

March 28, 2021

Palm Sunday

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Mark 11:1-11      "Show Me"

When I took my first preaching class in seminary, I had never preached a sermon in front of a congregation. I had never done any public speaking. The first time I was called upon to preach in front of the class, I was terrible. In fact, my professor said I was so visibly nervous and uncomfortable he almost stopped me mid-sermon to allow me to gather myself and start again.

There's one phrase that stands out as the most helpful piece of advice I ever received as a developing preacher. Of all the feedback the members of my class and I received, what remains the strongest in my memory are these words: "Don't tell me; show me."

Obviously, oral communication requires the speaker to tell the audience what he or she is trying to communicate, but there's something better. "Don't tell me; show me" means don't just give me a lecture. Paint me a picture so I can visualize it. Don't just launch into sophisticated explanations and expect me to follow your train of thought. Give me an example. Don't just tell me what you want me to know. Demonstrate it, if you possibly can.

What I've realized is that this bit of wisdom is not only applicable to the preaching moment. It can have profound implications for any of us, for our most intimate relationships, for family life, for friendships, for workplace relationships, and our relationship with God. If you really want to communicate something to me, don't tell me; show me.

I think that was what Jesus did on that first Palm Sunday. It was a momentous occasion. Pilgrims from everywhere descended on Jerusalem for the Passover festival. That meant the Roman occupiers would have beefed up security. The Roman army would have brought reinforcements. The governor, Pontius Pilate, would leave his seaside estate in Caesarea Philippi to personally oversee the management of the crowds in Jerusalem.

In the Gospels, Jesus had been making his way toward the holy city. He foretold that he would die and rise again on the third day. As readers, we're set up for this dramatic showdown between Jesus and both the Roman and Temple authorities. Pontius Pilate

would ride into Jerusalem on a warhorse, wearing armor, and surrounded by soldiers. Jesus rode in on a colt, completely unarmed, surrounded by peasants shouting Hosanna (save now).

Jesus used a colt to demonstrate what kind of a Messiah he was and what kind of kingdom he represented. Clearly, he paid close attention in his Preaching 101 class. The Pontius Pilate's of the world kept the peace by means of coercion and violence. By contrast Jesus entered in humbly, on a donkey, ushering in a realm of peace by being peaceful.

Like any good preacher, the first thing Jesus did was choose a text. He could have chosen Exodus 14. In Exodus, the Hebrew people escaped the oppressive Egyptian Empire. With God's help, Moses parted the Red Sea. The people crossed on dry land. As the Egyptian soldiers pursued, God caused the waters to return and drowned them all.

Jesus could have chosen that text, but that wasn't how God was going to save Israel from the Roman Empire. God's way was no longer to meet a powerful and violent force with an even greater and more violent force.

For his text, Jesus could have chosen Psalm 68:21. The psalmist wrote, "But God will shatter the heads of God's enemies, the hairy crown of those who walk in their guilty ways." Jesus could have chosen that text. A lot of Jewish folk in Jerusalem would have welcomed God intervening in that way, but that was not God's plan. The Kingdom of God would not be ushered in by the crushing of Roman skulls.

Instead, as his text, Jesus chose a passage from Zechariah. Zechariah 9:9 says, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

That text would explain why half the verses of Mark's Palm Sunday story pertain directly to the acquisition of this colt that Jesus would ride into Jerusalem. I have to think Jesus had the voice of his preaching professor in his head. Don't tell me that God's Messiah comes in humility; show me. Don't tell me that the way of God's reign is peaceful; show me.

What Jesus did on Palm Sunday was a demonstration. The entry into Jerusalem was his chance to show the crowds what kind of a Messiah he was and what the Kingdom of

God was like. Jesus didn't just talk about the Kingdom of God. He demonstrated it. He understood that actions speak louder than words. He practiced what he preached.

This past week, I watched the coverage of the latest mass murder at a grocery store in Colorado. I watched the coverage of the comments made by various members of congress. I read the tweets and the prepared statements about how much they care and how we need to solve the gun violence problem in our country.

I found myself thinking...don't tell me; show me. I'm not so interested in your latest tweet. I'm not so interested in the statement some staffer prepared for you. Show me you care, by what you do. Show me how committed you are to solving the gun violence problem by the actions you take.

After a tragedy like what took place this week, people everywhere take to social media with amateur analysis, snide remarks, and partisan finger pointing. The capacity technology provides to share our thoughts and feelings is astounding. Everyone who wants an audience can have one.

Now, I know that words have power. Words have the ability to build up or cut down. They can heal or wound. I know that what we say matters, but words have limits. They can easily be forgotten. There's truth to the idea that talk is cheap. At some point, words need to be backed up with action.

Right now, I'm not as interested in what folk tell me as I am in what they show me. I'm concerned about what my actions or inaction say about me and my values:

If you love your kids, show them by how much time you spend with them.

If you call yourself a Christian. Show it by loving God and loving your neighbor as Christ taught.

If you love God's creation. Demonstrate that love by how you care for it.

If all lives matter, show it by standing up for the rights of others.

If you love and accept LGBTQ people. Show them.

If you're generous. Demonstrate it.

If you care. Let the world see your caring.

Mark makes no indication Jesus said anything from the time he boarded the colt and began to ride into Jerusalem. The crowd cried out, "Hosanna!" The crowd shouted, but there is no indication Jesus said anything. He showed God's preference for humility. He showed that there is no way to peace. Peace is the way.

A quote attributed to St Francis of Assisi says, "Preach the Gospel at all times and if necessary, use words." In other words, let your actions communicate the gospel. Do the gospel. Demonstrate the gospel. Model the gospel. Live the gospel.

In fact, that's exactly what Jesus did on the first Palm Sunday.