

Pastor Gail Duba
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When the Cheering Stopped

Palm Sunday, 6B
Mark 11:1-11

Some years ago a book was written by a noted American historian, Gene Smith, entitled "When The Cheering Stopped." It was the story of President Woodrow Wilson and the events leading up to and following WWI. When that war was over Wilson was an international hero. There was a great spirit of optimism abroad, and people actually believed that the last war had been fought and the world had been made safe for democracy. On his first visit to Paris after the war Wilson was greeted by cheering mobs. He was actually more popular than their own heroes. The same thing was true in England and Italy. In a Vienna hospital a Red Cross worker had to tell the children that there would be no Christmas presents because of the war and the hard times. The children didn't believe her. They said that President Wilson was coming and they knew that everything would be alright. The cheering lasted about a year. Then it gradually began to stop. It turned out that after the war the political leaders in Europe were more concerned with their own agendas than they were a lasting peace. At home Woodrow Wilson ran into opposition in the United States Senate and his League of Nations was not ratified. Under the strain of it all the President's health began to break. He suffered a stroke and in the next election his party was defeated. So it was that Woodrow Wilson, a man who barely a year earlier had been heralded as the new world Messiah, came to the end of his days a broken & defeated man. It's a sad story, but one that is not altogether unfamiliar. The ultimate reward for someone who tries to translate ideals into reality is apt to be frustration & defeat. There are some exceptions, of course, but not too many.

It happened that way to Jesus. When he emerged on the public scene he was an overnight sensation. He would try to go off to be alone and the people would still follow him. The masses lined the streets as he came into town. On Palm Sunday, leafy palm branches were spread before him and there were shouts of Hosanna. In shouting Hosanna they were in effect saying "Save us now, Jesus." Great crowds came to hear him preach. A wave of religious expectation swept the country.

But the cheering did not last for long. There came a point when the tide began to turn against him. Oh, it wasn't noticeable so much at first. People still came to see him, but the old excitement was missing, and the crowds were not as large as they had been. His critics now began to publicly attack him. That was something new. Earlier they had been afraid to speak out for fear of the masses, but they began to perceive that the fickle public was turning on Jesus. Soon the opposition began to snowball. When they discovered that they could not discredit Jesus' moral character, they began to take more desperate measures. Before it was all over a tidal wave welled up that brought Jesus to his knees under the weight of a cross.

Why did the people so radically turn against him? How did the shouts of Hosanna on Sunday transform into the shouts of crucify him on Friday? I am not just talking about the immediate events that may have brought it about, but the deeper root causes. What were the underlying issues? In five days it all fell apart. Why? That is the issue that I would like for us to concentrate on this morning. Why did the cheering stop?

One reason why the cheering stopped is that Jesus began to talk more and more about commitment. During the last week of Jesus' life a very interesting scene occurred, and even more significantly, it occurred in full view of the people. A rich young ruler came enthusiastically running to Jesus. You are all familiar with the dialogue that took place. Jesus says: "Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and then come follow me." The people were stunned. They were troubled first for a theological reason. They had been raised to believe that God had especially blessed rich men. Yet, here is Jesus turning the big money away. I wonder how many churches would do that today. We think that people who are wealthy and prominent are individuals who need to be recruited and cultivated. We think their success in the world will lead to our success in the church. It bothered the people of Jesus' day to see Jesus turn away a rich man.

Prior to this Jesus' message had largely been one of grace. When the 5,000 were hungry he fed them. When they brought their sick to him, he healed them. When a woman is caught in adultery and is about to be stoned, it is Jesus who comes to her rescue and saves her. The message of his ministry is one of grace upon grace.

But now he seems to be saying, "The time for miracles is over. The time for commitment is now." It is interesting to note that in all four Gospels after Jesus enters Jerusalem to the shouts of Hosanna and palm branches there is not another miracle recorded. There are some events we might count as miracles but no miracles are done for the people. On the face of it this may not seem significant but when you consider that nearly one half of the Gospels is devoted to the last seven days of Jesus' life, you then understand the significance of this. While there are no miracles recorded in these chapters what you will find is a persistent call to commitment. These calls for commitment include:

- Hungry one morning, Jesus stops by a fig tree and finds no figs. He withers the tree because it is producing no fruit. Jesus demands fruitful committed lives.
- A Parable is told: Who is more committed? The son who says, "I will work" and then does not or the son who says, "I will not work," repents, and gets the work done? It is the son who does the work.
- The greatest commandment is given: Love God and Love your neighbor; again, a call to commitment.

- Jesus' teachings, "Be watchful for we do not know the day or hour of his return," is also here. After the triumphal entry everywhere Jesus asks for commitment and devotion from the people and what he heard in response he did not like.

The church's mission all too often is to meet its members' perceived needs rather than to serve God's need for a redeemed, reconciled, and healed world. Our concept of consumerism has crept into the church. To recruit persons and to be marketable we think that we need to be able to say: "Look what our church can offer you." Talk of discipleship is muted. Discipleship means knowing who Jesus Christ is and following the revelation made known to us in his teaching, death, resurrection, and presence. Commitment means after the shouts of Hosanna we walk to Golgotha carrying his cross of suffering.

I would suggest to you that when that rich young ruler walked away sorrowfully that day, he was not the only one. I think that it is safe to assume that a host of uncommitted people also walked away. Jesus was no longer talking only grace. He was now speaking about the other side of religion--obligation. He began to talk about the obligation that rests with a person who has accepted God's grace. The cheering began to stop when Jesus began to speak of commitment.

Secondly, the cheering stopped when Jesus dared to suggest that all people are worth loving. Now look what happens on Palm Sunday. Jesus goes to the temple and drives the moneychangers out. After the temple has been emptied, however, he then invites in the lame, the poor, the sick, the outcasts of society (Matthew 21:14). By bringing in these people it is his way of saying all people have access to God. It is his way of saying that this is what the Kingdom of God is going to be like.

I cannot help but notice the chain of events as Jesus comes to Jerusalem. The ones who are constantly making reference to Jesus' Messiahship are the disenfranchised of society. On the way to the capital city a poor blind beggar cries out: "Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me." And what was the response of the crowd? They rebuked him and told him to shut up. Then Jesus makes his triumphant entry into the city and there are shouts of Hosanna, blessed be the son of David. But look who it is in the temple court that is yelling out this proclamation: We are told that it is none other than the children (Mathew 21). It is the children who are getting under the skin of the Pharisees. They ask Jesus, "Do you hear what these children are saying? Are you going to allow this, Jesus? Do you not deny this?" Jesus says: "If I tried to quiet them the very stones would still scream it out." The point is that time & again it is the ones who are powerless in society who recognize Jesus' Messiahship. Those who have power resist it.

There is a wonderful story of an incident that occurred during the Special Olympics in 1976 in Seattle. Nine children lined up for the 100-yard dash. The gun sounded and the race was off. But only a few yards into the race, one of the children fell and began to cry. For some reason these challenged children did not understand the world's concept of competition and getting ahead and taking advantage when a competitor was down. The other eight children stopped running and came back to their fallen comrade. A young girl with Down's syndrome kissed him and brushed him off. The children lifted him up together, arm in arm, they ran over the finish line. The audience rose to their feet in applause: there was not one winner, there were nine winners. For a fleeting moment these children showed us what the Kingdom of God is like. They challenged the world's concept that first place is everything. In the race that we're in everyone matters. Particularly those who have fallen and are on the outside.

Why did the cheering stop? Because on Palm Sunday, Jesus opened the doors of the church to everyone. It angered some people then & it will anger some people today.

Finally, I would suggest to you that the cheering stopped because Jesus began to talk more and more about a cross. In the early part of his ministry Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God. This they wanted to hear about, especially since they misunderstood this kingdom to be a restoration of Israel to the days of King David's glory. But increasingly Jesus began to talk about sacrifice—even giving up your life. “Yes, lord, I heard that talk about sacrifice but I didn't really think that you meant it.” The cross says emphatically that he did mean it.

I began this sermon with the question, "Why did the cheering stop?" It stopped because Jesus more and more began to talk about commitment; it stopped because Jesus opened up the doors of the church and invited all people to come in. But most importantly of all, it stopped because Jesus began to talk about a cross. Amen.