**Vulnerable Victory**

**Text: Matthew 21:5**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**Palm Sunday**

**April 9, 2017**

It was maybe 10 years ago this day at First Christian Church in Bloomington. The service was about to begin and folks were passing out palms in the Narthex. Then two young men walked in land approached Pastor Helen. They said, “Do you where Brothers Bar is?” Now, it’s not every day that someone goes into a church, asking for directions to a bar, at 11 am on Sunday morning! Helen must’ve looked a little perplexed because they quickly added, “We parked there last night, and we’re looking for our car.” Someone pointed them in the right direction, and as they left the church Helen overheard one young man sheepishly saying to the other, “Oh man, it’s Palm Sunday; I completely forgot!”

It would appear that at least one of those young men grew-up in the Church! But whatever spiritual formation may’ve occurred during his formative years had temporarily taken a back seat – and was maybe lost altogether – amidst other influences that sometimes afflict us during our student years.

My dad use to say, “Failure isn’t fatal; success isn’t final.” When things have gone well and you think that you’ve won a great victory, you have to *keep* it won. That’s true whether we’re talking about nurturing a young person, or passing legislation…or winning over the City of Jerusalem. Success isn’t final; victories are vulnerable; you have to be on guard for a counter-attack.

This was the case with Jesus and his apparently “Triumphal Entry” into Jerusalem. To the extent that it was a victory at all, it was a vulnerable victory. The way that Matthew tells the story, it seemed like Jesus had won over the masses on Sunday, only to be defeated in a counter-attack by the power structure on Friday. Jesus’ success on Palm Sunday wasn’t final. But neither was his failure on Good Friday fatal; at least, it wasn’t *ultimately* fatal.

Two empires are in conflict on Palm Sunday: on the one hand, there is the Roman Empire; on the other hand, there is God’s Empire, God’s Kingdom. This becomes clear when we realize that there were *two* triumphal entries that day. While Jesus entered Jerusalem from the east, Pontius Pilate – the Roman governor – and the Roman Legion assigned to him entered Jerusalem from the west. You see, most of the year Pilate lived in a newly-built Roman settlement near the Mediterranean. With the sea breezes and all the amenities of Roman architectural design, it was a much more pleasant place than what the Romans viewed as the squalor of the backwater city of Jerusalem. But the Jewish festival of Passover was approaching, and with it the massing in Jerusalem of a dangerous number of angry Jews – including certain messianic figures who might want to lead the masses in a revolt against Rome – so Pilate and his troops had to ride into the Jewish capital to keep the peace.

And they made a great show of it: Roman soldiers in gleaming armor, astride mighty war horses, the Roman governor in his gold-plated chariot, banners unfurled, swords and lances prominently displayed: it was quite a parade!

Jesus parade, over on the other side of town, was quite a contrast: no chariots, no war horses; just a humble soul, riding on a lowly donkey. Instead of grand military banners, there were simple palm branches.

And if we’d been there, seeing the events with our own two eyes, rather than through Matthew’s editorial gloss, we would’ve seen that Jesus’ entry wasn’t the main event. There might not even have been as many people with him as we think there were. The oldest version of the story – in Mark – says that there were “many people” with Jesus. By the time Matthew puts pen to paper, it has become “a very large crowd.” But Luke – probably the most recent of these 3 accounts – Luke speaks of the “whole multitude.” So we see the embellishment happening with each retelling of the story. Maybe some embellishment has already happened by Mark’s time – some 40 years after the event itself – and who knows? On the spring Sunday when Jesus actually rode into Jerusalem, it might’ve been a small procession indeed.

In fact, maybe that was the point. Remember, we’ve got 2 empires in conflict here. Maybe Jesus intended his entry to be a small, humble parade all along. Jesus is contrasting the military might of the Roman Empire with the humble, gentle might of God’s Empire. Rome *forces* its will on the people through impressive parades and even more impressive weapons; God offers the persuasive power of saving grace.

But even if we’re right that the palm parade wasn’t all that big, it seems to have had a big impact on the people. Grace, after all, can be very persuasive indeed. Add to that the people who missed most of Jesus’ point and thought that he was riding into town to lead an armed revolt against the Romans, and by the end of the day you may well have had a mass of people in Jerusalem singing Jesus’ praises. “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they shouted. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” *Hosanna* means “*save us*.” The crowd is quoting Psalm 118, a song of victory. Matthew reinforces their words with lines from the prophet Zechariah. Hear what the prophet himself says: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble, and riding on a donkey” (Zeph. 9:9). These folks are filled with hope. These folks are ready for action. Whether it’s gentle persuasion or military might, non-violent resistance or armed revolt; the whole multitude expects Jesus – one way or another – to save them from the Romans and bring in God’s Empire of love, justice and peace.

It seemed like quite a victory. But the victory was only apparent. The victory was very vulnerable. The coalition of Jesus’ supporters was very fragile, of course. They had a common enemy in Rome, but they disagreed on strategy: as we’ve said, some expected an armed revolt while others were prepared for non-violent resistance. And non-violent resistance makes sense in this context. I mean, who cares about Roman lances when you expect to be rescued by a legion of angels?

But maybe Jesus wasn’t expecting victory; at least, not in any conventional sense of the word. It’s interesting that when Matthew quotes Zephaniah, he includes the part about “Your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey,” but he leaves out the part that says, “triumphant and victorious is he.” Maybe Jesus’ whole point is to call into question our entire understanding of victory; our entire approach to overcoming our enemies. After all, this is the Jesus who said – way back in the Sermon on the Mount – “Love your enemies…turn the other cheek…blessed are the peacemakers.”

This past week we marked the 100th anniversary of the U.S. entry into World War I. A little more than a year later, in July, 1918, a remarkable incident occurred. In an aerial battle over France, an American pilot was shot down and killed by a German plane. When German soldiers inspected the wreckage, they discovered that the dead pilot was Lieutenant Quentin Roosevelt, youngest son of former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt. In that sector of the war, the Germans stopped fighting, and they buried Lt. Roosevelt’s body with full military honors. It seems that they held former President Roosevelt in high esteem. They viewed him as one of the greatest of all Americans, and they believed that the least they could do would be to give his son a proper military funeral. For a brief moment, the madness of war was suspended and these German soldiers treated their enemy for what he really was: a fellow human being; a brother within the human family. The soldiers recognized that the human spirit has higher obligations than the normal protocol of the battlefield. You see, there are norms of decency and respect and human dignity that transcend the violent norms that so often govern human behavior. The empires of this world may adhere to those violent norms, but there is another Empire – a Higher Power – whose norms have to do with seeking justice, and loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God. It was the higher power of God’s Empire that Jesus brought to bear upon the swirling cauldron of conflict that was – and still is – Jerusalem.

But the empire strikes back. The Roman Empire will not be thwarted by the soft values of some long-haired peacenik. Whatever progress Jesus makes in persuading people of the virtue of non-violence is quickly lost. The crowd soon turns against Jesus. By Thursday night, the apparent victory is over.

Herein lies an important lesson for us. After winning a victory, you have to keep it won. I learned that lesson from one of my mentors, John Ramey. Keeping the victory won is often harder than the victory itself. John was a social worker and community organizer. He could count disarming gang members and thwarting the racist plans of real estate agents as among his victories. But the persistence of both gang violence in Chicago and racially segregated neighborhoods in so many cities indicates how vulnerable such victories are. Keeping your victories won is very difficult work indeed.

And we know this. If you’ve ever had a loved one in recovery from drugs or alcohol, only to slip back into addiction, you know how hard it is to keep the victory won. If you’ve ever helped someone work their way out of unemployment, only to be laid-off and then spiral back down into despair, you know how hard it is to keep the victory won. If you’ve ever worked on a successful political campaign, only to have your candidate defeated in the next election, you know how hard it is to keep the victory won.

History tells us how hard it is as well. It was on this very day – Palm Sunday, April 9, 1865 – that two war-weary generals sat down in Wilmer McLeans’s front parlor at the sleepy crossroads of Appomattox Court House, Virginia. It was there that General Robert E. Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia to General Ulysses S. Grant, effectively ending the American Civil War. The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which ended slavery, would be ratified by the end of the year. The 14th and 15th amendments, guaranteeing African-Americans U.S. citizenship and the right to vote, would be ratified a few years later. The crucial victory in the crusade against slavery appeared to be won. But the great champion of the freed slaves – President Lincoln – was assassinated a mere 5 days later, on Good Friday. And there followed nearly 100 years of terrorism in the South and discrimination in the North, as that hard-won victory over racial injustice was all but erased. And even today – even after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 – the evil empire of injustice still tries to thwart the victories of Appomattox and Montgomery and Birmingham and Selma. Success is not final. Victory is vulnerable. The powers and principalities of this present age are always prepared to pounce upon the advancing frontier of God’s Empire and push it back into the valley of the shadow of death.

Success isn’t final. But then again, failure isn’t fatal. The juxtaposition of Palm Sunday and Good Friday call into question our very concepts of victory and success. Maybe Palm Sunday was the defeat, and Good Friday was the triumph. Maybe the misunderstanding of the crowd, thinking that Jesus was set to lead an armed revolt, maybe that was the real defeat for the advancing Kingdom. Maybe that was the cause of Jesus’ weeping over Jerusalem, as reported in Luke’s gospel.

Perhaps the real victory is won whenever people stand-up to hatred and injustice and violence, even when taking that stand costs them their jobs, their reputations or their lives. That’s what Jesus did when he rode into Jerusalem that Sunday morning. That’s what Jesus did when he held his ground in the garden on Thursday night; when he faced down Roman swords and insisted that his disciples not use violence to defend him. That’s what Jesus did when he boldly stood before Pilate on Friday, and then shouldered his cross all to the way to Calvary. The real victory is won when people stand-up to hatred and injustice and violence, even when they make the ultimate sacrifice in the process. Because, you see, if the Cross means anything, it means that God can absorb human suffering, and somehow transform it into the ultimate victory of his eternal Kingdom. Amen.