

God's Love: Vulnerable and Crucified in History

From the Lenten sermon series: Love Story

Text: Zechariah 9:9-10; John 11:48-53, 12:9-19

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

God loved the world so much - that's where it begins, this Love Story, which is the one story of the Bible. The whole drama of the biblical story is the story of an amazing love, a love so alien to our human way of being and acting.

God loved the world so much He came in complete solidarity with the world - God was in Christ reconciling the world - making friends with the world. Jesus in the full humanity of his being was the concrete presence and disclosure of God in our world.

Jesus came in God's name;
Jesus came proclaiming God's kingdom;
Jesus came finally to the center of Jewish life and the religious institution, to Jerusalem itself; and,
Jesus was crucified.

In biblical understanding, Jerusalem was not just any city; Israel was not just any nation. Israel was a specially chosen and called people brought graciously by God into covenant relationship to be God's instrument to bring light and salvation to the whole world. Israel was the representative of all nations and people. Therefore, when Israel refused Jesus' call to repentance and new birth, it was an act on behalf of us all and when Israel crucified Jesus, it was a final rejection of God's covenant love and grace on behalf of us all.

When Jesus died, love was crucified in history.

That was the story then; that is the story now. I never sense that more keenly than on Palm Sunday. It has become a high festival day in the Church. There is much I love about it, but I must admit that there is an unsettling contradiction in the re-enactment of that day.

One reason for the confusing mix – of joyful praise, children singing and a festival crowd in parade, along with the sinister evil that is showing itself and the tears of Jesus that reveal the crushing weight of the imminent tragedy that was about to engulf Jerusalem – is that we have taken Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and mixed them all together into a single picture which has elements of all four Gospels, resulting in a picture which actually reflects no single perspective. But, that is an improper way to understand the Gospel accounts. A harmony of the Gospels which collapses them into one narrative of Jesus' life and destiny is to miss the sharp focus of each evangelist and mistake the purpose of the Gospels.

In this message we will listen to the account from John's Gospel. We have been reading from this Gospel throughout this Season of Lent. This Gospel has provided our theme - Love Story - from the familiar words of 3:16, "God loved the world so much ..." As the second half of this Gospel opens, our Evangelist writes of Jesus,

He had always loved his own who were in the world, and now he was to show the full extent of his love. (John 13:1)

It may be helpful to page through John's Gospel for a moment to get the setting for the Palm Sunday happening. The first half of the Gospel, called the Book of Signs, culminates in the supreme miracle of the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11. If John is portraying Jesus as the one come from God and revealing God, then the giving of life to one dead was the supreme sign revealing what God is about in the world - the giver of life.

Now notice how John moves from that sign to the reaction of the Jewish authorities (11:54). But Passover was approaching and many Jews made pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and the word of the raising of Lazarus was abroad and speculation ran wild - will he come to the festival? (11:56), and there was an order out for his arrest (11:57).

Then on Saturday, six days before Passover, Jesus comes to Bethany, to Mary and Martha's home. And Lazarus, whom Jesus raised, was their brother. They gave a dinner and there follows the report of Mary's anointing Jesus with very expensive perfume - a costly act of loving devotion.

Judas grumbles about the cost and Jesus says, "*Let her alone. Let her keep it till that day when she prepares for my burial.*" (12:7-8) Then follows the evangelist's editorial comment which intends to connect the Lazarus miracle and the conspiracy to kill Jesus and to set the context for Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem which commences at 12:12.

Look at it carefully. Follow the action, not from the collage of the four Gospels in your mind, but just from what John records.

The pilgrims already in Jerusalem hear Jesus is coming to Jerusalem from Bethany and they go out to meet him, bringing palm branches. They shout, “Hosanna,” an acclamation of praise. Citing Psalm 118:26, John writes.

Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord!

This was a Psalm sung by the pilgrims as they came to Jerusalem. Actually, the citation is,

Blessed in the name of the Lord are all who come.

Why the slight variation? In the Psalm it is a blessing spoken in God’s name on the approaching pilgrims. In John’s version, the one coming is coming in the Lord’s name – presumably some special envoy from God, not an ordinary pilgrim. But, John is not through. He adds,

God bless the King of Israel.

That is not in Psalm 118, but rather is a citation from the prophet Zephaniah (3:15). Now, notice what happens. Jesus finds a colt and sits on it – John says in full accordance with the text of scripture:

Fear no more, daughter of Zion, see, your king is coming, mounted on an ass’s colt. (12:15)

Here we must stop and consider the scene and its meaning as John sets it forth. What is going on with the crowd? According to John’s picture this is a crowd filled not so much with religious fervor as with rising nationalistic zeal. As I mentioned, only John speaks of palm branches and that is significant. Palm branches had nationalistic association. Palms were evocative of Maccabean nationalism. As a symbol of nationalism, the palm occurred on the coins of the Second Revolt (A.D. 132-135). When Judas Maccabeus rededicated the temple altar after the Syrians had profaned it (164 B.C.), the Jews brought palms to the temple. When Simon Maccabeus conquered the Jerusalem citadel (142 B.C.), the Jews took possession of it carrying palm fronds. In the Testament of *Naphtali* V4, the fronds are given to Levi as a symbol of power over all Israel.

In sum, John’s use of palms would seem to give to the whole scene a political overtone; Jesus is being welcomed as a national liberator.

Further, the words, “*God bless the King of Israel,*” which John has the crowd chant are not found in Psalm 118:26 from which the words, “*Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord!*” are taken. Once before in John’s gospel (6:14-15) after Jesus fed the multitude, he realized the crowd wanted to make him king and he withdrew from them.

There is little doubt that the scene John paints is intended to indicate what was going on with the crowd. They were hoping that in Jesus they had found a national liberator and they hoped that this one now entering Jerusalem was about to declare himself the King of Israel.

But this was precisely not what Jesus was intending. Now he must do something to set them straight. What does he do? He seeks to dispel the crowd's misunderstanding through a prophetic action – an action even the disciples did not understand until after his death and resurrection. The action: Jesus sat on a colt, thereby seeking to call to mind the words of Zephaniah and Zechariah.

In Zechariah and Zephaniah it is the King who comes, but it is a different kind of king. Listen to the Zechariah citation:

See, your king is coming mounted on an ass's colt.

If we go to that context in Zechariah, we find it is a call to Jerusalem to rejoice because its king is coming, coming mounted on an ass's foal, to banish chariots from Ephraim and war horses from Jerusalem; the warrior's bow shall be banished. The prophet's word continues,

He shall speak peaceably to every nation, and his rule shall extend from sea to sea, from the river to the ends of the earth.

"Yes, Jerusalem," Jesus seems to be saying by mounting the ass's colt, "I am your king coming to you, but a different kind of king than you expect or desire."

Similarly, in Zephaniah we have.

Fear not, O Zion, ...the Lord your God is in your midst, like a warrior to keep you safe; he will rejoice over you and be glad; he will show you his love once more...

In that same context the prophet cries,

... be glad, rejoice with all your heart, daughter of Jerusalem ... The Lord is among you as King, O Israel...

Jesus' mounting the colt was a prophetic action, according to John. After the death and resurrection John writes, we *understood what that action was trying to say*. Jesus realized that the crowd had misinterpreted the Lazarus miracle just as the crowd had misunderstood the multiplication of loaves and fishes in John 6. The raising of Lazarus was a sign that God the giver of life was visiting His people in Jesus. They should not be proclaiming him as an earthly king, but as the manifestation of the Lord their God Who has come into their midst, the God of Zechariah Who would bring peace to the whole world. He *will speak peaceably to every nation*.

Immediately following this event we find the Greeks, that is the Gentiles, wanting to see Jesus and we are never told whether they see him, but that request triggers that emotional response of Jesus. He responds,

The hour is come...

Then we have that word about the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying and Jesus' soul is in turmoil, saying,

What am I to say? Father, save me from this hour? No, it was for this that I came to this hour. Father, glorify Thy name,

And the paragraph ends with the words,

And I shall draw all to myself when I am lifted up from the earth.

Jesus' prophetic action was to counteract the nationalistic misunderstanding of his coming and to affirm the universal kingship that will be achieved only through death and resurrection. Ironically, the Pharisees' comment with which John concludes the Palm Sunday narrative confirms that universalistic dimension of Jesus' way when they say in distress,

You see you are doing no good at all; why, all the world has gone after him.

It is fascinating to reflect on the Palm Sunday narrative as John presents it, as it illumines our own world. It would appear that the world then and the world today are not very different. There remains the worldly way of established power perpetuating itself by coercion.

Does it strike you how the way of God's love as lived out by Jesus is so contrary to the ordinary way of worldly power, to the commonly held assumptions of us all?

We could examine the very city into which Jesus entered – Jerusalem – today. What agony continues to be the rule there. The Palestinian problem will not go away. And, ironically, the Jews for whom Israel became a refuge from the savagery of the holocaust have become a nation which is dangerously close to being an oppressor. And while we cannot begin to enter the suffering that people has endured, and thus must empathize with their need for security, it remains a fact that now they hold power and the Palestinians' claim is not heard.

In South Africa, great shaking of the foundations is occurring, but it has come only as a result of those who have stood up and faced the peril of oppression and death. And we know Nelson Mandela could become a martyr – or Allan Boesak.

No matter where one turns, it is the same story. In this nation it would be no different. We, all of us, American, Russian, German, Israeli, name whatever

nation or people you will, we are all of us selfish and narrow in our interests. World history is monotonous with the story. The world of nuclear capability has gotten our attention and we hardly dare unleash that awful power, but a Khadafi or the Iraqi regime might go for broke.

The longer I live, the more historical moments I live through, the more I see the stark contrast between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. Or, to put it in more concrete personal terms, I see the stark contrast between Jesus' way and my way.

Maybe Jesus' way is best summed up in his word in the Sermon on the Mount, practiced himself on the cross. He said.

Love your enemies, and on the cross he prayed, *Father, forgive them*. Jesus was no wimp. He was the strongest, freest person that ever lived. But, I can't live that way. And America can't survive that way. It doesn't work in the practical affairs of this world. Trying to practice that consistently only gets one crucified. That's right.

Love: vulnerable and crucified in history.

I have been accused, not unjustly, of being a universalist, that is, of believing that in the end God will win the love of everyone. Maybe I am; maybe not. Anyone who knows one way or the other for sure knows too much. But, let me make one thing clear. If I believe God will finally win out with everyone, it is not because I believe everyone is finally not so bad. Rather, it is because I see such a total, universal repudiation of God's way.

When I'm honest, I am more like Caiphus than Jesus. (Let's keep the church together, even if we have to lie and kill to do it.) I'm more like Pilate than Jesus. (Let's keep America safe and Number 1, even if it takes the flexing of military power.) Threaten my church and watch me. Threaten my nation and watch me. Threaten my personal situation and watch me. Am I a Christian? Sure. I believe. But, don't push me. And I am sad to say that I don't find myself much better or worse than those I know and rub shoulders with.

Jesus, if it's a matter of my losing everything I've dreamed of and worked for and believed, or your death, you die, Jesus. No, friends, it is not that I have gotten soft on sin or fail to see the twist, the distortion in human nature. It is that I see it so painfully clearly, and I see it in myself and then I say, if God is going to save one, it is purely of grace and, if God wills to save one, all of grace, why not all, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. One person lived it out – love all the way.

One person lived in perfect covenant relationship and obedience all the way. One person made it all the way to death.

One person took the consequence of total vulnerability and was crucified while he prayed for those crucifying him. And God said that's enough; he made it! He made it! And because he made it, death will not hold him. Because he made it, I will accept the rest through him.

In *The Revelation of John*, there is a scene in heaven of a vast throng from every nation of all tribes and peoples and languages,

... standing in front of the throne and before the lamb. They were robed in white and had palms in their hands, and they shouted together, 'Victory to our God who sits on the throne, and to the lamb!'

That lamb spoken of earlier in chapter five is the Lamb that was slain. Jesus died. Jesus was crucified, because Jesus was God's love in human form and God's love is vulnerable and crucified in history – then and now.

The vision in Revelation is of an ultimate triumph of God's Kingdom. Jesus' way doesn't work in history. Crucifixion is its end. But then, does history's way work? Shouldn't twenty centuries convince us that it does not, cannot, will not work?

Jesus' way, so the vision promises, is the only way that will finally work, for finally it is only the power of love that can defeat loveless power.

Must that not convert us?

Must that not change us?

Can we go on pursuing a way that is futile, crucifying the Christ again and again?

Must we not change, be converted?

God have mercy on us!