

Behind The Palms

Palm/Passion Sunday

April 14, 2019

Shaun and I have a friend and colleague named Gwen. She is the Presbyterian minister in St. Marys, our former town. Recently Gwen told us a funny story about a Fall retreat that she took with some women friends of hers. This group of women share a commitment to getting away on a regular basis to relax, reflect on spiritual things, and just take good care of themselves. This time they decided that they wanted to just take a simple camping trip. So they arrived at Algonquin Park, got their tents set up, and their bags unpacked. They started a bonfire, and began working together to prepare a stew for supper. So there they were, all sitting around the bonfire and chatting as they prepared the food... Some were peeling potatoes and carrots, some were cutting up the beef into cubes, others were chopping onions, and so on.... when Gwen noticed that one of her friends, who was peeling carrots with a couple of other women, seemed very agitated. Gwen just took note of it and said to herself, "Well, that's why we're all here, to let go of the difficult things we're carrying." And trusting that her friend would work out whatever was ailing her over the course of the weekend, she went back to peeling potatoes. But a few minutes later, she couldn't help but notice out of the corner of her eye that this friend of hers was becoming more & more agitated and peeling her carrots with more & more of a vengeance. Until, finally, this woman got up, and shouted to the other women who were peeling carrots along side her, "**I can't take it any more!!! That's not how you peel a carrot!!!**" And she proceeded to quickly collect all of their carrots into her own basket, and told them abruptly, "*I'll take care of the carrots... why don't you all just go peel potatoes instead.*" And, then, once she had all the carrots in her lap, she became more calm... But, as you can imagine, everyone else's eyebrows were raised, glances were being exchanged, and the chatting became much less spontaneous, as though everyone was "walking on eggshells." In the end, they were all able to laugh about it together. But there were a few stressful moments there before this friend of theirs was able to identify for herself what was actually at the root of her suffering, and let go of her rigid rule that **there is really only one right way to peel a carrot.**

Something similar happened recently to Shaun and I. We were getting ready for our move here to Brights Grove. Doing all of the usual things -- packing boxes, changing our address, bringing things we didn't need anymore to the Salvation Army, and so on. One little detail that I was working on was making sure that we had just enough groceries to get us through the final week, so the refrigerator would be more or less empty on moving day. And the plan was working well. So, on the night before the move, I decided to get one of those already cooked barbecued chickens, like they sell at Foodland, because we didn't feel like cooking, and the pots and pans were already packed. So, we had dinner, and afterwards, Shaun went to wash the plates and silverware. And he called out to me from the kitchen, "Do you want any more chicken?" And I said, "no," **thinking** that he meant, "Do you want any more chicken **right now?**" So, he finished the dishes, and we decided to just relax and watch a movie for the rest of the night. And about half way through the movie, I decided I wanted another piece of chicken. So I went into the kitchen and opened the fridge -- *no chicken*. I looked in the oven -- *no chicken*. So I called out to Shaun, "Where'd you put the chicken?" And he called back, "I threw it out." And, suddenly, out of the blue, without a clear thought in mind, my mouth just seemed to open by itself and shout, "**You did what?**"

Fast forward about an hour... We'd figured out the communication problem we'd had, but I was still very unsettled, asking myself, "**Where did that come from?**" Eventually, I realized that Shaun had broken a very important little rule of mine: "You **never, ever**, waste food." It was something that must

have become deeply ingrained in me, growing up with parents who, when they were children, lived through the Great Depression. And judging by the strength of my reaction, it was quite a rigid little rule. In contrast, Shaun's parents grew up in a time of relative plenty. He also learned to not waste food, but he didn't have the same rigid rule about it that I did. So, in the end, it turned out to be a good experience. It reminded us of the need to communicate more clearly, especially during stressful times like moving, and it helped me become more conscious of this rigid little rule in my mind that I really don't want to drive me into acting against my deeper values. (Shaun now affectionately refers to this whole incident as the "Chickengate Scandal.")

All created things, including our own bodies & brains, are quite "**wobbly**"; they're continually moving through countless ups & downs from the moment we are born until the moment we die. It is just part of who we are as mortal beings in a mortal world. We learn quickly that created things disappoint, they need perpetual maintenance, they break down, they fade away, just as our physical selves eventually do. And so we naturally long for a stability that is beyond what any created things can provide. And one of things we all do to help us feel more stable, less wobbly, is to have **little rules** for ourselves. We inherit them, and we reinforce them in our lives over time, until they gradually become part of our character, our personality.

Realistically, many of our little rules are quite benign, and they **do** make us feel less wobbly, more stable, which is a good thing, up to a point. It's only when our little rules become **too rigid**, too divorced from our deepest values, that they can become a real hindrance in our lives. Then they can become a means of harshly judging ourselves and others as being unworthy of love, like happened with some of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. Their rigid rules held them back from developing a deeper relationship with the God who is Love, the God whom many were coming to recognize in Jesus.

In many ways, the People of Israel had a terribly **wobbly** history; life always seemed to be tossing them 'to and fro', frustrating their need to feel stable and secure. And, tragically, through multiple wars and many other traumas, they had developed and passed down a number of very rigid rules which helped them to feel more safe and stable in their violent tribal world.

I don't mean the rules of the Jewish Law, as such, but rather the rules that regulated how they interpreted & understood the Law. Rules like: "*Real Messiahs don't cry, much less bleed; Real Messiahs are Men of Steel.*" "*They meet violence with even greater violence -- and **that** is how they'll lead us into the Peace of the Promised Land.*" For many, such rigid rules had "boxed in" their understandings of God, themselves and others... and what God was desiring to do in their lives and the lives of their neighbors.

And so, Jesus disagreed with them. For Jesus, the God of their understanding, boxed in by their rigid rules, was not the One that he called 'Father.' His Father's power, and strength, and way of leading his people were of a very different sort.

So you see what Jesus is up against as he enters Jerusalem, riding on his humble little donkey, with the crowd waving their palms and shouting their Hosannas. They **were** happy to see him... They **did** love him. But, for many of them, it was a rigid, conventional kind of love, the kind that easily turns to hate when the object of its affection breaks one of its conventions. And Jesus was about to break through all of their rigid rules, by refusing to become the King they wanted him to be, but instead choosing to be himself... and to surrender himself... to the One he called 'Father'. Jesus understood that many of the persons who were waving their palms at him on Sunday might well be shaking their fists at him and shouting "crucify!" on Friday. But still, he believed that – although they were clearly responsible for their actions – they were not fundamentally to blame. These rigid rules were the real enemy. They had so constricted their hearts and minds that they no longer really knew what they were doing.

As we all know, it is not that unusual to find all sorts of moral evils “hiding behind the palms” of conventionally religious lives. And just as it mattered to Jesus what was actually going on in people's hearts and minds back in Ancient Palestine, it matters to him what is actually going on within us, here and now.

Thankfully, God's love for us doesn't follow our little rules. In a sense, our relationship with God is a highly "imbalanced" one. It's imbalanced in the sense that it is a relationship where God consistently relates to us far better than we relate to God. That's just the way it is. It is a relationship in which we can lie, cheat, and steal; wound, humiliate, and even kill – without losing our place in God's heart as beloved children. It's not fair, as we usually understand that word. It is **so** imbalanced a relationship that God's Very Being, Incarnate in Jesus, is willing to suffer great evils to further the flourishing and the quality of our lives. (Parents may be able to relate to this.)

Christ's Love for us, as we take it in, and keep taking it in, over & over again, frees us from the destructive power of evil in our lives... and writes within our hearts all the moral requirements of Divine Law. For it gradually forms within us the extraordinary virtues of Jesus - genuine love, compassion, discernment, justice, faithfulness...

And this gives the church in our day genuine hope: Divine Love never withdraws from any of us, even when, from time to time, we hide ourselves, our suffering and our sin, behind the mask of conventional piety. That is still how faith works.

Thanks be to God.

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