**Passionate Power**

**Text: Philippians 2:5-11**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**Palm Sunday**

**March 25, 2018**

It was quite the procession. Clergy and laity alike had gathered from many churches and denominations. Bishops and regional ministers and presbytery executives were there. The ecumenical gathering was hosted by the Anglican church – that would be the Canadian counterpart to the Episcopal church – it was hosted by the Anglican church that was around the corner and down the block from the Disciples congregation that I was serving at the time. One lower-level bishop was particularly decked out in all of the regalia that he was entitled to wear by virtue of the fact that, even though he was a *junior* bishop, he was still a *bishop*: the multiple layers of colorful robes, the ceremonial shepherd’s crook, the miter (that’s the big, pointed, sometimes golden headgear that bishops wear); I mean, the dude was dressed to kill! As I said, it was quite a procession. Bringing-up the rear of the procession was the Anglican Archbishop of Canada. He was the bishop of the bishops. And he was wearing a simple blue shirt, and a modest clerical collar.

I’ve always had a special admiration for people in positions of power and authority who are surrounded by an aura of humility. They don’t call attention to themselves. They understand clearly that it’s not about me. It’s about God. And it’s about the mission to which God has called them.

Jesus understood this. He was the Son of God. He was the Word of God incarnate. He had come from the very heart of God, and he would return to the heart of God. Yet even Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Or, as another translation of Philippians 2:6 says, “He did not count equality with God a thing to be *grasped*”. Instead, he *emptied* himself, he took the form of a *servant*, he became *obedient* to the point of death.

The words come from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. Paul may have borrowed them from a very early Christian hymn. And what we see in Mark’s gospel – especially on Palm Sunday – reflects much of this same, humble spirit that characterized Jesus’ ministry. We call that Palm Sunday procession the “triumphal entry,” but in Mark’s gospel anyway it seems to have been a rather modest affair. Mark does reference “*many*” people being part of the events that Sunday; how many we don’t know. But when Matthew is written maybe 10 years later the *many* have become *“a very large crowd*,” and then in Luke’s gospel they is a “*whole multitude*” of Jesus’s followers shouting “Hosanna.” So Mark’s version of “many people” sounds rather modest by comparison.

And to opt for the Matthean or Lucan “triumphal entry” as opposed to Mark’s more modest parade misses the point of much of Mark’s gospel. We’ve mentioned Mark’s “Messianic Secret” in recent weeks. That’s the tendency of Mark’s Jesus to do something spectacular – like healing a sick person or casting out a demon – and then telling all who witnessed this deed of great power to say nothing to anyone about it. It’s as if Jesus wants to keep it all a secret. Mark’s Jesus maintains a low profile, or at least he tries to. He doesn’t want people to get the wrong idea about him. He doesn’t want them to focus on him, but on the mighty deeds that God is doing *through* him. Mark’s Jesus does not seek to be the center of attention. No, he seeks to be a *servant*.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” Paul says. Paul encourages the entire congregation in Philippi to have that same humble mindset, that same servant mentality, that same “it’s not about me” point of view that Jesus has throughout Mark’s gospel. He encourages that community of early Christians to have the mindset of Jesus, and – through Paul’s words – God encourages the Church to have that same Christ-like mindset today. Of all of the congregations that Paul shepherded, the Philippians were probably the closest to this servant mentality already. In this letter there is no outburst of anger against the self-righteousness that had invaded the Galatians, or the holier-than-thou attitude that Paul found among the Corinthians. Unlike the frustration that Paul expresses in those other letters, in Philippians he is gently encouraging a congregation that he dearly loves to just continue down the path that they’re already on. “It’s not about you, it’s about the Kingdom,” Paul is saying. “So stay the course with the kind of humble, servant ministry in which you’re already engaged.”

“Have the mind of a servant,” Paul says. “Sacrifice yourself for the sake of others,” he seems to suggest. For this is the mindset of Jesus.

Even as we’re all watching college basketball on these weekends of March Madness, updating our brackets, being amazed at the upsets…let’s not lose sight of the fact that God’s *favorite* sport will start this week. Thursday is baseball’s Opening Day. The Cubs and the Marlins will take to the field in Miami, which is a good thing because no one in their right mind would want to play baseball in March in Chicago.

One of the things that I love about baseball is the whole concept of the sacrifice. If basketball is about charging down the court, going in for the slam dunk and all the while calling attention to yourself, baseball at its best is about giving yourself up so your teammates can score. My all-time favorite team is the 1959 Chicago White Sox. They didn’t have a Mickey Mantle at the plate or a Juan Marichal on the mound or some other attention-grabbing superstar on their team; just 9 average guys who worked together. And those 9 average guys won the Amercan League pennant that year. Here’s what one of their big rallies looked like: Louie Aparicio, their little short-stop, would lead off with a walk. Then he’d steal 2nd. Nellie Fox, the 2nd baseman, would lay down a sacrifice bunt, which meant that he was out but Aparicio would advance to 3rd. Jim Landis, the centerfielder, would hit a sacrifice fly ball, which meant that he was out too but Aparicio would come sprinting home after the ball was caught. That made the score 1-0 and that might be all the runs the Sox needed to win because their good pitching and defense would hold the other team at bay. Nothing flashy, no big standouts, just good fundamental baseball where everyone worked as a team and they got the job done.

Now, some of you all might think that that’s really boring. And I understand; watching lots of home runs fly out of the park can be exciting. But the skill and the precision and the teamwork and the excellent defense in a game like that is just *thrilling*. Nellie Fox hit only 35 home runs in his entire major league career, but a more passionate, a more exciting baseball player you’ll never see. He wasn’t a power hitter but he had a powerful passion.

The best baseball game I ever saw was scoreless through 9 innings. I’ll set the scene for you: The New York Yankees are playing the Blue Jays in Toronto, and I’m living in Toronto at the time so I’m rooting for the Jays. Anyway, if my favorite team is the White Sox, my second favorite team is anyone who’s playing the Yankees. So I’m at the ballpark watching the game, and I’m sitting next to this family who’ve driven all the way from New York to cheer on their Yankees. Scoreless game through 9 innings, but the pitching and the defense are just stellar, and we’re enjoying the game and kibitzing back and forth, and it’s just a *great* day. The Yankees finally score in the top of the 10th and they win the game 1-0. I reach over and shake the hand of the Yankee fan next to me, and then we all give both teams a standing ovation.

In my mind, that’s the way that sports ought to be, that’s the way that life ought to be, that’s the way that the life of *faith* ought to be: a devotion to excellence, a passionate commitment to a lofty goal, egos out of the way, everyone working together for the good of all.

There’s power in that kind of passion. It’s the passionate power of the Kingdom of God. Jesus exemplified such passionate power when he rode straight into his opponents’ camp, recognizing that he was probably going to be the loser in the short-term, but trusting that somehow God would draw something amazing out of this apparent defeat, out of this sacrifice, out of this act of obedience to the point of death.

The Kingdom draws nearer when we follow our passion. God is praised when we run with great enthusiasm toward those goals that truly excite us. There is great power when we let go of the things that hinder us. There is great power when we pursue those things that God has placed upon our hearts and we can feel them burning within us. It doesn’t mean that the going will be easy. That week in Jerusalem was hardly easy for Jesus. Sometimes the very thing that were passionate about leads us to make great sacrifices, and even leads to great suffering. Obedience and servanthood often mean that someone else gets the glory. It has been said that you can accomplish a lot of good in this world as long as you don’t care who gets the credit. Any anyway, if you’re seeking after glory, than you’re grasping at something that belongs only to God. The passionate power of Jesus is found in servant ministry. That’s something to remember, as we enter this week that marks the *Passion* of Jesus Christ. Amen.