

## Message: "What Makes Something Real"

### Scripture Lesson: Matthew 21:1-11

21When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, <sup>5</sup>"Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." <sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" <sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

We have great reason to celebrate in this church today. No, not just because it's Palm Sunday, where we hear of the cheering crowds, the procession led by Jesus on a donkey, and the waving of palm fronds to the beat of "Halleluia's" everywhere. This is of course one of the great moments in the narrative journey of Jesus 2000 years ago, when greatness was hailed and divine revelation was on the move - what a sight it must have been! A great cause for celebration.

No, we have other specific things to celebrate today in our own local congregation - yes, right here at First UMC Missoula. And just what are these things that we have to celebrate?

We have an alley door automatic lock assembly malfunctioning such that it actually automatically props open the door when used.

We have a sewer malfunction that has been the subject of more than one sermon, so I won't repeat the details except to say that it is not a good thing for a church to have sewage flooding the basement regularly.

Our funds are presently in decline, where our giving patterns have dropped as they have in many churches around the nation, due to the pandemic but also due to the general trend of decline that was happening before Covid.

We have a brick exterior that is crumbling and cracking; we've fixed about a half of the exterior, but need to have the other half of the building finished to the tune of five times the cost of last summer (prices have gone crazy).

I recently discovered a stain in one of our rooms that is practically unremovable - I've tried several kinds of stain removers and solvents and detergents to no avail - and here's why I believe it is unremovable: it was unaffected by Goof-Off, my number one stain remover for anything (it even removes paint!). I really would like to know what it was that was spilled.....

And last but not least - our new coffee grinder got jammed this past week - threatening our supply of freshly-ground coffee for our fellowship time after worship - can you feel the worry?

These are things to celebrate. Right? You don't agree?

I say these are things to celebrate because **THEY SIGNIFY A CHURCH THAT IS ALIVE AND ACTIVE!** These are signs that we are on the move in many ways, with our own activities as a community of faith - committee meetings, book clubs, educational classes, practices, services, youth group, Bible studies, lectures, United Women of Faith, Mighty Methodist Men, special presentations - but also with the activities of so many other community groups - United We Eat immigrant/refugee business, Easter Seals employment training and clearinghouse, Alanon, AA, Alateen, Scouts, community-oriented presentations such as suicide prevention training and climate change lectures. We're a really, really busy place! And this is something to celebrate.

But celebrations like this have their costs, don't they? The plans are being made, the costs are coming, the workers and repair personnel and contractors are lining up for the work of enabling our building to keep pace with greater activity. We always have had, and will continue to have, work to do to keep up with where our ministry is going; there are good things going on here, accompanied by growing challenges.

But isn't this always the case - that that which we celebrate comes with a cost?

The birthday party filled with laughter requires work to plan and work to clean up; happy occasions such as graduation from school or a career-advancing job require tests and interviews and study before acquisition; an indictment signaling the happy hope that justice may finally occur only comes after an agonizing process of gathering information and interviewing witnesses; the joyous birth of a new child starts with this thing called "labor." It would seem apparent that significant celebrations are always accompanied by significant costs.

Kind of like what we see going on with Jesus, in his processional on Palm Sunday?

Rather than recount the story, which we just heard, I thought it would be an interesting exercise to consider the mind frame of Jesus as he witnessed the ongoings of the crowd on the approach to Jerusalem that day. This was brought up in our Tuesday morning class this past week as we heard the ideas and thoughts of the biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan; our study focuses on the execution of Jesus and starts with the Palm Sunday episode. Professor Crossan had us consider the mind frame of Jesus as he approached the holy city, and he asked a challenging question of us all - "did Jesus expect to be executed by the authorities as he entered Jerusalem?"

It is a very interesting question in that it had us consider what Jesus was thinking about in that pivotal moment. The text doesn't say exactly, of course, but it would seem that Jesus played a direct part in the celebration, directing the procurement of the donkey and colt, and thus at least went along with the festivities; but he neglected to take advantage of what would seem a tremendous opportunity to share a message or preach a sermon; he remained pretty silent about it all. And then, immediately following this scene finds Jesus furiously turning over the moneylender tables in the temple, and in the Gospel of Luke we find Jesus lamenting and weeping over Jerusalem for all its past and future suffering. The celebration was not long lived, or so it would seem; perhaps Jesus was well aware of the cost behind the celebration?

The things that make something real are often the troublesome, messy, unpredictable things that reality often presents to the world - life is a messy thing, and we spend an inordinate time trying to clean it up, but in the process of cleaning up we easily sweep things under the rug, cover and hide what doesn't fit, distract from our own messes, and hide behind a façade of our own creation, hoping people never see the real us. These things only increase the cost to life down the road.

But there are a certain category of experiences that make things real which is more disturbing - the category of suffering. Pain is a great reality confirmer, something that demands our full attention, something that forces us to let go of things that are not real. Perhaps this is behind the relative silence of Jesus, that he knew that alongside the cheering of the crowd there was the specter of the cross fully present? That the cause for celebration was a cause inviting suffering due to the radical nature of what Jesus represented - a counter-cultural, alternative authority dynamic represented by a God of love rather than earthly

power? But that he nonetheless continued his journey because he knew the cost was worth it?

I remember quite clearly a journey I took many years ago with one of my parishioners as she traveled the road of terminal cancer. Her name was Terry, and I got to know her over eight months of her decline. Terry had had, by most standards, a pretty good life thus far - a family with three children, everyone healthy to this point, good friends, stable work, respected in the community. But then the pall of cancer entered their realm when she was in her forties, and her decline was steady.

Some cancers are rather forgiving in the amount of pain they exert upon the body; this cancer was not forgiving at all. It was a journey wracked with pain, a progression from one level of suffering to another. I grew to appreciate the change in Terry's attitude and outlook over those months as we conversed about her treatment and her illness, her hopes and her worries, her life and her death. One thing I respected greatly about those conversations was that I witnessed Terry's mindset as growing in a kind of clarity; when we first met, she was careful to call me "reverend" and "pastor" and speak to me quite carefully, as if to make sure she didn't say anything wrong (by the way, pastors of any merit hate this; we really do what to hear what is really going on in a person's heart and mind, and should be well practiced at never judging what is honestly shared).

But this tendency to speak carefully around me changed over those eight months - and I discovered that she had, shall we say, a much more colorful vocabulary that she developed to get her points across? In other words, she was not one to mince words, and swearing was, well, almost one of her gifts - never used to attack or insult, but to clarify and communicate.

I remember one of my last visits to Terry, as she lay in bed wracked with pain; we talked about the looming shadow of death, but also about the good things she had experienced in her life, especially her family and close friends. Then, she made a comment to me I'll never forget - she said that "one thing Cancer has taught me - that most of the things I used to worry about aren't worth excrement." (she used a different word for "excrement"). She died three days later, wracked with pain, but fully aware of the love that surrounded her. I can't prove it, but my overwhelming sense was that she died celebrating the good things in her life, and, if questioned regarding whether it was all worth it with respect to the terrible pain of her cancer journey, I think she would have responded with an expletive-laden affirmation.

Things worthy of significant celebration come with significant cost. That's what makes them real; that's how they enter into and impact life fully. Life works this way, doesn't it? And the celebration, if it is truly about something significant, is worth the cost. I sense this in my life, and perhaps you sense this in yours - and I sense this as something of the mind frame of Jesus on that day so long ago, as he continued his journey in the midst of the celebrative throng. Knowing what lies ahead, or at least the potential for the cross, he nonetheless steadied his life in the knowledge that the celebration over what he brought to the world was worth the cost. Worthy things in life always are.