

Sermon: When the Cheering Stops
Text: Mark 11:1 – 11
Date: April 5, 2009 AM
Place: Jesup First UMC

When Little Johnny woke up, he wasn't feeling like going to church, so mama decided to stay home with him. Well, a few hours later, daddy came walking through the door with a palm branch and Johnny said: "What's this, daddy?" Daddy said: "Well, this is a palm branch. You see, when Jesus came riding into town, everybody waved palm branches to honor Him." And Little Johnny said: "Aw man! The one Sunday I miss church that Jesus showed up."

Well, today is a celebration of the day Jesus showed up. We call this day Palm Sunday. Some time around the 4th Century, Cyril of Jerusalem began commemorating this day, the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem. For weeks, He had been making His way toward Jerusalem, traveling through the towns and villages of Galilee. And as He drew near, He sent two disciples into town to retrieve a donkey. And He sat on it and rode into Jerusalem while the people sang and danced and waved their palm branches. And everybody was happy, but what happens when the cheering stopped?

My mind drifts back to the first Gulf War in the early 1990s. Americans sat fixed to our televisions as the greatest military in the world made the Iraqi army look like amateurs. There was a spirit of optimism in our country; we felt invincible. Norman Swartzkoff became the new face of America's military strength and George Bush was a hero. Everywhere he went – at home and aboard – he was cheered.

But the cheering didn't last long. Overseas, our allies soon drifted away and at home, congress soon made it impossible for Bush to capitalize on his popularity. And by the election of November 1992, the cheering had stopped and Bush was defeated by William Jefferson Clinton.

We know on Sunday Jesus rode into town a hero, but by Friday the "*Hosannas*" had turned to "*Crucify Him.*" The waving of palm branches was replaced by the shaking of closed fists. How did it all fall apart so fast? Why did the cheering stop?

1. THE CHEERING STOPPED BECAUSE JESUS BEGAN TALKING ABOUT COMMITMENT.

During this last week, a very interesting scene occurred, and even more significantly, it happened in full view of the people. A rich young ruler came to see Jesus. You know the story. Jesus said: "*Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor and then come and follow me.*" The people were stunned. They believed wealth and prosperity was a reward from God and yet, Jesus turned this man away. You see, we believe the rich and prominent should be recruited and cultivated. We think their success will lead to prosperity for the church, but Jesus turned this man away and it bothered them.

They were bothered for another reason too. Jesus changed His message. He once preached love and grace. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and rescued the woman caught in adultery. But now, His message was different. Now, He preached commitment.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus didn't perform any miracles during Holy Week? He didn't go to Jerusalem to perform miracles; He went to call for a commitment.

So, Mark 11 says Jesus stopped by a fig tree and found no figs on it. So He cursed the tree. Later, He told a parable about two sons: one made a commitment and then didn't keep it and the other was slow to commitment, but eventually did. Even Jesus' discussion of the greatest commandment – love God and your neighbor – is a call for radical commitment.

And nobody likes commitment. One of our Methodist bishops went to Nebraska Wesleyan College to recruit young men and women who were interested in the ordained ministry. And after he spoke that night, one of the young ministerial students came up to him and said: *"I have a problem with your use of the word 'Commitment.' It just sounds so binding and restrictive."* Maybe Bishop Carder of Tennessee had it right when he said: *"The church of today has become an institution in which even belief in God is optional or peripheral."*

How sad for us! How sad for them! You see, for folks who want to see miracles, who want to have their ears tickled, who want to be entertained, all this talk about commitment just doesn't float. And so, the cheering stopped.

2. THE CHEERING STOPPED WHEN JESUS SUGGESTED EVERYONE WAS WORTH LOVING.

I don't think it's a coincidence that three of the four gospels place the cleansing of the Temple during

Holy Week. Jesus went to the Temple, took some rope and made a whip, and drove out the merchants and the moneychangers. And then, Matthew says: *“The blind and the lame came to Him.”* And the indication here is that they came to Jesus in the Temple Courts. Now, folks like that aren’t allowed in the Temple, but Jesus dared to bring in the outcasts and the marginalized. And symbolically, Jesus is saying to everyone: *“You’re all welcome in God’s house.”*

The interesting thing is: it’s the outcasts and the marginalized who truly recognize who Jesus is. It was the blind beggar who cried out: *“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”* The crowd told the beggar to shut up, but Jesus told him to come. And then, on the day that Jesus cleansed the Temple, it was the little children who praised Him. They said, *“Praise God for the Son of David.”* And the Pharisees tried to make Jesus stop them, but they recognized Him and honored Him.

Before I left home for college and seminary, I was a voluntary youth director. Now, anybody who has ever done that knows why I think I’ve got a few stars in my crown. But it was a great experience. There was a group of kids in the church and we started working together, but then we started reaching out to some kids from outside the church. Now, these kids didn’t know how to behave in church. They weren’t nice and neat church kids. These were kids with problems and habits and issues. And guess what? The members of that little Methodist church weren’t happy! They didn’t want *“those kids”* in *“their”* church.

You see, you and I have to be really careful, because if it is true that we sometimes entertain angels without even knowing it, then it is also true that we sometimes turn angels away without even knowing it. And the very person we turn away or the person we don't reach out to might be the Lord Himself. You see, the way I read scripture, Jesus never turned anyone away. Now, on more than one occasion, people decided not to follow Jesus because the cost was too great, but that's a decision Jesus allowed people to make. Jesus welcomed and accepted everyone: the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the Jew and the Gentile, the women and the men and the children, the religious and the non-religious. Jesus said: "*Everybody is worthy loving.*" And then, the cheering stopped!

3. THE CHEERING STOPPED BECAUSE JESUS WAS FOCUSED ON THE CROSS.

In His early ministry, Jesus talked a lot about the Kingdom of God and the people loved it. They gathered around Him by the thousands, because they thought He was talking about an earthly kingdom. And so, when He came riding into Jerusalem that day, they expected Him to overthrow the Romans and re-establish the nation of Israel. But suddenly, Jesus began talking about the cross. He talked more about sacrifice than satisfaction. He talked more about thorns than He did thrones. His mind was on the cross and making the ultimate sacrifice.

A young boy came up to bat with the bases loaded and he looked over to his coach and the coach

gave him the signal to sacrifice bunt. So, he stepped up to the plate and took three of the biggest, hardest swings you'd ever want to see and he struck out. So, the coach called him over and said: "*Didn't you see the signal to sacrifice?*" The boy said: "*Yes sir, but I didn't know you were talking to me.*"

That's you and me, isn't it? We hear the message of the cross, the message of sacrifice, but surely, it was meant for someone else. Jesus said: "*The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.*" And not only did He talk about His cross, but He talked about ours; He said: "*If you want to be my disciple, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.*" He started talking about the cross and suddenly, the cheering stopped.

On Sunday, the people were cheering, but on Friday, they were jeering. On Sunday, they shouted "Hosanna", but on Friday, they yelled: "Crucify Him." Oh how quickly the voice of public opinion changes! Oh how quickly we change our minds. We vow faithfulness on Sunday, but then the cheering stops! We pledge our love on Sunday, but then the cheering stops! But oh my friends, when the cheering stops, God and the flame of our love and faithfulness fades, Christ stands ready to welcome us, to forgive us, and to strengthen us in our walk.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Christ our Lord!