

Easter Preparation

Palm Sunday
March 25, 2018

Call to Worship/Scripture Reading – Mark 11:1-11

Next Sunday is Easter Sunday, the day which we celebrate the culmination of God's great plan of salvation, both for human beings and all of creation, in and through His Son, Jesus Christ. Well, not quite the culmination! We still await Jesus' second coming.

Today is what is known as "Palm Sunday," on the Christian calendar, the day which we celebrate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the week before that first Easter Sunday. In the eyes of Jesus' first followers, the week started with a lot of anticipation and excitement. The week ends in both discouragement and despair.

Before we get to Easter Sunday we need to go through the cross. But if we're really honest with ourselves, most of us would admit that we really don't like to go the route God demands us to go. We would rather take the bypass.

It's like having to drive through one of those very busy cities during rush hour. The retreat center where I have been taking my quarterly retreats with the Transforming Community is about 30 miles north of Chicago. In order to get there I need to go right through downtown Chicago. It's such a nice and relaxing ride the first five hours, until I get just south of Chicago, to that place where I-90 and I-94 meet, and I'm just about to turn to go north through the city and every time I find myself asking, "Why God, why do I have to do this, isn't there an easier way?" Well, if you have even gone that way you will know that there really is no easier way.

The same is true of God's plan or map of redemption for humankind. There are no bypasses. We need to go through the cross. And it's not something we do only once (that might not be so bad), but we need to go through it often. Jesus said to disciples recorded in the gospel of Luke, "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it*" (Luke 9:23-24). Our entire lives here on earth are about dying to ourselves and taking up our crosses. It doesn't just mean giving up sweets or candy for lent, or even ice cream for some of us, as hard as it may be. It means dying to ourselves so that we can have new life in Christ. That's part of what Jesus washing his disciples feet at the end of the week which started with his triumphant entry into Jerusalem was all about:

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

² *The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.* ³ *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;* ⁴ *so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.* ⁵ *After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

⁷ Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

⁸ “No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.”

Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”

⁹ “Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”

¹⁰ Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” John 13:1-10 (NIV)

Washing one another’s feet wasn’t really what it was all about. It was to show what Christian service really looks like and it was to show that everyone who has truly been baptized in Christ, symbolizing that their full body has been cleansed, still need at times to have parts of their body washed.

The way the Christian church has traditionally cleansed themselves in preparation for Easter is through confession. The disciple John wrote in his first letter:

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:5-9 (NIV)

Overall, the Christian church has not done a very good job with confession during its 2,000 year history. The Roman Catholic Church, throughout much of its history has at least included it as something which is done on regular basis. It has not done such a good job when it comes to expecting any real change in the specific behavior of the one whom is confessing, and it was really off base when it required indulgences – sinners actually paying money for their sins, or the sins of their loved ones who had already died, to help get them into heaven. It was the required indulgences that seemed be the tipping point which brought on the Protestant Reformation in the 1500’s.

But Protestants, as well as Anabaptists and Mennonites who soon followed, have not done very well with confession during their history either. I am sure all of us who have been around the church for any length of time have heard horror stories of someone being forced to stand up before a congregation and confess some sin – only to receive judgment and the source of much gossip throughout the community for years following - instead of forgiveness, mercy and grace. I can’t seem to find in the Bible where someone is required to stand up before everyone in the church and confess their specific personal and individual sins. That doesn’t discount or dismiss those times when an individual might feel called by God to confess before the congregation. I know some who have confessed on their own and have found it to be a very cleansing and freeing act.

The Bible tells us that we are supposed to confess our sins to one another, so that we can be healed and forgiven, but it doesn't have to be before the entire church. I think that is where our discipleship groups of 2, 3 or 4 meeting together on a regular basis offer the greatest potential. Hopefully close relationships are being built so that we can be vulnerable enough to be able to confess our sins to one another and to know that they are not going to be shared with others. And in the name of Christ we brothers and sisters in Christ can offer forgiveness to one another. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church who believe only a Priest can do that, we believe that any Christian can do it. That is the ultimate meaning of "the priesthood of all believers" that we find in the Bible.

There was a time in the history of this church when the Pastor or the Bishop would go around to all the families in the congregation the week before Easter, or the week before celebrating communion, and would try and make sure that everyone was right in the eyes of God, right with Christ. And the way one was made right with Christ was by confessing their sins.

Being right with Christ also involves being right with our brothers and sisters in Christ, so when the Bishop or Pastor went around to the people from the congregation and asked whether or not they had any sins to confess, he would also ask them if they were in the right place with their brothers and sisters in Christ?

Have you sinned against, or hurt, or harmed any brother or sister in Christ whom you need to ask forgiveness from, or have you forgiven all your brothers and sisters in Christ for any sin, hurt or harm they might have caused you? If not, then it was assumed that the person would not come to the communion table until doing so. Jesus tells us in his *Sermon on the Mount*:

If you are coming to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave the altar and first go and be reconciled to your brother and sister, then come and return. Matthew 5:23-24 (NIV)

Reconciliation between two parties is not always possible because it takes the willingness of both parties to reconcile, but each of us owes it to God, because of what He has done for each of us through His Son, Jesus Christ, to offer an apology for our part and to forgive the other for their part – even if they cannot acknowledge or accept their part. Often the other person doesn't even know that they did something wrong or the extent of just how much they have hurt or harmed you. True forgiveness is not conditioned on the part of the other person acknowledging the act or him or her forgiving us. I'm not talking here about abuse, especially physical or sexual, or someone taking the life of a loved one. That takes forgiveness to another level. We also need to remember that forgiveness is not the same as forgetting, and it doesn't mean placing us back in the same position, or staying in the same position, for that harm or hurt to occur again.

And just because we have not done a very good job with confession in the past, doesn't mean we should just give up on it. True confession done in a meaningful and positive way not only cleanses us from all unrighteousness as the beloved disciple John tells us in 1 John 1:5-9, the disciples James, Jesus' own brother tells us, *confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed* (James 5:16).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, best known for his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, wrote another book which is not known quite as well but just as challenging entitled *Life Together*, about how Christians are supposed to live in community with one another. Bonhoeffer wrote way back in the late 1930's, early 40's, that the key ingredient to true Christian community, that which is often missing, is that of confession.

“He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians – notwithstanding their corporate worship, common prayer, and their fellowship in service – may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners.

“The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everyone must conceal his or her sin from their sin and the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are all sinners!

“But it is the grace of the Gospel, which is so hard for the pious to understand, that it confronts us with the truth and says: ‘You are a sinner, a great desperate sinner; now come, as the sinner you are, to God who loves you. He wants you as you are; He does not want anything from you, a sacrifice, a work; He wants you alone.’

“God wants to see you as you are, He wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go lying to yourself and others, as if you are without sin; you can dare to be a sinner. Thanks be to God!!!”

God tells us through the prophet Jeremiah that the ones who he brings judgment upon are those who say, “I have not sinned” (Jeremiah 2:35). Jesus said, “I have come to call not those who think they are righteous. I have come to call those who know they are sinners and need to repent” (John 5:32). Jesus also said, “if anyone who is thirsty, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37).

So, this morning we are going to take some time and prepare ourselves for celebrating Easter next Sunday, and for those of us who are here this morning and are returning next Sunday, to prepare ourselves for coming to the table – to eat and drink what God has prepared for all who have acknowledged their own sinfulness and have put their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

Easter Preparation – Confession and Prayer

OPENING

Leader: O God, come to our assistance.

All: *O Lord, make haste to help us.*

PRAYER FOR MERCY

Leader: Holy God, Creator of All

All: *HAVE MERCY ON US.*

Leader: Jesus Christ, Savior of All

All: *HAVE MERCY ON US.*

Leader: Holy Spirit, Breath of life
All: HAVE MERCY ON US.

PSALM READING – Psalm 32:1-5

A CALL TO CONFESSION

Leader: Brothers and sisters in Christ, remember here in the presence of one another that we serve a God who stands ready and able to forgive us and to cleanse our hearts from all unrighteousness.

All: In light of God's loving readiness, let us confess our sins, so that we may obtain forgiveness by God's infiniteness kindness and mercy.

Leader: Let us in silence confess our faults and admit our frailty to God.

SILENCE

CORPORATE CONFESSION

*All: Most merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you
In thought, word and deed,
By what we have done,
And what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our own heart;
We have not loved our neighbors as our selves.*

*We are truly sorry and we humbly repent,
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ,
Have mercy on us and forgive us:
That we may delight in your will,
And walk in your ways,
To the glory of Your Name.
AMEN.*

PERSONAL CONFESSION

Leader: Before God, with the people of God, I confess to my brokenness:
to the ways I wound my life, the lives of others, and the life of the world.

*All: May God forgive you, Christ renew you,
And the Holy Spirit enable you to grow in Love.*

Leader: Amen.

*All: Before God, with the people of God, We confess to our brokenness:
to the ways we wound our lives, the lives of others, and the life of the world.*

Leader: May God forgive you, Christ renew you,
And the Holy Spirit enable you to grow in Love.

All: Amen.

PRAYER: *Keep Working in Me* by Rory Noland

*All: Lord, forgive me the pain I have caused,
All the peace I've disturbed
Lord, I'm sorry for my selfish ways
And all the people I've hurt.
Jesus, heal what's in me
That's broken and needy;
Set the truth in me free.
Spirit, mold my nature
To that of the Savior;
Keep working in me,
Keep working in me.*

AFFIRMATION FROM SCRIPTURE

Leader: This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you,
that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.
If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

*All: If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Thanks be to God!*

BLESSING

Leader: May the God who created us in His image,
who redeemed us in His Son Jesus Christ,
and empowers us with His Holy Spirit
bless us and keep us;
may the LORD make his face shine upon us
and be gracious to us;
may the LORD turn his face toward us and give us peace
and lead us in the way of everlasting life. AMEN.