

LOUSY BOUNDARIES

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton
Palm/Passion Sunday, March 28, 2010
Scripture: Luke 19:28-40; Philippians 2:5-11

There is a kind of adrenaline pump that goes with Palm Sunday. The heady excitement of the entry into Jerusalem, the triumphant messiah, the populist Jesus in his inaugural parade. And there is a mystery to it too, the mystery of the colt upon which no one has ever sat, a pure unblemished animal never ridden before, exemplifying the pristine nature of the one who will mount his back and ride triumphant into the city today. If anyone questions the disciples who are gathering this colt, they are simply to give the secret handshake, and say the magic words, “The Lord has need of it,” and the way will be clear. No more problems about transportation. It’s all a part of the plan.

So Jesus enters the city, according to Luke with shouts of acclamation, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest.” Sounds familiar! Aren’t these the strains of Psalm 118 and wasn’t this what the heavenly chorus sang the night of his birth? “Glory in the highest, and on earth peace!” Funny, the way that comes back here. Is this how peace is made? Is this how God is glorified?

Somewhere along the route into the city, Jesus got a panorama of the hills that lay about Jerusalem, the gates, the temple, the throngs of people, the pomp and circumstance. Thoughts of David crossed his mind perhaps, after all it was King David’s city... and it made him cry. “Would that you knew the things that made for peace,” he sighed.

There was a porous nature to Jesus, a kind of boundary-lessness in which the suffering of others became his suffering and the vulnerability of others became his vulnerability. Seeing the city, and its restless, peace-lessness, made him weep.

Eventually, he mustered his courage and rode all the way to the temple and there he drove out the merchants and sellers. “My house shall be a house of prayer,” he said, “but you have made it a den of thieves.” So after the shouting was over on the streets, Jesus did a little shouting himself within the temple precincts, no doubt making an impression, and not a good one, on the temple authorities who never like disruption on their watch.

Things go down hill from there. It’s not a good week. There are confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees, arguments, debates, the prediction of the destruction of the temple, which no one wanted to hear. Not a good week.

Then Jesus predicts the downfall not just of the temple but of the whole city. And there you’ve got it; grounds for sedition, proof of blasphemy, the foundation for an arrest and a trial. All that’s needed is a betrayer; and he’s ready to come on stage as soon as he hears his cue.

From this point, events fall like a stone rolling down hill, gaining speed and moving faster until at last they lead to a lonely hill outside the city's wall where love will be laid out, stretched on a cross for all to see.

Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus, Paul tells the Philippians, *Have this mind in you...*

What kind of *mind* is that, what frame of mind, what mindset?

Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus, Paul says, *who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death – even death on a cross.*

What Paul is trying to tell us is that the King of kings and Lord of lords was nothing if not humble. That humility was, in fact, the essence of his life. He may have been riding high in Jerusalem on the back of that donkey, but it was a sign of his humility nonetheless.

In the Roman world triumphal entries for conquering heroes were meant to impress the throngs with the power and superiority of the returning victor. So came the legions of soldiers and captive slaves bound in chains, the white bulls for sacrifice, the carts of spoils one after another, the leaders of the enemy in locks and irons, and an impressive array of horses taken captive. Finally would come the conquering hero, riding in a chariot, a slave standing behind him in the carriage holding over his head a laurel wreath and whispering into his ear, *Memento mori*, “Remember that you will die.” A humbling reminder on the best day of your life!

Jesus rides into Jerusalem as one about to die, and he knows it, so that while this is a triumphal parade it is also a circus parade, a caricature. In comparison to Rome's triumphal arrivals this is little more than children beating pots and pans with folded newspaper hats. More of a funeral procession than a Thanksgiving Day event. There are shadows in the background and sorrow in the air, because the cries of “Hosanna” will become “Crucify” on the lips of Jesus' well wishers by week's end.

Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus, Paul said; a readiness to empty self for the sake of others. And he goes there, of course, to save us. Enters the city knowingly, seeing the danger that is there, and knowing his life is on the line. So why does he go? Because he is the selfless expression of God's love and in him we see how far God will go to reach out to us with that love.

Substitutionary atonement is one way to describe what is happening when Jesus dies on the cross. The idea is that Jesus takes our place on those crossbeams and there pays the penalty for our sin. I understand the part about consequences for bad choices, the corrective nature of punishment. But I have never felt at all comfortable with the substitutionary atonement especially as it implies that God is somehow satisfied by the suffering of an innocent child, God's own child, in fact. And what kind of parent is

pleased with that suffering? What kind of God would require human sacrifice as an appeasement?

Maybe it's something else that's going on there on that cross. Because when we look at the cross, maybe in the deepest sense what we are looking at is God's own suffering, God's own willingness to get inside our skin and know our sorrow, and take to self our pain. God does that because God cannot stand at a distance from any suffering. And God is not being placated by a death in the family.

What God does is suffer on that cross *with* us. Because like any Mother or Father, God suffers for the child, God does not make a child suffer. And God's heart is the first of all our hearts to break.

My friend Chandler Stokes, pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan tells the story of a father he knows who lost his son. The family was taking some time off for the Christmas holidays, where John, the father in the family now grown up and teaching in Australia, had been coming home with his own family to visit with his parents for a week.

John and his wife brought their two active children with them, of course, a thirteen month old daughter, and a three year old son Pablo to be with grandma and grandpa for the season. They were having a lovely holiday, had been in town for a few days, and on about the third day when they all woke up that morning, the parents found the three year old son, Pablo, had died during the night. They found him in his bed. He hadn't been sick; there was nothing apparently wrong with him. He simply died in the night. Just as inexplicably as that.

At the funeral, there were lots of pictures of Pablo lovingly displayed in the narthex as everyone entered. High school and college friends of John came to the service, now married themselves and with children of their own. Sorrow filled the church and huddled into the pews.

There was a time set aside in the service during which John planned to thank people for coming and to tell a few stories about his small son. He said Pablo wasn't perfect and there had been times when he had to be disciplined, as any child must, but John explained that whenever Pablo had to take a time out John would go with him to his room or to the porch, or wherever the child had been banished, and read to him.

Pablo had behaved badly on those occasions, John said, he needed to be separated from polite company, "But," the grieving father said, "he didn't need to be alone." John, like many parents with hearts too big for their children's own good, had lousy boundaries, I suppose, but that happens sometimes with love.

Frederick Buechner writes powerfully of being a father of three daughters and suffering over the hurts and injuries of life that they have suffered. One of his daughters struggled with anorexia through a long and frightening season. One by one as his children left home for college, and instructed by that time in his and his daughter's life, Buechner remembers,

It was not just that I greatly missed them but that I feared for them more greatly still. The world does cruel and hurtful things to us all before it's done with us, and with little more to defend themselves against it than their bags full of clothes and their boxes full of rock records, coat hangers, hockey sticks, it was out into that world that they went. The adventures that they have had since are theirs to tell, not mine, but insofar as from time to time the world has worked them over as it works us all over, I have suffered vastly more from such pain as they have known than I have ever suffered from any pain simply of my own....."¹

Lousy boundaries I suppose, but is there a parent here who does not understand what Buechner is saying?

Chandler Stokes reminds us that,

The gospels tell us that when Jesus became obedient unto death, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Thereby the last place where we thought God could not go, the place of utter isolation ...is now saturated with the presence of God. No longer confined by the curtain – God came flying through... to our...side, like the father who ran to greet his prodigal, like the mother who cannot refuse her nursing child, God tore through that veil running to enter our frantic and crazed hearts, and opened Her deep and vulnerable heart to us. Lousy boundaries!²

The Jesus who enters the city of Jerusalem and into our hearts is not a victim but one whose love and whose trust in God is so great that God is willing to empty self and become a servant so that God's love may be made manifest.

Just about everyone has seen the movie, *The Blind Side*, the true story of Leigh Anne and Sean Tuohy, a wealthy white Memphis couple who take in a homeless African American teenager by the name of Michael Oher and help him discover the gifts God has given him for playing football. Michael has an innate desire to protect those closest to him, and it's a ferocity that is beautifully channeled through his massive frame. He becomes a star player in high school, goes to Ole Miss and plays football there, and eventually becomes the 2009 first round draft pick of the Baltimore Ravens.

The movie cuts across all the boundaries, race, economics, faith, and stereotypes and makes us all realize the common human need for love and support that is within us. I was glad the theater was dark when I watched this movie, because I just couldn't stop puddling up, from one scene to the next.

But what I think touched me most was the consistent and unbending way that Leigh Tuohy, the mother in the movie, was like a mother hen gathering even those who were not her flock into her flock of chicks and providing them shelter. Michael's challenges and sorrows in life became Leigh's challenges and sorrows in life, and so his

triumphs and joys became hers as well. Lousy boundaries. But, boy, do I wish I had boundaries like hers!

Our God is a God who suffers for us, who agonizes over our hurts and grieves over our sorrows. This is not a God who takes delight or finds satisfaction in any suffering, but whose love for us is so great that he would take our suffering as his own.

God has boundary issues, and we will see it plain in but a week. On Friday the shouts of Hosanna, will morph into “Crucify,” and God’s heart will break as the power of love is handed over to loveless power.

Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus... who gave his life in love to God, and whose love of God would give him life again.

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¹ Frederick Buechner, **Now and Then**. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) 102-103.

² Chandler Stokes, Moveable Feast paper, (unpublished) 2010, Chapel Hill, NC. Passion Sunday, March 28, 2010.