

FORGIVE US; HELP US FORGIVE

Mark 11:1-11

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29 March 2015

It's hard to not like a parade. If you're standing along a parade route, there's sure to be something that comes by that makes you smile. Maybe it's the marching band, maybe it's a Little League team, maybe it's a friend waving on the back of a convertible. A parade brings out a festive crowd; you'd have to be a real grump to not get caught up in the joy of the moment.

Last July 4, Doug and my parents and I attended a parade in the charming small town of Deer Isle, Maine, when we were on vacation. Here is a picture of the t-shirt Doug bought in Deer Isle, which gives you a good feel for what the town is like: (If you can't read it, the t-shirt says, "Welcome to Fabulous Deer Isle, Maine - what happens here stays here, but nothing ever really happens here.") We were in a quintessential American small town, and the parade was something out of a movie or a Norman Rockwell painting. Here are a few shots from that day:

People were smiling, eating ice cream cones at 10 in the morning...swept up in the festive good feelings of the day and the occasion.

Each year, when it was time for the Festival of the Passover, people would arrive in Jerusalem, having come from every direction. The population of the city would swell to six times its usual size. Every room would be filled, campsites would pop up. Imagine the energy of that many people. Then imagine that something unexpected happens. A rumor begins to spread that Jesus of Nazareth is arriving into town. Some

people have already seen Jesus, heard him speak; others only know of him. But his name has grown familiar. "There is something about him," people say. Or they don't even say it, but when they talk about him, their voices convey it. People talk about his healing miracles, his stories; they talk about his presence. Some of his followers run ahead as they get closer to Jerusalem. They pull down branches and shout praises. As word spreads, others join the crowd, so we have these concentric circles of support around Jesus. The disciples are walking with him, the other apostles and followers are running ahead, people who want to see him again, and then there are the curious, the people who want to be a part of something exciting, whether they know anything about Jesus or not. The crowd is large and boisterous.

Everybody, it seems, wants to jump on the Jesus bandwagon. Because it's fun to watch a parade. It's fun to cheer for a winning team, to be a part of something that's popular. So Jesus' closest friends and those who knew nothing about him - they all shouted, "Hosanna"! Just like we did earlier this morning.

But. Jesus doesn't want cheerleaders. Jesus doesn't want fans. Jesus doesn't want people on the sidelines or on the bench. Jesus wants followers. People who are willing to do what he did when he walked this earth. Notice the people on the side of the road. Notice the people who are living with disabilities. Notice the lonely ones with no friends. Notice the ones living with chronic pain, the heartbroken, the outcast. And befriend them. Don't just give them a handout, but invite them over for dinner. Jesus wants followers. People who will do what he did in his lifetime. Like question authority.

Challenge laws and rules that don't make sense and that harm more than help. Jesus wants followers. People who take risks for the sake of love.

Throughout this season of Lent, we've been focusing on the words of the Lord's Prayer, so that when we pray, we won't just be mindlessly repeating words we've known all our lives, but will pay closer attention to each phrase and to what it means. On this last Sunday in Lent, we look at the phrase, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Or, you could say, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Whatever word you use, the meaning is the same. This prayer of Jesus describes forgiveness as a cycle. We want to be forgiven. We long to be made right with God. But our ability to accept that forgiveness, and to really feel it, is linked to our ability to forgive others. Once we truly realize that we are accepted and forgiven and loved unconditionally, then we can extend forgiveness to others.

Jesus spends the next four days in Jerusalem. Roman soldiers are everywhere, trying to keep the peace in a crowded city, on the lookout for anyone who might be disruptive. Jesus catches their attention, with the masses who follow him. He's been on their radar anyway and they are very suspicious. The religious officials, too, are on high alert. It's the high holy days, Jesus is in and out of the temple. His words challenge the authorities. They don't like his popularity. There is, in the distance, a drumbeat that gets louder and louder, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday.

He eats the Passover meal with his disciples, and by this time he knows the end is near. One of them will betray him. He spends the night in the garden, asking his closest disciples to stay awake with him. None of them do. Friday morning comes, and

Jesus has been arrested. While he's being questioned, Peter denies, three times, that he even knows Jesus.

Do we? Do we know Jesus? Would we admit to it if our lives were at stake? Would he know us by our words and actions? These are the questions for Holy Week. And this is our prayer. Forgive us, Jesus, for only following you when it's easy to do so, when it's popular, when it's fun. Forgive us the times that we have ignored the needs of one of your children. Forgive us for making our own lives comfortable while others can barely survive. Forgive us, change us. In you all things are possible, and so we pray that our lives may be transformed and we truly live as your disciples, following you, even to the cross.