



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: April 5, 2009

Jesus' Downward Mobility, Robert B. Culp
Mark 15:16-24; Philippians 2:5-11

Today is an interesting and challenging Sunday for Christians. Most Christians are celebrating this day as Palm Sunday, with the lectionary readings from the Gospels describing Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Others in the Christian community, though, are observing today as Passion Sunday, with the extended 119-verse lectionary reading this year from Mark, describing in detail the poignant events that took place during those last days that led up to Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

In one set of readings, we witness a festive parade with Jesus riding a donkey and the people spreading their cloaks in front of him, waving palm branches and shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" In the other set of readings, we encounter the unfolding plot to kill Jesus, the Passover meal Jesus shared with his disciples and the institution of the Lord's Supper, and then in rapid succession we come face to face with Judas' betrayal, Peter's three denials, Jesus' trials before the Council and Pilate, and finally Jesus' *via delorosa* to Golgotha and his death upon a cross.

On Palm Sunday we experience laughter and joy and great excitement, as we are uplifted in the light of such a glorious day. Whereas on Passion Sunday we are moved deeply by the sadness and overwhelming heaviness of Jesus' final days, finding ourselves downcast and sorrowful amidst the darkness of Jesus' passion and death.

It is quite a contrast in how this day is experienced, isn't it? And yet, in the end, it is the same day ... and is not an either/or choice for us at the beginning of Holy Week. Rather, it is a day when we are called to hold in creative tension both light and darkness, joy and sorrow, life and death as we move into the wondrous mystery of God's self-giving love in the unfolding drama of our salvation.

Nearly two thousand years after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, another visitor came to the city, Germany's last Kaiser, Wilhelm II. His procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of an empire similar to Caesar's that was positioning itself to be a world power. His entourage was so grand that he had to have the Jaffe Gate in the old city widened so that his over-sized carriage could pass through. After the parade had ended, someone climbed up and attached a large sign to the gate. The sign simply read: "A better man than Wilhelm once came through this city's gate. He rode on a donkey."

Rather than focusing upon Jesus' parade this morning, which embodies the alternative vision of the kingdom of God differing considerably from Caesar's and Kaiser Wilhelm's; and not wanting to race through

a broad overview of Jesus' passion narrative, which will be a part of our Maundy Thursday Service later this week ... I would like to have us consider together several questions tied to that sign attached to the Jaffe Gate years ago. What made Jesus a better man? What was it that compelled the people to spread their cloaks and wave their branches and hail him as king? What is it about Jesus that still inspires millions of people to give their lives to him, and in some places to give their lives for him?

The Apostle Paul seeks to answer such questions in his joyful and confident letter to the Philippians, as he refers to the wondrous mind of Jesus, which was nothing less than the mind of God. From his prison cell, Paul penned these eloquent words that probably are fragments from an early Christian hymn: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant and humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Such a mind is filled with compassion, and Jesus' compassion is characterized by a downward pull, which – if truth be told – disturbs us. Most of us cannot even think of ourselves in terms other than those of an upward pull, an upward mobility in which we strive for better lives, higher salaries, and more prestigious positions and places of recognition. So, it is natural for us to be disconcerted by a God who embodies a downward movement. Instead of striving for a higher position, more power, and more influence, Jesus moves, as Karl Barth says, from "the heights to the depths, from victory to defeat, from riches to poverty, from triumph to suffering, from life to death."

In fact, Jesus' entire life and mission involves accepting powerlessness, and revealing in this powerlessness the unlimited dimensions of the love of God. You see, Jesus' compassion is not a bending toward the underprivileged from a privileged position; it is not a reaching out from on high to those who are less fortunate below; it is not a gesture of sympathy or pity for those who fail to make it in the upward pull. On the contrary, Jesus' compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute, and building a home there.

This is a compassion that is total, absolute, unconditional, without reservation. It is the compassion of the one who keeps going to the most forgotten corners of the world, and who cannot rest as long as he knows that there are still human beings with tears in their eyes and unmet hungers in their tummies and their souls. It is the compassion of a God who does not merely act as a servant, but whose servanthood is a direct expression of his divinity.

Such a compassionate mind is humble, service-oriented, obedient, and in the end it bears the cross all the way to Golgotha. The mind to which Paul refers in his hymn is not simply knowledgeable and astute. Rather, it is the mind-set of how Jesus sees himself, his brothers and sisters, his neighbors and the world, and his God; and it invites us to see in the same fashion. It is a mind-set that reflects a "downward mobility" that is as counter-cultural as it is startling.

To think of putting on such a mind as this, I confess, causes me to shudder a bit ... whether I apply it to myself or to the church as the Body of Christ which Paul does in his letter to the Philippians. Can persons and churches of humble mind and disposition survive in the world we know? Can they achieve what they need to achieve? Can they accomplish the challenging agenda of Christ in the world today? After all, we live in a culture where humility and servanthood and cross-bearing are not the values that are highly touted nor pursued. For ours is a society that has made best sellers of Robert Ringer's *Looking Out for Number One* and *Winning Through Intimidation*, and such a society seems to value more highly aggressiveness and controlling and banner-waving.

And yet, this humble way of compassion reflects the mind and the way of Jesus, and it is the life-giving way to which you and I are called. Of course, who among us wants to be humble ... wants to be last ... or wants to be like a little, powerless child? Who desires to lose his or her life, to be poor or mourning or hungry? All this appears to be against our natural inclinations. But once we see that Jesus reveals to us, in his radically downward pull, the compassionate nature of God, we begin to understand that to follow him is to participate in the ongoing self-revelation of God and the expansive, abundant life God offers in Christ.

In other words, by setting out with Jesus on the road of the cross, we become people in whose lives the compassionate presence of God in the world can manifest itself in ways that bring new life and joy, peace and justice.

The Catholic priest Henri Nouwen discovered this truth in a profound way. After teaching at great universities, publishing many successful books, and being recognized as a trustworthy spiritual guide to so many throughout the world, Nouwen found himself burned out. And in his signature way, he probed the heart of that self-diagnosis. "I woke up one day," he wrote, "with the realization that I was living in a very dark place, and that the term 'burnout' was a convenient translation for spiritual death."

In the person of Jean Vanier, the French philosopher and Catholic layman who founded L'Arche (communities for severely handicapped people), Nouwen heard a call to "go and live among the poor in spirit" and find healing there. "So," he wrote, "I moved from Harvard to L'Arche, from the best and the brightest, wanting to rule the world, to mentally handicapped men and women who had few or no words, and were considered marginal to the needs of our society."

When he arrived at the Daybreak L'Arche community in Toronto, Henri was asked to help Adam Arnett, a man with severe physical and developmental disabilities, with his morning routine. He began this assignment with much trepidation, having no training or background in caring for someone who was non-verbal and who could not move without assistance. In the eyes of the world, Adam was a nobody, someone unable to make a contribution to society. Henri's first encounters with Adam were awkward, but over time a deep friendship grew between them. Henri treasured their time together, reveling in the slower rhythm of life.

Of this relationship, Henri wrote this, "Adam is my friend, my teacher, my spiritual director, my counselor, my minister. Adam taught me that being is more important than doing, that the heart is more important than the mind, and that doing things together and living in community is a lot more important than trying to do it all on your own. With Adam I knew a sacred presence, and I 'saw' the face of God. He was the most radical witness to the truth of our lives that I have ever encountered."

Reflecting on the life of Henri Nouwen and the downward mobility in his life that mirrored the life of our Lord, one commentator offers the following poetic expression:

From the hallowed halls of Harvard,
And the lecture rooms at Yale,
To a lowly life at Daybreak,
Is a long and dusty trail.
From the noise, and the pomp, and the circumstance,
That we've come to know so well,
To the morning light of a simple life,
There's a story here to tell.
I'm bound away on a long, long journey,
Oh, yes, the road will be long, and sweet will be my rest,
Yes, I'm bound away on a long journey,

The answer to this riddle shall be my quest.
And the riddle says,
Finding leads to losing, losing leads to finding,
Living leads to dying, living leaves death behind,
Losing leads to finding, nothing else to say.
No one will find life, no one will find joy,
Oh, no one will find life in any other way.

In the end, the meaning of this day – Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday – is that you and I are being called to go to those places where we would rather not go. Our way as followers of Jesus Christ is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility, joining Simon of Cyrene in bearing the cross with Jesus. Perhaps this sounds a bit morbid and fraught with masochistic dimensions. But for those who have heard the voice of our Lord's love and have said 'yes' to it, the downward-moving way of Jesus is the way to life in abundance, and the joy and the peace of God.

Let us pray: Lord, free us to cultivate the mind of Christ and faithfully follow the will of God for our lives. Illuminate us with your wisdom. Make us one in understanding, one in love, one in soul, one in spirit. And may we serve you and others with humility and compassion, in the name of the servant Jesus, the "better man" who enters the seats of power, and our very lives, humbly riding a donkey and willing, for our sakes, to embrace a cross. Amen.