

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Courage in the Wilderness: Hold Hands With Strangers

Luke 19:28-40 Rev. Tyler Amundson

April 14, 2019

Luke 19:28-40 Common English Bible (CEB)

²⁸ After Jesus said this, he continued on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹ As Jesus came to Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, he gave two disciples a task. ³⁰ He said, “Go into the village over there. When you enter it, you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say, ‘Its master needs it.’” ³² Those who had been sent found it exactly as he had said.

³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, “Why are you untying the colt?”

³⁴ They replied, “Its master needs it.” ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their clothes on the colt, and lifted Jesus onto it. ³⁶ As Jesus rode along, they spread their clothes on the road.

³⁷ As Jesus approached the road leading down from the Mount of Olives, the whole throng of his disciples began rejoicing. They praised God with a loud voice because of all the mighty things they had seen. ³⁸ They said,

“Blessings on the king who comes in the name of the Lord.
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heavens.”

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees from the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, scold your disciples! Tell them to stop!”

⁴⁰ He answered, “I tell you, if they were silent, the stones would shout.”

What does it mean to follow the way of Jesus?

Think about that for a minute, if you were asked in an elevator and had 3 minutes or less to answer what would you say?

Have you ever asked your friends in church that question? What does it mean to follow Jesus?

This last week I had the opportunity to ask three people that question and the responses I got were deeply felt understandings. After worship today I would encourage you to ask one another, "What does it mean to follow Jesus?" and listen to each other. You may find you have a shared experience with someone you barely knew, or thought you knew completely.

Today as we begin our sermon, I invite us all to focus on how you have followed Jesus in your life this week and where you need prayerful support from our community to do it in the next week. I also invite you if you have an opportunity this week to attend an additional holy week service in your community, maundy Thursday, Good Friday or another extra service, to do so. Do this to remind yourself of who Christ is and go remembering Christ did this journey to remind us God loves us in a deep way.

A few weeks back I shared a concern that our country and world is in a "spiritual crisis." In America in the last 30 years our rates of loneliness have doubled and the statistics show this is a worldwide reality. Something is missing from our lives, something that is making us feel isolated and unable to find joy in our lives. I am not talking rainbows and unicorns kind of joy, I am talking about the deep joy that rises from the bottom part of your body and courses to your head, the joy that lets you laugh a belly laugh, or experience deep sustained hope.

A few weeks back I also shared this idea:

There is a term in American Folk Bluegrass Music called the “High Lonesome.” It is a sound that is sweet, sour, full, and empty. It is the sound of suffering and hope in direct correlation. Story has it that as a child, Bill Monroe would hide in the woods next to a railroad track in the “long, ole, straight bottom part of Kentucky.” Bill would watch World War I veterans returning home from the war as they walked along the track. The weary soldiers would sometimes let out long hollers—loud, high-pitched, bone-chilling hollers of pain and freedom that cut through the air like the blare of a siren.¹

These veterans we hear about in this story had experienced trauma. Let me define trauma, “Trauma is anything that scares us and we do not get over the fear.”² For these World War 1 veterans shouting their high lonesome, they are shouting out their concern about whether the atrocities they have seen will allow them to come home, they are shouting out concern about whether they will have a place to belong, and they are shouting out fear of never returning to the people they knew before they left.

After sharing this in the sermon a few weeks ago, one of my friends said, “Holler is something else in Virginia where I grew up.” She explained that a “holler” is a mountain gulch where often the financially poor in live. One remarkable thing about these places is the houses are built in these hollers, where the whole family lives, so that people can go out on their porch and holler messages to one another and be heard. Messages of joy, of a need to gather, and even a pain and loneliness. On her voice was the sense of the connectedness I have

¹ Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness* (p. 43). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² https://medium.com/s/story/if-connection-is-our-core-human-need-then-why-are-we-so-bad-at-it-a904ae486a48?fbclid=IwAR0vKoe_qlRAZ6zpN8joc8shWL3lyGxaUYw6YibXEqR4lg0YmNnCXRxjsBM&sfns=mo

offer heard describe of the people who dwell in Appalachian mountain, the rich sense of community to which I sometimes long for in my life.

We all long for some place to belong, it is human nature. We know that people heal faster in the love of their community from both physical and mental wounds. The challenge is we all think to belong we have to “be good enough,” do the “right things” and earn up to it. Yet, the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is this, “God loves you.”

That is it. Not only is that it, but Jesus even goes on to say, “God is love.”

He stops there.

No equivocation or additional information.

Then he goes on to say, “The greatest commandment is to love God, and while you are at it, love your neighbor.”

Jesus is saying something that we need to hear, he is saying our role to find a God that seeks connection with us, is our connection to ourselves and the universe, is to touch that connection and to hold hands with strangers.

I think Jesus knew something about humanity, that we fail to recognize in our spiritual crisis today. If we hold hands with strangers, if we work together to share experiences of joy, then in that joy we will find the depth to overcome the trauma we see in our world, our lives, and we will remember God is connecting us to those we struggle with, truth will shine through, and terror will diminish because we are in this together.

There is a Lakota tale that goes this way:

The other side of terror

Oftentimes in the summer heat the land would be visited by terrible forest fires. When this happened the people would flee with their animals, terrified of the flames.

One year a great fire came upon the land again, and the people of the tribe were fleeing, desperately trying to outrun the flames. But the fire was rapidly catching up with them, and there was no hope of escape.

Until the wise woman of the tribe suddenly stopped running and addressed the people: “We can never outrun the flames,” she told them. “We must turn to face the fire, and run back through the flames, to safety on the other side.”

Now of course the people shrank in fear at the thought of running back through the flames, but they respected the wise woman and heeded her advice. First they drenched their children with the remaining water they were carrying. Any surplus water they used to drench their animals and themselves as best they could. Then, holding their children close in their arms, they ran back through the flames.

Some died. But most came through to safety beyond the flames. All were scarred and became known as “the people with burn scars on their skin”. They had faced their worst fears, and broken through to the life that beckons on the other side of terror.

Retelling of a traditional Lakota story³

³ Silf, Margaret. One Hundred More Wisdom Stories (p. 137). Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition.

The author of our book study, Brené Brown, explains that shared experience “holding hands with strangers” gives us a deep connection that is unexplainable, and reminds us we “inextricable connected” to one another. Take this for example from her book:

THE PEOPLE OF FM 1960

I know exactly where I was on January 28, 1986. I was in Houston driving down FM 1960, a busy four-lane thoroughfare close to the suburb of Klein, where I lived when I was in high school. I remember I was driving through an intersection when I saw cars suddenly pulling over to the curb. A few actually stopped right in the middle of their lane. My first thought was that a fire truck or ambulance must be coming from behind us. I slowed down to a crawl, but even after I checked over and over—in my side mirror, in my rearview mirror, craning my neck to look behind me—I couldn’t see the lights of an emergency vehicle.

As I slowly rolled past a pickup truck that was pulled over to the curb, I glanced inside the cab of the truck and saw a man leaning on his steering wheel with his head buried in his hands. I immediately thought, *We’re at war.* I pulled over in front of him and turned on the radio just in time to hear the announcer say, “Again, the space shuttle Challenger has exploded.”

No. No. No. No. I started crying. I saw more people pulling over. Some were even getting out of their cars. It was as if people were desperate to bear witness to this tragedy with others—to not have to know this alone.

NASA is not just a beacon of possibility in space exploration for us in Houston—it’s where our friends and neighbors

work. These are our people. Christa McAuliffe was going to be the first teacher in space. Teachers everywhere are our people.

After five or ten minutes, people started driving again. But now as they slowly made their way back into normal traffic, they had their headlights on. No one on the radio said, “Turn your lights on if you’re driving.” Somehow we instinctively knew that we were all part of this procession of grief. I didn’t know those people or even talk to them, but if you ask where I was when the Challenger disaster happened, I will say, “I was with my people—the people of FM 1960—when that tragedy occurred.”⁴

We can all name national tragedies and where we were for those moments: President JFK’s assassination, Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, the challenger explosion, September 11 attacks. We also can probably name shared experiences with people, like Brené’s story of being on the road. The lights in this story, were an impromptu funeral procession. Funerals are another place we feel a connection to one another, through understanding death, and recognizing somehow despite our differences we were connected to this person who is now gone from this place in the way we understand.

Share experiences of joy are also parts of reminding us we are connected. In our Lenten study, I heard about moments of joy including when the Laurel Locomotives one a basketball tournament in 1969, called the Big 32. A moment attended by 10,700 people in Montana. The shared joy of that moment was remembering even our

⁴ Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness* (pp. 125-126). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

small towns give big contributions to our world and place. I could hear the excitement of the times as people described sleeping in people's basements, and attending the games. As schools across Montana competed in Bozeman. I could feel the groups collective joy and fears as we shared different shared experiences last week. The thing that was most interesting to me is even if they weren't my own shared experience I felt connected knowing these peers in Christian living were touched and changed by these moments.

Turning now to our moment of holding hands with strangers in the gospel today, Jesus' ride into Jerusalem. The Luke version of this story I think is important, because we often imagine the ride into Jerusalem to be heralded by a lot of people waving palm branches. It is not. Instead, the people named are the disciples, being told by the Pharisees to stop. The term disciples probably means more than just the 12, it means everyone following Jesus' including the unnamed women and children who were following. What is striking is that this parade which we celebrate so grandly today was not that many people. Yet, it was a shared experience that reminded the followers of Christ, that the Prince of Peace had rode into Jerusalem and that a week later was risen by God to a throne of peace, and that from that throne a message of God's love for all would echo forever.

I invite us now to hear a reflection from one of my mentors on this Palm Sunday shared experience:

“We now enter the holiest week of the year – the heart of Christian life and faith. I don't think it is an accident that at the center of Palm Sunday is a road. Actually *two* roads – and two journeys, two parades, if you will. From the east, we find Jesus on a donkey, entering Jerusalem through the Golden Gate. It was through that gate in Jewish tradition the *Shekinah* (Divine Presence – power, grace) entered and

would, they believed, enter again when the Messiah came. Jesus would have known the prophecy – and so did his followers.

From the west, another parade advanced on Jerusalem. At the center of this parade was Pilate, the Roman, the Governor, the representative of Imperial power. Pilate was on his way to Jerusalem because there was a Jewish festival and military reinforcements might be needed to – you know – keep the peace, bring order, suppress any inconvenient demonstrations. Trust me, Pilate wasn't riding a donkey. His parade would have included war horses and great displays of military power. His parade was also a display of Roman imperial theology. Remember that, for Rome, Caesar was not just an emperor or king. He was also the 'son of God' and the 'savior of the world.' Those titles were his. Roman imperial theology taught that it was Caesar who brought peace on earth – through war and victory. Pilate's procession was meant to clearly remind those who gathered who was boss – and to let them know that he would keep the peace the only way he thought possible – by wielding a hefty sword.

The parade from the east would have been relatively small compared to the Pilate parade but it would likely have been noticed, especially with the heightened sensitivity Jewish festivals brought. And, while the ordinary Roman may have missed the significance, the Jews gathered on the Jesus parade route would have known that his entrance, through a gate that by its very nature declared divine blessing from the God of the Jews rather than through the divine Caesar of Rome, was an act of defiance. Quiet defiance, perhaps, but defiance nevertheless. Just a few days later it would all come to a violent end. Fear would have its way. Jesus would appear to have lost his bid to

change hearts and lives. Rome would claim victory – as it usually did. Rome would claim that their victory restored the peace. And Jesus would want his followers to remember that there was another path. His ‘way.’ He had confronted the powers of Rome armed with love. That was the path he affirmed on the day he chose to enter Jerusalem from the east on a donkey as the Romans entered from the west on war-horses.⁵

Sixty years later, when John wrote his gospel, the power of Rome was stronger than ever. And the temptation in the fledgling Christian community was likely to . . . give up, give in, succumb to the pressures of the world – or fight back. Christians were caught. *Give in to Rome’s power*, taunted the Roman overseers. *Come back to us*, whispered faithful Jews. And, in response to those voices, John’s Jesus reaffirmed the haunting message . . . *I am the way. Follow me. Follow on the path, from death to life. Follow.* And they did – which is why we are here. But in the end, the choice is a daily one and must be made by each Christian in every age. After all, let’s be honest. Through the ages Christians have done their share of beating up on people and mounting war horses in the name of Christ. On Palm Sunday we hear a clarion call to stop it and to decide which procession to be in.”⁶

Friends this week begins the steep climb up the Palm Sunday road...a journey our ancestors and forbearers in the faith have named as leading to Life and Truth.

⁵ I join my mentor in confessing to being inspired in my understanding of Palm Sunday by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan’s work: *The Last Week*, HarperCollins ©2006.

⁶ Borrowed with permission from my Mentor – Rev. Marianne Niesen who preached this in a sermon March 22, 2015 at St. Paul’s UMC in Helena, Montana

Dare we follow the way of Jesus today? Dare we join in shared experience with others and live in the Kingdom of God?

This week I invite you to join us the spiritual practice of Holy Week. Come to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday service. To experience the journey Jesus completed, to learn how to follow Christ to Easter.

And lest you think this is your final chance and that God only nudges once, our forbearers taught us one more thing.

God will keep knocking on the door of your heart until you're ready to receive the path of Jesus. No action will save you, no perfect moment will connect you, you are connected no matter what to a God of love who sacrificed all to remind us and keep reminding us of that.

Go from this Palm Sunday, choose the parade you will follow and trust that God will provide you more chances to walk with him in your journey ahead.

And remember as the end of the scripture says that even the "stones would cry out" for connection if we did not.