

“The Power of Love”
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson
Mark 11:1-11 | March 24, 2024 – Palm Sunday

When I was a student at Miami University, I took a course called Community-Based Theater. This class was based upon the premise that theatre is not simply art for art’s sake, but is a tool for building community, a tool for transforming community. One of our group projects was to take theatre into the public square, to stage some sort of performance piece that would invite reflection on an issue affecting the campus community.

At the time, there was a poem circulating on Facebook that imagined the ideal “Miami Girl.” She was *not* a woman known for her intelligence or aptitude, her leadership gifts or future-forward ideas. No, according to this rhyme, the ideal “Miami Girl” was attractive, well-dressed ... Not particularly smart, but who cares? Because she came to Miami seeking *not* an education, but a husband.

My group decided to respond to this poem. So, we staged a performance piece at the busiest crossing on campus; our plan was to have one of the women pose silently on the quad, while one of the men recited the poem for all to hear. Unfortunately, it fell to me to be the “Miami Girl,” so I spent a very uncomfortable afternoon standing on a pedestal with a giant price tag hanging around my neck. It was college, after all.

The community’s response to our performance piece was fascinating. Some passersby were merely perplexed; some were visibly uncomfortable. The university tour guides saw our demonstration from afar and bypassed the scene, skipping one of the main campus sites in the process. A few people paused to thank us. One woman was so overcome with gratitude that she pressed her hands together in front of her heart and bowed.

I have no idea what conversations unfolded in classrooms or dining halls that day. But clearly our performance piece made an impression. We managed to stage a spectacle that disrupted the life of the campus community, if only for a moment. We managed to stage a spectacle that provoked a response.

Our class of idealistic college kids was certainly not the first to experiment with community-based theatre. We were simply adopting an age-old tradition of using theatre as a tool for transformation. This art form may be as old as community itself. In fact, I would argue, that Jesus experimented with community-based theatre. That’s exactly what he’s doing as he enters Jerusalem. He’s staging a performance piece in the public square.

We know this scene as the Triumphal Entry. And it *is* a Triumphal Entry. Or, at least, it mimics one. But — as Mark tells it — Jesus is not *really* riding into Jerusalem as a king. He’s taking an established ritual and turning it on its head. He’s enacting a perfectly planned performance on the streets of Jerusalem.

According to Mark, Jesus designs every moment of this spectacle. First, he sends two disciples into the village ahead with orders to conscript a colt. The scene unfolds exactly as Jesus predicts: The disciples find a colt tied near the entrance to town; the villagers ask the very question Jesus imagined they would; the disciples recite the script Jesus has supplied: “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” *He will send it back here immediately.* After all, the colt is merely a prop for the performance piece; Jesus won’t require the donkey for long.

With colt conscripted, Jesus climbs on its back and rides into Jerusalem. And many people recognize this act as a victory march. They know well the promise of Scripture, how the prophet proclaimed: *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* (Zech 9:9). The people also know well the customs of the age — how a conquering king rides through the city gate on a war horse; how the residents are expected to welcome the victor with shouts of praise. So, the people respond to the Messiah’s performance exactly as Jesus knows they will: they spread cloaks across the road; they cut leafy branches from the trees; they lift their voices in praise: *Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

The performance does not end on the streets of Jerusalem. Jesus rides from the edges of the city to its sacred center. He ascends the temple mount and walks into the temple complex and then, he looks around. He looks around at everything. And then, he leaves. Jesus slips out of Jerusalem. Presumably, the donkey is returned to its owners as promised; then, Jesus spends a quiet night with his disciples in Bethany.

It’s such a curious detail, especially for a Gospel that is so action-packed. Mark’s Jesus does not dawdle. In this Gospel, things move quickly: *immediately*, the spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness; *immediately*, the disciples leave their nets; *immediately*, the hemorrhaging woman is healed, and Jairus’ daughter is restored to life. But, here, Jesus takes his time. He climbs the temple mount just to have a look around. He enters the city just to leave it again.

It feels as though the plot has taken a confusing detour. It looks like Jesus started a victory march but ran out of time to see it through. But that is precisely the point. That is precisely the plan. Because this is a performance to provoke a response.

If this were a *typical* triumphal entry, it would have concluded with some sort of culminating ritual — a sacrifice, perhaps, or replacing the signs of the vanquished rulers with the trappings of the victorious regime.¹ But Jesus leaves the ritual unfinished. And, in doing so, turns it on its head. He turns people’s expectations upside down. He recasts the role of God’s Anointed One.

You see, he makes clear that the Lord’s Messiah will *not* come as a conquering king to cast off the yoke of Rome. He will *not* use the power of the sword to restore David’s kingdom to its former glory. Rather, the Lord’s Messiah will come as the Prince of Peace. *Not* with military might, but with mercy ... *Not* with vengeance, but with grace. He will save his people from every force that

¹ See: Dong Hyeon Jeong, “Commentary on Mark 11:1-11” and C. Clifton Black, “Commentary on Mark 11:1-11 or Mark 14:3-9,” workingpreacher.org.

threatens to deny and destroy them and restore broken humanity to divinely ordained wholeness. Jesus' performance piece — this spectacle on the streets of Jerusalem — demonstrates for the masses what his preaching has long-declared: That love is the greatest and only power that can transform communities, that can save the world.

Like all good performance art, this not-so-triumphal entry provokes a response. At first, the reactions are varied. Some people had long feared the changes Jesus' ministry would bring. This subversive act only intensifies that fear and soon, the chief priests and the scribes will double-down on their efforts to see him killed. Other people immediately herald Jesus as King. But, over the next few days, they will become disillusioned with his kind of kingship and join the crowds in crying: "Crucify! Crucify!"

In the end the people's response is tragic, just as Jesus expects it to be. After all, he has come to Jerusalem knowing that *this* is the place where the Messiah will suffer and die and, on the third day, rise again. And — because of his unbridled commitment to the power of love — the week that began with Jesus riding on a colt ends with him hanging on a Roman cross. And, yet it seems *even this* goes according to his perfect plan. As the tide of emotions turns, the ritual that Jesus had left unfinished when he slipped away from the temple comes to completion. It just comes to completion in a way no one would have ever imagined. Rather than the victorious king ending his procession with a ritual sacrifice, the subversive king sacrifices himself. Rather than conquerors cleansing sacred space of all vestiges of former power, the One who ultimately reigns Sovereign conquers the forces of destruction and death. In raising Jesus from the grave, God shows once and for all that love is the only force that can truly transform the world.

Like all good performance art, the Messiah's entry into Jerusalem provokes a response. It certainly provoked a response for those who witnessed the events of Palm Sunday firsthand. And it should provoke a response in those of us who are keepers of this story, those of us who follow it — with all its twists and turns — from a not-so-triumphal entry to an incredibly triumphant end. It should invite a response of faith — an approach to living a life that bears witness to the power of love.

Doctor Otis Moss tells a story about this kind of witness.² When Moss was new to his position as Senior Pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, his congregation was thrown into the national spotlight. It was 2008 and certain media outlets were airing snippets of sermons delivered by Moss' predecessor in an effort to discredit one of Trinity's more prominent members, Senator Barack Obama. Unfortunately, the intense media attention attracted the unwelcome attention of bad actors across the nation. The congregation started receiving death threats — at least a hundred a week — some by phone call, others by hand-written letter. Then, one day, those threatening violence showed up in the flesh.

² The following illustration comes from: Otis Moss III with Gregory Lichtenberg, *Dancing in the Darkness: Spiritual Lessons for Thriving in Turbulent Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023), 98-101.

They came from the Westboro Baptist Church, a fundamentalist congregation known for spewing hateful and violent rhetoric while picketing gatherings in churches and cemeteries. On this particular Sunday morning in 2008, the members of Westboro Baptist stood outside Trinity United Church of Christ, shouting racist epithets through megaphones as families arrived for worship.

Otis Moss had a decision to make: Should he ignore the protestors? No. If he did that, some in the neighborhood might confront them, and the situation would escalate. Should he address them himself? That would have little impact. Then Moss had an idea. Or, as he tells it, the Holy Spirit “dropped an imaginative flash of inspiration.”

Moss went to the atrium, where members of the choir were gathering for their weekly procession into the sanctuary. He asked them to turn around and walk outside, instead. “Muster up the kind of faith our ancestors had,” Moss preached. “We are going to march outside and surround the protestors, but we are not going to touch them. We are going to sing to the glory of God so loudly that our voices, the voices of love, are going to drown out the shouts of hate.” And that’s what they did. The choir spilled onto the street. One hundred strong, they encircled the protestors and lifted their voices, singing: *This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine ...*

And then, the deacons of the church did something else extraordinary: they invited the members of Westboro Baptist to join them in prayer. To no one’s surprise, the protestors declined. But that didn’t stop the deacons of Trinity Church from joining hands and lifting their voices to God. The picketers from Westboro Baptist were flabbergasted; they didn’t know how to respond to this turn of events. As Moss reflects, “The protestors were overwhelmed by something they were not used to: the spirit of God’s love.” So, they climbed clumsily into their vans and drove back to Kansas.

As the congregation of Trinity United Church of Christ so effectively demonstrated, we who follow the risen Christ are called to proclaim another way. We are called to bear witness to the power of love, even in the face of hatred and violence, even in the face of destruction and death. We are called to declare through our prayers and our songs, our proclamation and our service that we worship the one who comes not with might, but with mercy; the one who comes not for judgment, but with forgiveness; the one who enters the city not in enmity, but in love. Yes, we worship the one who comes in the name of the Lord to show us the kind of power that will change the world. We worship the one who confounds with staged spectacles and surprises with authentic humility. Yes, we follow Jesus, the one who compels our hearts and provokes a response in us: a response of genuine, gracious, generous love.