ... we might say a "*servant* for Christ." And how does that make us free? Christlike service is the love and consideration of others, as primary in our lives, which *frees us* from the chains of self-centeredness, self-absorption, a world curved around self at the center of the world!

Now I'd like to sing for you a song about this paradox of the cross: The Way of suffering, is co-mingled with Love, essentially a love that suffers for the sake of others. (Sing "The Via Dolorosa" as recorded by Sandi Patty).

*Down the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem that day, the soldiers tried to clear the narrow streets. But the crowd pressed in to see the man condemned to die on Calvary. He was bleeding from a beating, there were stripes upon his back, and he wore a crown of thorns upon his head. And he bore with every step the scorn of those who cried out for his death. The blood that would cleanse the souls of all men, made its way to the heart of Jerusalem. Down the via Dolorosa, called the way of suffering, like a lamb came the Messiah, Christ, the king. But he chose to walk that road out of his Love for you and me. Down the via Dolorosa, all the way to Calvary.*