

“The Gift of Misfits”

March 25, 2018

Gifts of the Dark Wood series – Palm Sunday

AFTER SCRIPTURE: *Just a Closer Walk with Thee* (FWS 2158)

I invite you to hear these words from Goethe, an 18th century German writer as we consider the people who walk with us on our faith journeys:

*The world is so empty if one thinks only of mountains, rivers & cities;
but to know someone who thinks and feels with us, and who, though distant,
is close to us in spirit, this makes the earth for us an inhabited garden.*

Repeat refrain *Just a Closer Walk with Thee* (FWS 2158)

We enter into Holy Week. Perhaps we know the basics. What we call Palm Sunday is the start of a downward spiral. Maybe it seems like a wonderful parade, but if we look at it, it became like a political rally - a protest against the powers that be. In the light of what we're experiencing in our country right now, it's an intriguing connection.

Millions of people in many communities have gathered together over the past month - students at schools and others in the public square to march and protest - to talk about the reality of gun violence and spur discussion and action. However we feel about it, it's an interesting connection as we enter into the Holy Week.

In picturing the scene in Jerusalem, scholars say that around 200,000 people were gathered for Passover. So how can it be compared to a political rally? They were waiting for the Messiah, and they expected that Jesus was the One they'd been waiting for. They expected that he'd overthrow the Roman government and be a military victor. They'd be free from Roman occupation and rule. He'd usher in God's reign through power and might.

Waving palm branches and shouting “Hosanna!” is their cry for help - a plea to “Save us!” It's not necessarily a celebration, but a time of anticipation of what God will do. Jesus rode on a donkey instead of a warhorse, and yet hopes were high. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Really, Jesus had been pushing the envelope throughout his public ministry. Right away, he had the attention of a lot of people (some intrigued and some upset) when he said that the Kingdom of God had come.

SLIDE: Mark 1:14-15 (NRSV) **projected during message:**

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way: *Change your whole way of thinking, and you'll discover that heaven has been waiting for you all along!*

It was probably difficult to accept Jesus' words. Under Roman occupation, how could it feel like God was bringing hope? And even for many of us, it may be a struggle to believe that the Kingdom of God is here in the midst of violence - just this week - shootings, bomb threats, and package bombs. And for any who grieve – whether the loss is recent or not, it's hard to feel peace and joy when death seems so powerful and overwhelming.

But all along, Jesus has said that the Kingdom of God looks different and feels different than what we expect - that we can even find blessing in the struggles. Eric Elnes says that Jesus' message is that heaven isn't simply experienced in the absence of struggle, but in the heart of struggle. The deepest challenges we face can be opportunities to experience God's presence and power.

Consider where we've been in the Dark Wood so far - uncertainty, emptiness, thunderstruck moments, getting lost, temptation - all of them probably more personal and individual struggles. But it's vital to remember that Jesus called disciples (plural) and many others who surrounded him. He called a community perhaps because he knew the need for others on the journey of faith.

The “gift of misfits” needs some explanation. The phrase makes me think of the Island of Misfit Toys from the *Rudolph* cartoon - those toys cast aside because of their imperfections and formed into a community by what brought them together. But I'd invite us to think about a misfit as someone who is being intentional about embracing the gifts of the Dark Wood - going against prevailing ideas that faith in Jesus is neat and tidy.

As we're honest about our struggles, we find connections and build trust with others who are willing to walk with us. We know how vital those people are in our spiritual lives, and we seek to be that for others, too. Maybe we don't like the title “misfits,” but it's a part of living our honest faith in today's world and in today's church.

Elnes identifies a few different types of people. First, a mentor or guide with more experience who offers wisdom for the journey. I think of a classmate named Margaret who has continued to offer support and guidance

as I consider my calling as a spouse, parent, and pastor. Her words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have come just at the right time.

Second, a group of fellow travelers. Some of us today called these folks “our people” or “our tribe.” Again, there’s a trust that allows us to be ourselves and an assurance that helps us to know that we’re not alone. One of my examples is a group of four other high school friends with whom I stay well connected. They are the next closest thing to family for me.

The last one is a community of faith. Some of us have been in this congregation for a long time, and others for not so long. I hope that we all experience the presence of the Spirit here, and maybe you’ve had other congregations where you experience deep connections that allow you to grow in faith.

You have a thank-you note in your bulletin today so that you might consider writing to someone who is among your crowd of misfits - those people who are traveling the journey of life and faith with you. Take time to think about who has been with you at particular times in the Dark Wood. I pray that it would help us be better companions for one another.

We know the close community of disciples who surrounded Jesus. These were people whom Jesus called, and they went. They had high hopes, too. They wanted real justice. They wanted the enemy defeated. They wanted a hero, and they were human.

We can only imagine how we’d feel if we were them - how much of a struggle it would be and how much it would feel like a deep darkness. When Pilate comes in with Romans and shows force during Passover celebration. When Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with them to remember God’s faithfulness and deliverance and then washes their feet to show them how to serve. When he tells them that he will be betrayed. When they fall asleep while Jesus prays. When Jesus is arrested, and Judas’ kiss begins the line of betrayal.

When Jesus is put on trial: first by chief priest Caiaphas and then by Pilate, then he’s given over to be crucified to please Jewish leaders. When Jesus is mocked and beaten by soldiers and his disciples deny him and flee from him. When Jesus dies on a Roman cross.

On Palm Sunday, I always think of this: Jesus will never meet our expectations, but he will always exceed them. He isn’t the answer that the people who shouted “Hosanna!” wanted, but he’s the answer they needed. They wanted him to claim the throne of this world with power, but he claimed the throne of heaven with love.

Still, Jesus calls us to challenge what is before us - to critique power and pride that we think is a sign of strength and look to him as he embraces humility and love. Perhaps Jesus isn't always the One we think we want, but he's the answer we need. He will never meet our expectations, but he will always exceed them.

We can't skip from "Hosanna!" to "Hallelujah!" We can't just sit on either side of Holy Week; we have to go through it. And we go through it together, knowing that even the Dark Wood places, we are not alone. We have each other, and God is with us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE - *Come and Rest*

Weave intercessions...

There are many people who are walking the Dark Woods for various reasons.

Let us lift up names of those who need our prayers...

[allow time for this and when the naming stops...]

God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

There are many places in this world where uncertainty reigns.

Let us lift up names of places in this world that need our prayers...

[allow time for this and when the naming stops...]

God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Pastoral Prayer

Praise be to you, O God, who boldly asks us to march into the Jerusalems that confront us each day. We would like to think that we will be loved and cherished wherever we go; our witness of faith will be gladly received. But it will not necessarily be so. For there are those who fear faith; who question the reality of your love and healing power. With each step we take, guide our lives in your paths of peace and hope. Give us courage and strength to witness to your love. Help us feel the powerful presence of Jesus Christ in our lives, calling us to come with him to truth and salvation. We offer this prayer in the name of Jesus the Christ. AMEN.