

OUR NEW MOTTO: COME AND DIE

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Who doesn't like a parade, except maybe the band marching behind the Clydesdales or the folks who have to sweep everything up? Parades are a time of celebration, like this week when UCONN won not just one but two national championships in basketball. Last month thousands of people lined up for the St. Patrick's Day Parade, with the Irish, Italians, Polish, Hungarians, English, Spanish, and God knows who else drinking and reveling in the streets serenaded by bagpipes. And we especially need a parade after crawling through six weeks of Lent, waiving our palm branches, shouting hosanna, and singing "All Glory, Laud, and Honor. If we just had some confetti to throw and noise makers to blow it would be just perfect.

Today of course is Palm Sunday, the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the crowd tossing their coats on the road and shouting loudly for Jesus to save them from the Roman authorities. The people of Jerusalem had come to the city for the Passover, and with Jesus riding into town with palm branches waving they could read the signs: This is the Messiah, God's anointed one, who was coming through the city gates to solve all of their national and personal problems: He will lower taxes, guarantee everyone a job, provide national healthcare, defeat all foreign armies, bring equality to all people. The nation's honor would be restored, diseases of body, mind, and spirit would be healed, and God would once again look with favor upon the people.

But within just a matter of days the parade would become a funeral and all hope would be lost. Today is not only Palm Sunday, but it is also Passion Sunday. The shouting of hosanna will be drowned out by the screams "crucify him." Maybe we should just call this schizophrenia Sunday, or bipolar Sunday. The parade and the passion of the Christ create a powerful dissonance. It is hard, even painful to hear the clashing, clanging stories bump up against each other.

But dissonance is really our reality much of the time. A granddaughter is born and then a grandfather dies. A son graduates with high honors and receives a great scholarship to the school of his dreams and then gets arrested for drunk driving. A young couple in love gets married but then then they begin to fight and wonder if they have made a horrible mistake. Parade and passion, joy and sorrow, inextricably intertwined. Life is not always a parade, and life is not always sorrow.

You may have noticed that we do not offer a Good Friday service anymore and probably won't again. Good Friday is not a national holiday where businesses close down. We've become more secular, which may or may not be bad. It just is. Anyway, we like parades and death and funerals should be avoided like the plague. The Passion story and Good Friday don't market well in our world. As one of my friends once said, "we don't like a hung up to die Jesus"!

Some churches today are adopting catchy slogans or mottos to get the congregation excited and bring in outsiders and fill up the pews. Here are a few:

Is Your Life Running On Empty? Free Fill ups Here Every Sunday!

Got Jesus? It's hell without Him.

Come as you are, Leave changed.

A church of ordinary people worshipping an extraordinary God.

But I would like to suggest a new motto for us as a church: Come and die! Do you think that might attract outsiders? Come and die! Is it a motto we can all rally around, get excited about, and maybe even hold a parade?

While holy week may begin with Jesus on parade and end with the celebration of Easter, sandwiched in between is the darkness of the Passion. From the Garden of Gethsemane to the betrayal by Judas and the arrest and trial of Jesus followed by his crucifixion, we discover the darkness and pain that permeates Holy Week. Sadly, most of us want to join the parade and move quickly to Easter, avoiding the darkness of the Passion.

We humans try as hard as we can to prevent pain and suffering and when it encroaches upon our lives we seek immediate relief. A fellow pastor asked me this week why is there so much addiction in our community, and I responded by saying that addictions are a human attempt to mask the pain of living and a means of filling the empty void in the human soul. I believe that addictions, be they alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, or food are what we gravitate to when we are unwilling or unable to deal with the pain of life and the loss of meaning and hope.

The Christian faith is not the "opiate of the masses" as Karl Marx suggested. A shot of Jesus does not take away our deepest pain or mask our emptiness. But of

course Jesus did enter into our world and touched the leper and healed him. He spoke with the paraplegic man and cured him, and he restored sight to the blind man. When the woman who had been hemorrhaging for 20 years frantically touched him the bleeding stopped. When the woman caught in adultery was about to be stoned he defended and saved her. When he was approached by people who were demon-possessed he cast out the demons. When his best friend Lazarus died he entered into his tomb and raised him.

And just as important as the physical problems he cured, Jesus addressed the emotional and social difficulties of people he encountered. He forgave sins, relieved guilt, gave people meaning and hope, restored broken relationships, brought in the outcast and those alienated by society. Even when on the cross he comforts the thief next to him, promising him that he would soon join him in paradise, and uttering aloud that God forgive those who were crucifying him.

But here is the irony. Jesus said if anyone wished to follow him they would need to deny themselves and take up their cross. Paul said we should be imitators of Christ, not just the way he lived but also the way he died.

All this begs the question...Is the Gospel about helping alleviate pain and suffering or is it an invitation to enter into pain and suffering? Jesus reached out with compassion to touch and heal all kinds of human pain, but on the other hand, the most basic symbol of our faith is a cross, and we are aware, even if we avoid admitting it, that Jesus insisted that those who want to follow him...must deny themselves and take up their own cross.

So which is it? Does God want to relieve our suffering and increase our joy or does God want us to enter into pain willingly and walk the way of death?

Maybe it is not an either/or proposition. Maybe it is a both/and. God does want us to be happy and healthy, and God does want us to live a life of meaning. When Jesus wept in the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed that God might spare him the suffering of the cross, but he concluded his prayer with the haunting words, "But not my will, but thine be done." Jesus was willing to be obedient to God, regardless of the cost to himself. The cross is the suffering that leads to new life, a life of something far better than merely avoiding death.

So I propose the motto “Come and Die” as we begin Holy Week. Think of Holy Week not as 7 days, but as the microcosm of a lifetime. We all have our own crosses to bear, the sacrifices we are willing to endure for some greater good. A mother undergoes the pains of childbirth for the benefit of bringing about new life. A man chooses to enter into treatment and give up alcohol in order to save his marriage. A family chooses to show tough love to a son caught up in a destructive addiction to gambling, refusing to bail him out again.

The good news is that God enters into our suffering with us. Sometimes we have to die before we can live again. We have to die from our addictions, die to our pride and sense of entitlement, die to relationships that are killing us, and die to old ways of doing things before we can find new ways. And the promise is God goes with us and accompanies us to the grave so that we will not be overcome. He invites us to come and die so that we truly might live.