

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

Palm/Passion Sunday

Duane M. Harris

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Text: John 14:1-12

Title: “The God We Can Know: Knowing God’s Way”

Back in the days when I led canoe camps in our conference, one particular week, there happened to be a couple of campers that were not easy keepers. They knew the rule at the time was that they could not be out of the sight of adults no longer than 20 minutes, but there were several who liked to push the margins and it was greatly frustrating for those of us leading the trip.

One night as we were sitting at the campfire, three of them asked to go to the bathroom before bed. This was wilderness camping. No porta-potty or outhouses on these trips. You took your own little shovel and made your own. Two girls and a boy. The boy was supposed to be their protector and stand guard on the path while the girls did their thing.

Well, once again, they were gone too long. By this time everyone else had gone to their tents except for my friends the VanSickles who were the other adult leaders on the trip. And we began to talk about how we might teach these three a lesson, that when we said 20 minutes we meant 20 minutes. We talked about getting a bucket of water out of the river, standing in the dark next to the trail and throwing it on them as they passed by, but decided against it. The thrower would probably get wet, too, and who was going to get in that cold river this time of night. It was cold. We could see our breath if we got away from the fire. We talked about other possibilities too, but I decided what I would do. I got up from my spot near the warm fire, my friends giggling after I told them what I was planning to do.

Without a light, I walked up the path the three had followed, just outside of camp beyond the light of the campfire. I walked off the path about 20 or 30 yards into the waist high ferns that covered the forest floor and crouched down on all fours. We had warned the campers about watching out for bears in the area, which of course, is why the girls wanted protection and why this boy presumably went along. When I heard the three of them chatting away as they returned to camp, at the right time I started grunting and running through the ferns on all fours trying my best to simulate a bear. Low, angry growling. Maybe it was more like the Red Riding Hood’s big bad wolf than it was a bear, but it really didn’t matter. The effect was the same. All I heard was screaming, and when I emerged on the trail from the thick ferns still on all fours with my red wool coat, all I saw was the two girls sort of hugging each other and the big bad protecting boy huddling behind them, stretching his arm out from behind them and pointing the flashlight at me as I lay on the path bursting in laughter. The effect was so good I could hear my friends back at the campfire laughing, too.

The three students didn’t think it was quite so funny as they ran toward me and started hitting me as I lay on the ground too immobilized by laughter to get up.

They never were late again, and my friends and I still talk about that night whenever we manage to get together.

Sometimes there are unexpected surprises on life’s trails, especially when we aren’t paying

attention. They can come out of nowhere when we least expect it. Certainly the families of those lost in the Alps on Germanwings flight 9525 had no idea the co-pilot would be psychotic on Tuesday and fly the aircraft into the mountains intentionally. Life's path can find us laughing or crying depending on what comes our way, but the path we choose to follow can make all the difference.

This morning we mark Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday on the Christian calendar. Palm Sunday commemorates Jesus' procession into Jerusalem riding a donkey and being hailed "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" as people laid down palms in his path. It was an expression of expectation that Jesus would become king as the crowd shouted in the Gospel According to Mark, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Mark 11:10).

Perhaps what the crowds did not understand was that Jesus was traveling a path to a different kind of kingship. He was riding a donkey, not a war horse. A donkey was about the humblest ride around. More like a motorcycle scooter than a tank. The symbolism identifies the kind of kingship Jesus was about, and it wasn't about exercising the kind of power to which people were accustomed when someone was called "King".

This Palm Sunday processional was the beginning of the end for Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. It leads to the beginning of Jesus' final days which is what we call Jesus' Passion.

And in the reading from John's Gospel this morning we find Jesus preparing his disciples still for his own death as he travels this path to kingship. This is still part of what scholars call the "Farewell Discourse" during which Jesus is teaching and preparing his disciples for the time he would no longer be with them physically. He's getting them ready for the experience of his own death and beyond his death, which is why this passage is so often shared at funerals.

It's one of my favorite passages as we overhear Jesus trying to comfort his friends using the image of preparing a place in God's household for them. I don't know about you but I find that description of being part of God's household comforting. It's like someone lovingly preparing a room for you when you come to visit. The beds are freshly made, the rooms are clean and prepared because the people who've done so love you and want you to be with them. In fact, they are glad you're there, so glad in fact that they've gone out of their way to make the place ready for you. That's Jesus preparing a place for his disciples in the household of God.

Of course, the disciples don't get it which so often happens in the Gospel accounts. Thomas says they don't know where Jesus is going so how can they know the way. Philip is equally clueless, too, and tells Jesus to show them the Father and they'll be satisfied. They're not unlike us in that we often miss what Jesus is trying to say to us, too.

Jesus tells them in John's Gospel, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." What I hear in this is that if you are seeking the God who leads to the kind of kingship that rides a donkey instead of a warhorse, Jesus is the One who reveals this God and Father of all.

Of course, there are other paths people can travel. ISIS and Al-Queda and Boko Haram offer paths to a very different god, small "g", and people are choosing to travel the path of this killing god. A headline I read this week indicated that ISIS is recruiting in Minnesota of all places. Their god is manifest in violence and terror and people are obviously walking that path, but that's not the God known and experienced in Jesus the donkey rider. Jesus' is the Way to God, capital "G", who is not One to use terror and violence but rather is One who gives his life in Jesus to reveal a love so deep, so powerful, that the ultimate sacrifice is offered: willingly giving his life. It's such a stark contrast to other religious expressions. Nothing in Jesus about taking his life suicide-mission-style or the taking of anyone else's. It's all about the free-will giving of it.

A few weeks ago, one of the readings for reflection in the prayer guide I use for personal devotions was written by James C. Fenhagen. Dr. Fenhagen was an Episcopalian priest and dean of General Theological School in New York who wrote several books about Christian spirituality and pastoral leadership. In that reading for that particular day, Rev. Fenhagen wrote that to be a follower of Jesus means to embrace the values expressed in Jesus' life. He articulated four of them. You might argue there are more but here are the four he names as Jesus' core values:

1. A commitment to an ongoing and disciplined enrichment of our relationship with God.
2. An affirmation of human need and worth in the face of the demonic pretensions of those principalities and powers that control our lives.
3. The desire to serve out of love rather than power or reward.
4. Deep identification with the poor and the hungry and the oppressed.

As I hear Jesus in John's Gospel speak of himself as "The Way, the truth and the life", these four values resonate. And I wonder if Jesus as the Way to God means that those who seek God are being called to embrace those values as our own. Hear them again:

1. A commitment to an ongoing and disciplined enrichment of our relationship with God. According to the Gospels, Jesus frequented the synagogues, knew the scripture of his faith tradition, and spent time alone with God in prayer. In what ways are you and I nurturing an ongoing and disciplined relationship with God in our own lives?
2. An affirmation of human need and worth in the face of the demonic pretensions of those principalities and powers that control our lives. According to the Gospels, Jesus did not measure a person's worth according to a person's net worth, but rather proclaimed in Matthew's Gospel the value of "the least of these". Are you and I equally able to see through the values of our culture and see the face of Christ in those we might consider "less than ourselves", people who might even make us uncomfortable?
3. The desire to serve out of love rather than power or reward. Of all the commandments, laws, rules and regulations found in the faith Jesus--when pressed--proclaimed only two as of prime importance: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." This Holy Week as with all Holy Weeks, we remember and reenact the ultimate way in which Jesus expressed such love as he willingly gave his life. The donkey riding king does so not for power or reward but purely out of love for all human beings. Love often expresses itself through sacrifice. How are you and I doing with serving out of love rather than out of the desire for some form of power or some kind of reward? Is there evidence of your willingness and mine to forgo our own desires in order to uplift someone else?
4. A deep identification with the poor and the hungry and the oppressed. Throughout his ministry in the Gospel accounts, Jesus is on the side of the

suffering, whether that suffering comes through an illness of some kind, hunger—both physical and spiritual, or powerful people exacting unjust punishments on the vulnerable. Jesus identifies with the impoverished, children, poor widows and hungry crowds. How are you and I doing with embracing this value of Jesus by the way in which we live our lives?

This isn't another checklist for salvation I'm suggesting here. Check off these four and we are good to go. I'm simply trying to express that the One who came as a donkey riding king in Matthew and Mark, the One who told bewildered disciples in John as he prepared them for his own death that "I am the Way, the truth and the life" and "If you have seen me you have seen the Father": this One invites us to walk on a path that is distinct and when we walk that path, following in his Way, we find God, and—paradoxically--in finding God, we find our Way.