

Phil.2, Palm Sunday, 2020 humility and power

Like many of you, my husband and I have been finding different ways to keep ourselves going during this stay-at-home time. With many of our usual activities or engagements not happening, we've done our best to create some new activities that don't put us or anyone at risk, but give us something to anticipate. Unfortunately, many of these activities center around food! For example, since I'm not looking to get to church early in the morning on Sundays these past weeks, we started a new tradition of having pancakes and sausage on Sunday mornings, just because we can. If Phil and I stick to our new tradition for this Palm Sunday morning, we'll actually be observing in our little way a portion of our congregational tradition for Palm Sunday—the nearly legendary Palm Sunday pancake breakfast, put on by the men of the church. I'm not going to lie---it makes me sad to not be in church together for Palm Sunday! No palms to wave in our hands. No children participating in the service or hunting for Easter eggs after the breakfast. No choir singing, no Holy Communion shared, and no pancakes and sausage following worship. It's a lot to miss! And I do miss it, and I'm thinking most of you do, too. I'm not even preaching in the church setting this week, out of respect for the Governor's Stay-at-Home order. But while we are experiencing numerous losses, there is also much that is *not* lost. We are *still* the body of Christ in this community of Knife River. The church is not the building, as we all know; it's *us*---we are the church, regardless of where or how we are meeting. And we can still pray together, worship together, talk together, and serve our neighbor together, just in different ways. And we

can still eat pancakes and sausage together in spirit sometime today in honor of Palm Sunday.....Phil and I are down for that, if you are!

This event of Palm Sunday, when Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey to the cries of Hosanna from a gathered crowd, always makes me think of parades. The thought of any kind of parade we might actually get to see or be a part of in person seems a long way off right now. Except that I feel a little like I'm watching a parade some days when I look out of my windows onto 52nd Ave. North in my neighborhood. With outdoor exercise being a break from being within one's home, we frequently find ourselves looking out on a veritable parade of those passing by. I love the variety! Sometimes people are on their own or with one other person, sometimes we see good sized family groups. Some walk, some run, some are biking, some are on scooters, many are accompanied by dogs. And if you're wondering, it would appear that Golden Retrievers are the most popular breed to walk, at least in our neighborhood. We have been delighted to see so many out, parading past our windows, and if we're out with them, we exchange greetings from our appropriate social distance. Even that simple exchange of greetings provides a lift of spirits. Now, perhaps more than ever, we recognize the buoyancy and energy that simply gathering a crowd together can produce, because we don't get to do it anymore. Palm Sunday has traditionally been all about crowds and intergenerational interaction; this year we're doing it under a Stay-at-home order with physical distancing precautions---what an unexpected and ironic turn of events! Probably in our present circumstances we more fully grasp than we ever have the contrast between being solitary and being part of a group. And if a group of people are gathered together for a common

and positive purpose---to worship, to cheer on a sports team, to be a part of a parade--- that crowd energy and buoyancy are multiplied exponentially. This is the kind of spirit that seems to have animated Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on this Palm Sunday nearly 2000 years ago. People are shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David" and waving branches of palm trees and flinging their cloaks on the road to create a smoother donkey ride for Jesus. Jesus, who enters Jerusalem both in the manner of a messianic king with cheering throngs, but also in the manner of a peasant on a humble donkey. We see both Christ's power and his humility on display in this Palm Sunday moment.

Power and humility are appropriately the focus of our other Palm Sunday lesson this morning, from Philippians. The book of Philippians is actually a letter from the apostle Paul to the congregation he founded at Philippi. In this letter he quotes a very early and ancient hymn of the church about the nature of God as revealed in Christ. Let's examine this hymn for a moment. Scholars call it the "kenosis hymn", "kenosis" being the Greek word for "emptying". Though a part of the Godhead, Christ was willing to empty himself, to be born of a human mother, to humble himself to a terrible death on the cross for our salvation. As we read in verses 6 and 7 of this 2nd chapter from Philippians, "Jesus, 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 and being born in human likeness." This ancient hymn praises Christ for his willingness to empty himself, to become like a slave, and to die like a criminal. Christ is praised here, not for using his power in some aggressive or self-aggrandizing way, but for his willingness to lay down his power; for his willingness to empty himself for the sake of others. It is *because* of his

humility that Christ is exalted and that at his name, knees around the world and in heaven and on earth, will bow.

Paul includes this ancient hymn within his letter to the church at Philippi, because he is making a point: he wants them to have amongst themselves this same mind that is revealed in Christ, this same way of exercising one's power out of a humble kind of stance. Paul's words to the congregation at Philippi are also Paul's words to our congregation at Knife River. And so this morning, we would do well to reflect for ourselves on what it means to be humble, and what it means to exercise God-given power for the sake of the world. How will we both embrace a humble posture while exercising power rightly? As God does in Christ?

Let's think about humility. Not humility as in being Minnesota nice or politely self-effacing, but humility as in honestly recognizing our limits. As in acknowledging that we are the children of God, but *are not* God ourselves. As in grasping that it's not all about us, treasured and loved by God though we are. Perhaps this is an easier time than usual to think about humility, because in many ways, these are very humbling times. They are humbling for humanity in general; isn't it true that we have usually thought that we, the human species, were the most powerful and potentially most frightening force in our world? And yet, a tiny pathogen that cannot even be seen without an electron microscope has brought all the world to its knees. No country is immune, regardless of how wealthy or medically advanced or militarily powerful they might be. That's humbling. And it's humbling also for many of us to realize that in the midst of this pandemic, we feel so powerless, so unable to help, perhaps so removed. We see

desperate situations in New York City and other places, but most of us are still staying safely at home in an area with relatively few confirmed cases. We see and hear of others who are taking on crucial roles, those in the front lines of the health profession, for example, who are rightly our new heroes. They are genuinely emptying themselves for sake of others and acting with a humble spirit for the common good. Certainly they are the ones who are modeling servanthood very much in the spirit of Christ. And in comparison to the sacrifices and risks they are making and taking in their service to others, we may feel humbled indeed.

Additionally, it has probably rarely been so obvious that we are not in control and, in fact, are very much at the mercy of circumstances much bigger than ourselves. We are forced to humbly acknowledge that none of us can make this pandemic go away. There are some upsides to this realization though. Because while we can't *singly* fix the problem, we can, together, make a significant impact for good by flattening the curve of the spread of Covid-19. That's something which is only effective if we do it in tandem, if we are part of a group effort. Which requires a certain humble approach on our part, a willingness to work as a community team, a national team, even a world team, for a common good. None of us get to be divas within a pandemic; there isn't room for our usual bluster and pretensions; we need to work humbly together for the common good, even if it means sacrifices of various kinds on our part. In the same way that some have been saying that this is the Lentiest Lent they've ever Lented, we could also acknowledge that this may be the most humbling Lent we've ever Lented; like it or not, we are learning

lessons in humility. But that's all right, because humility is the very vehicle through which God works. Being humble doesn't mean being without power.

Here's what I think it's important for us to remember: once we adopt that kind of humility modeled by God in Christ, once we see ourselves as servants, *we are not powerless*. God exercises power through servanthood in Christ; in fact, God saves the whole world, which God so loves, through Christ's humble servanthood. We can also exercise power through servanthood. We are, in fact, em-powered by the Spirit of God, to find ways to help heal and bless our community and our world. One of the interesting things about having these online meetings that are now so common is that you see each other in your homes, sitting at the kitchen table maybe, coffee mug in hand. At our online Lectio study group last Tuesday, when we talked about power, one of the participants said to another, "I can see what your power is, because it's right in front of you on your kitchen table.....notecards, envelopes, and stamps. You're sending out notes as a way of staying in touch." And right now, that is a humble and wonderful way to exercise power---sending a letter or note to someone to remain connected. Or picking up the telephone and making some calls. Or hosting a Zoom gathering online to bring people together. Or driving the food shelf supplies from Duluth up to Two Harbors and then packing the food bags which are being left out on the sidewalk for families or people in need. Or plastering the airwaves with pictures of beauty and springtime, or going to the pharmacy for a neighbor to pick up a prescription, or praying for every person you know who is vulnerable or working in the medical field. I know church members who are doing all of those things, and so do you, and probably so are *you* doing these very

kinds of things—exercising your gifts, your God-given power, in humble but important ways that will help to bring healing and blessings in a time when they are so needed.

When Phil and I walked a portion of the Lakewalk the other day, we realized that some unknown hand had painted fist-sized rocks in a bright variety of colors and sparkle and randomly spread them along side of the Lake walk. Amidst our present northern Minnesota version of spring--which mostly features brown, gray, and a bit of green,-- those colorful, sparkly rocks shone like jewels. What a day brightener! Someone used their power for good in a humble but spirit-lifting effort to make people smile. We can do likewise.

This is not the Palm Sunday of which any of us dreamed or probably could have even imagined just a month ago. No crowds, no music, no palms, no pancakes. Yet, *it is* Palm Sunday, the day our Lord entered Jerusalem with the majesty and power of a king and the humility of a servant. In doing so, he models what it means for us to exercise the powers and gifts God gives us with a humble, servant's heart. We look to have this same mind among us, that is so beautifully shown in our Lord. We are not in our building, but we are the worshiping, serving body of Christ of Knife River, Minnesota. We are Church, and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be part of God's force for good in this world, to bring healing and blessing at a time when they are so needed. Amen.