

Is 50:4-11
17 April 2011
Palm Sunday

“Attending”

On Palm Sunday, we remember an ancient practice. When the conquering hero would ride into town, people would welcome him by carpeting his path with palm leaves. This conquering hero would be returning from a successful military campaign. In the case of Jesus, the people (many of them, anyway) are expressing their hopes—he’s there to lead them against the Romans. We recall how his disciples and would-be disciples join in this practice. Who are these disciples? What does it mean to be a disciple?

I’ll tell you a story I once told our church in Jamestown. A couple of days after I arrived in Philadelphia to go to seminary, I decided to take a walk. This was September of 1991. I wanted to go exploring. So I started off, heading west down Lancaster Avenue, which is US Route 30. I walked several miles that day.

At a gas station, I came upon some people having a car wash. It was a church group, and they were raising money for mission work. Being on foot, I wasn’t going to be a customer, but I went over to talk with them and see what was going on. There was one guy, a little younger than me, who spent the most time talking with me. I’ll call him “Jay.” (That wasn’t his real name.)

He told me they were with the Greater Philadelphia Church of Christ, part of the International Church of Christ. That’s different from the UCC, the United Church of Christ, and from the Churches of Christ, a large number of which are in the south. He invited me to worship with them on Sunday; they were meeting in a theater at Haverford College, a few more miles down the road. I told him I left my car in Tennessee, so he offered to pick me up Sunday morning.

The congregation was a bit unusual. There were three or four hundred in attendance—and about ninety percent were in my age range. Almost everyone was either in their late teens or their twenties. The service was energetic, though they didn’t believe in worshipping with music. For some reason, they thought the scriptures forbade it. Still, I went there for the first couple of Sundays I was in Philly.

Jay and the others were very friendly. They invited me to play volleyball at the house of one of the pastors, which I did. They also invited me to a Bible study. And that’s when things started to get kind of weird.

It was soon **quite clear** that this unlike any Bible study I’d ever been in. I was used to ones where everyone shares freely. When I lead them, I try to create the same atmosphere. It became apparent that I was the only one who was expected to answer. Everything was directed my way. Posed to me was stuff like, “Do you believe that all Christians are disciples?”, or “Is there a difference between Christians and disciples?”

I noticed that Jay kept deferring to another guy, whose name escapes me. (I’ll call him “Joe.”) It seemed rather strange. In any event, this didn’t feel like an honest, open discussion. It felt like an interrogation. So I decided that I would have some fun with them. I asked them, “Am I giving the right answers?” They seemed a bit embarrassed at that.

When I went home that night, I figured that's enough of that, and I started going to the church across the street from school—Overbrook Presbyterian. I joined the church in December, and I officially became a Presbyterian.

However, the Greater Philly Church of Christ wasn't through with me! A couple of weeks later, at about 11pm, there's a knock on the door of my room. In walks Joe and some other guy I've never seen before; he just stands there and never says a word. Joe begins by politely asking me where I've been. I tell him about the Presbyterians across the street.

Joe tries to convince me to return. When he senses that he's **failing**, his tone becomes hostile. "You know," he says, as he looks around my dorm room, "just because you're in seminary, it doesn't make you a disciple." And my response is this: "You know, I think you guys are a cult." At that, out the door they go, never to be seen again. About a year or so later, I **did** happen to see Jay in the supermarket. I walked over to talk with him, but he pretended like he didn't see me and took off in the other direction.

I've told you this story to suggest what being a disciple is **not**. I don't know if this church was **actually** a cult, but they demonstrated cult-like behavior. I checked up on them recently. Apparently the International Church of Christ has suffered upheavals, with a lot of their members wanting to reject the controlling, dominating tactics that typify cults.

I'm actually thankful for the experience I had with them. I can better understand how people get sucked into cults, especially people who are unsure of themselves—or those who are desperately longing for connection, connection which at first appears to be love.

So, if they represent what a disciple is **not**, who represents what a disciple **ought** to be? One very good answer is in our Old Testament reading. This is the third of the so-called Servant Songs in Isaiah. In January, I preached on the first two Servant Songs, in chapters 42 and 49. These are about the Servant of the Lord. As I said then, there are a variety of views about the Servant. Some identify the Servant as the prophet himself; others say Israel; still others say the Servant is the Messiah. I think there's truth in all of those.

Our scripture begins, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher" (v. 4). Here, the Hebrew word for "teacher" (לִמּוּד, *limmud*) is also the word for "disciple." God has given me the tongue of a disciple. The same word appears at the end of the verse. "Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught." To listen as those who are disciples.

According to Isaiah, the teacher is a disciple. The disciple is a teacher. This is a person who always wants to learn, and who always wants to share what has already **been learned**. We're reminded, "Docility and fidelity [gentleness and faithfulness] are the traits of the disciple, and these the Servant has."¹ That doesn't sound **at all** like someone who wants to control or manipulate. That doesn't sound at all like the fellows I encountered.

The path of discipleship is one of endless training. It is one of endless training of others. Being a disciple of Christ means conforming to Christ. That requires both humility and courage.

¹ John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 117.

I'm not the first to point out how the crowds on that first Palm Sunday bear little resemblance to the crowds on Good Friday. Or do they? No one knows how many of the same people were present at both times, but that isn't the point. In neither case is the spirit of discipleship demonstrated. Jesus shows how fame is fleeting and fickle. In a matter of days, the people go from calling for a crown for his head—to calling for his head. The crowd seems to have a mind of its own.

On that note, I have another story to tell, one I'm not too happy about. In 1983, during my freshman year of college, I went with a friend (and a few thousand other people) to watch the Ku Klux Klan as they marched on the State Capitol in Austin, Texas. It was my personal introduction to the power of the mob.

Among the crowds were people carrying signs, people yelling at the Klansmen, and others (like me) who were simply curious and wanted to see what was going on. As the marchers made their way toward the Capitol building, they moved through thicker and thicker crowds along the road. You could feel the hatred in the air. It was just a matter of time before someone got bored with hurling insults and decided to hurl something physical.

It began with a couple of small stones and quickly escalated into a barrage of rocks of all shapes and sizes. Even though the Klansmen came equipped with plexiglas shields (I guess they expected this type of reception!), some projectiles managed to hit home. There was more than one bloody face among the marchers (they were hooded, but unmasked). When they reached the spot where their vehicles were parked, demonstrators started smashing car windows. It was the final angry act of the day.

There's one moment, though, in that afternoon of violence that remains with me. At one point, when the Klansmen had circled around behind the Capitol, people were running in all directions. I had stopped and was surveying the scene (being careful to steer clear of the volley of rocks!). Suddenly, a young black man who was about my age stopped running and knelt about ten feet from me. He was gathering some dry clumps of dirt to fire at our white-robed friends.

He must have noticed out of the corner of his eye that someone was standing there, because he just froze and looked up at me. There we were—two young guys, one white and one black—the black one probably wondering what the white one would do. And what the white one did was to give the black one a little smile, as if to say, "Go for it!" He returned the conspiratorial smile, picked up his dusty weapons, and disappeared into the crowd.

I believe now, as I did then, that our constitutional right to peacefully assemble is vitally important. Even a group that I find as repugnant as the Ku Klux Klan has the right to express its opinion, as long as they're not promoting violence. That day the KKK **was** being peaceful. It was the onlookers who were violent. And I was a part, if only a small part, of that violence. In my own way, I became a contributor to the mentality of the mob. That's not a good feeling.

I like to tell myself that I wasn't a Christian then, but even so, I knew the difference between right and wrong. But I wonder. Would I have been swept up with the frenzy of cheering on Palm Sunday? Would I have been swept up with the frenzy of jeering on Good Friday?

In both of the stories I told, there is a sense of giving up, a sense of going along with whatever the crowd commands, whatever the group dictates. There is a sense of refusing to take responsibility for one's own mind and spirit.

Richard Rohr notes, "Once we let the group substitute for an inner life or our own faith journey, all we need to do is 'attend.' For several centuries, church has been more a matter of attendance at a service than an observably different lifestyle. Membership requirements and penalties predominated, not the change-your-life message that Jesus so clearly preached."²

"The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward" (v. 5). These are words from the Servant of the Lord. These are words that we Christians place in the mouth of Jesus. These are words spoken by someone who isn't satisfied with simply attending.

Rohr continues, "Membership questions lead to endless arguments about who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong, who is worthy of our God, and who is not. Such distinctions appeal to our ego and its need to feel worthy and superior and to be part of a group that defines itself by exclusion. The church ends up a gated country club, giving people a false sense of superiority. This is why Jesus walks to those on the edges: the handicapped, the sinners, the excluded ones."³

In a few moments, we'll sing a song that is often sung during Advent ("Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates"). Notice the third verse: "Redeemer, come! I open wide / My heart to Thee; here, Lord, abide. / Let me Thy inner presence feel; / Thy grace and love in me reveal."

When we sing that—and really **mean** it—we aren't content to simply **attend** life. We want to dive deeply into it. And no doubt, we find inside ourselves all kinds of forces. We find the cheering and joy of Palm Sunday and the jeering and rage of Good Friday, but it need not sway us.

Regardless of what the multitude does, we can take hold of Christ. We can confidently say, "The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame" (v. 7). We need not simply attend; we can participate. It's a decision we make every day.

² Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 276.

³ Rohr, 276.