
Back in the ’60’s there was a book written titled, “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. His part in the so called “War to end Wars” was significant and people knew that here was a truly great man. There was a great spirit of optimism throughout society. People actually believed that the last war had been fought and the world had been made safe for democracy. It must have been a wonderful period of history – to think that peace reigned throughout the world and that it always would...

On his first visit to Paris after the war, Wilson was greeted by cheering mobs. He was actually more popular than their own heroes who had fought in the war... The same thing was true in England and Italy. Everywhere he went he was met with crowds of people just wanting to get a look at him... In a Vienna hospital, a Red Cross worker had to tell the children that there would be no Christmas presents that year 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. HE would make Christmas as it should be. HE was the new Santa Claus.

The cheering and adulation lasted for 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 with preserving a lasting peace. At home, Woodrow Wilson ran into opposition in the Senate and his League of Nations was not ratified. Under the strain of it all, the President's health began to deteriorate. 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 and 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 and defeat. There are some exceptions, of course, but not too many.

It happened that way with 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 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 long. In an incredibly short time the tide began to turn against him. People still came to see him, but the old excitement was missing, and the crowds were not as large as they had been on Palm Sunday. 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 him and they were ready. Soon the opposition began to snowball. When they discovered that they could not discredit his 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 just a few days after he had been hailed as the savior – the conqueror – the new king – the Messiah....

Have you ever wondered why the people so quickly turn against Jesus? Have you ever wondered why the shouts of “Hosanna!” on Sunday transformed into the shouts of “crucify him” by 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? 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 up to Jesus. You are all familiar with the story. Jesus says: “Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and then come follow me.” The masses 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 tend to think that people who are wealthy and prominent are individuals who need to be recruited and cultivated – to be brought into our membership. We think their success in the world will lead to our success in the church. It bothered them tremendously to see Jesus turn away a rich man.

They were bothered, too, by what he was saying. Up to now, Jesus’ message had mostly been one of grace. When the 5,000 were hungry, he told his disciples to feed them. When they brought their sick to him, he readily 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 – time after time after time.

But now there seems to be a change in his message. He seems to be saying, "The time for miracles is over. Now it’s time for ... commitment."

Did you know that, after Jesus enters Jerusalem to the shouts of Hosanna and palm branches, there is not even one more miracle performed? There are some events we might count as miracles, but no miracles are done for the people. On the face of it that might not seem significant, but when you consider that nearly one half of the Gospels are devoted to the last seven days of Jesus life, you then understand the significance. But listen to this: While there are no miracles recorded in these chapters, what you will find is a persistent call to commitment.

Hungry one morning, Jesus stops by a fig tree and finds no figs on it. He withers the tree because it is producing no fruit. Jesus demands fruitful, committed lives. That’s what the moral of the fig tree story is... If you aren’t producing anything, you might as well wither up and die...

Then He tells a Parable: Who is more committed? The son who says, "I will work" and then does not or the son who says, "I will not work," changes his mind, and gets the work done? It’s a rhetorical question. It is, clearly, the son who actually does the work.

In those few days after Palm Sunday the greatest commandment is given: “Love God and Love your neighbor;” again, a call to commitment.

His teaching, "be watchful for we do not know the day or hour of his return," is also during this time period. After the triumphal entry, everywhere Jesus goes, he asks for commitment and devotion from the people and what he heard in response he didn’t like.

A well known Methodist minister was lecturing on the campus of Nebraska Wesleyan a few years ago. Afterward he was talking to a group of students who had expressed an interest in the ministry. When asked how many of them were definitely committed to going into the parish ministry, only one raised their hand. One young lady spoke up and said: "I have a problem with your use of the word ‘commitment.’ That sounds so very binding and restricting."

The church is such a product of our culture. We have bought into marketing techniques just like JC Penney and Walmart. Our basic appeal is to self-defined needs of the citizenry. “What do YOU need that we can supply.” And it works. People go to church because they hear the minister is a good speaker or because the youth program is exceptional or the really cool videos really move them or the people are so friendly... Our mission has become – “Find out what people want and give it to them.” Our message has become: "Look what our church can offer you." Discipleship, as Jesus talked about it after Palm Sunday, has taken a back seat. We almost don’t want people to know that after the shouting of “Hosanna” stops, the rest of the journey leads to the cross.

I can’t help but think 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 about 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, I think that the cheering began to stop when Jesus dared to suggest that all people are worth
loving. Look what happens on Palm Sunday. Jesus goes to the temple and drives the moneychangers out. But then, after the temple has been emptied, he invites in the lame, the poor, the sick, the outcasts of society (in Matthew). He dares to bring into the church those whom we would refer to today as those *seedy street people.* “Why Jesus, that is not the way to win friends and influence people. Don't you know that?” 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.

The one time Methodist Bishop of Mississippi Jack Meadors tells a wonderful story of an incident that occurred during the Special Olympics. 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 friend. 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, and it will anger some people today.

Finally, I think 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 and how desirable and wonderful it is. They loved to hear about, especially since they understood this kingdom to be a restoration of Israel to the glory days as it was in King David's time. But increasingly Jesus began to talk about sacrifice – even giving up your life – not really a crowd pleaser...

The story is told of a little league baseball game. When the young boy got up to the plate he looked over to the coach, and he saw him give the signal to sacrifice bunt. He then promptly proceeded to take three big swings and strike out. The coach ran up to him and said: Didn't you see me give you the signal to sacrifice? Yes, the boy replied. But I didn't really think you meant it.

Isn't that what we so often say to God? “Yes, lord, I heard that talk about sacrifice but I didn't really think you meant it.” The cross says emphatically that he did mean it.

We'll see that in a couple of weeks in a dramatic way. Today - full church. Next Sunday - full church. The Sunday after - not so much...

Where are you in all of this? We began our service today with the cheering – the flowers, the singing, the color, the joy of Palm Sunday. What happens when Jesus begins talking about commitment? Will we say “Wow. I'm really not ready for that. I'm not sure even what it means. Does it mean more prayer and more church attendance and more giving and more fellowship and more of my time and energies toward whatever direction God leads me?” Yes, it does. “Does it mean being open to people “not like me” being a part of the family of faith?” It means that, too. “Does it mean a cross?” It may.

To follow the Jesus of Palm Sunday beyond the parade is to be committed to who he is and to his mission in the world and to truly be a part of it. See you next Sunday... and the one after?