

March 20 – Palm Sunday

The Stones Would Shout

Luke 19:28-40

I want to begin by telling you about Ryan. Ryan started dating the daughter of one of the “pillar” families of the congregation. I need to let you know that father was not pleased. Ryan represented everything, or so it seemed, that the family didn’t like. He was from a broken home and had been on his own even before graduating from high school. In a family of teachers and scientists, his high school degree was all he had, and Ryan had a pretty high disdain for the education system in general and teachers in particular. He had been in the heavy metal music scene for a while and was one of Kurt Cobain’s guitarists before Kurt hit it big with his grunge band Nirvana. He had an earring when that was a big deal, and long hair. Ryan had never attended church and his only understanding of religion was the negative stories his father had told him from his unhappy early years in a very strict religious home. Dad and mom were beside themselves. What did their daughter see in Ryan? He worked hard for Dad installing carpets. He was valued as an employee but not as a son-in-law. What were they going to do?

We will get back to Ryan’s story after a bit but for now realize that Ryan represents the type of person surrounding Jesus on Palm Sunday. They were a rag tag group of poor, oppressed, sin filled rabble or at least that is likely how the Pharisees saw them. The Pharisees represent the status quo. They, along with the High Priest and his Sadduceen party, were responsible for keeping the peace. If they didn’t, Rome would act and they always acted harshly. They were the ones who ran the temple. They were the religious experts of their day. Jesus and his followers needed to understand their place. They needed to shut up and do what they were told. Jesus needed to keep them in line.

Jesus refuses to listen to the leaders of the faith. He sees how the rabble represents a new thing happening. Jesus’ words about the stones crying out go back to Habakkuk who in 2:11 says the very stones will cry out over the excesses and evil of the rulers. They are sensing the presence and power of God through the words and

teaching of Jesus. The rabble represents the hope God offers to all, no matter how lowly.

Now, back to Ryan. Jessica, the couple's daughter saw beyond the externals of Ryan, the long hair, the earring and all the rest, to something more. As they continued to date, Ryan finally asked her to marry him. She told him there was no way she would ever consider marrying him unless he went to church with her. I still remember that first time he came to church. He looked so uncomfortable, definitely a fish out of water. Mom and Dad had pasted smiles on their faces but hoped no one would talk to Ryan beyond saying hello. The only one who seemed thoroughly thrilled was Jessica who wanted everyone to meet Ryan. He started attending and we had a few conversations. One Sunday he asked me if he could come in and see me during his lunch break, but to not tell the family.

God was doing a new thing in Ryan's life. He, whom Jessica's parents and their friends were trying to discourage, was being transformed. For you see Ryan came in to talk to me about faith, about his questions and doubts, about church membership, and about his love for Jessica. He told me how she would not marry him if he didn't go to church. He let me know that if he went to church it had to be more than just to please her. It had to mean something for him. He also said that he had never felt such warmth and acceptance as he had felt at church. I thought we were acting pretty cool towards him but it was more love from a stranger than he had ever had in his life. Ryan and I began to meet weekly to talk about faith, his doubts and his questions. I got him a Bible so he could begin to read it. He had never owned one in his life. About four months later the church was taking in new members. Ryan asked me if he was ready to be baptized and become a member. When I agreed to this he said, "Don't tell Jessica. I want to surprise her." When that Sunday morning came I asked those wishing to join the church to come forward. Ryan stood up. Jessica tried to get him to sit down because she thought he didn't understand what was happening. I recall him turning to her with love and say, "I am doing this for me. Will you be my sponsor?" With tears running down her cheeks she stood beside him as he was baptized into the faith. The very stones were crying out.

This began to soften mom and dad toward Ryan. They finally accepted him as a son-in-law. Let me fast forward over twenty years. I saw Ryan a couple of summers

ago. They are still part of the church. They have raised their son in the faith. Ryan has been helping lead the youth group for many years and most see him now as one of the pillars of that church. Those who don't know his story would be surprised at its beginning. They would assume he has always been a part of a family of faith. The hair got shorter, the earring smaller but he is still Ryan. What Jessica saw initially and we had to find out about was a person of tender emotions, a person who was rock solid in his convictions. He gave up on Kurt when he got into drugs, but he never deserted him as a friend. She saw in Ryan one who would not be swayed by those around him. She saw a hard worker and someone who loved people. I think she hoped that if he was persuaded to go to church that faith would grow. I don't think even she knew that he would become the faith rock in their home. He told me he still reads the Bible that I gave him every day. He told me the best thing that ever happened to him after meeting Jessica was coming to church.

We live in such a polarized time. It seems as if "us versus them" is how we are challenged to think in all circumstances. Whether we want to admit it or not, sometimes our actions mirror those of the religious leaders on the temple wall looking down at the rabble and wishing they would shut up and just go along with things as they have always been done. Whenever we bemoan that these are not the good old days or put down folk who are not attending worship, we are there. Sometimes our actions more closely resemble the rabble, demanding change in the life of the church at all costs. We see a problem and we want it fixed now and in a way we are happy with. Then we have Jesus who tries to embrace both groups. He sees those around him, flawed, poor and sinful as they might be, as representing something good and positive and wonderful that God is doing. He encouraged those on the top to embrace them and not try to silence them. He wants them to see how God is at work. I believe he would also have challenged those around him to not reject those on the top. He said more than once that he came not to abolish the laws but to fulfill them. He tried to embrace all that was good about their faith and heritage but not be bound by some of its rules. He wasn't a rebel leader wanting to tear everything down and start over. But he also would cry over Jerusalem as he realized that those who were doing their best to protect it would ultimately cause its destruction.

I believe Jesus challenges us, in the church to see how God is at work in the “others” of the world. I am talking about the “Ryans” of life who don’t fit our pre-conceived ideas of what is acceptable. This requires flexibility on our part. We have to see beyond the externals that separate us to what unites us. The religious leaders saw an uneducated carpenter surrounded by poor ignorant folk. God saw a new beginning. Think about what we have learned to embrace as a church. We, in the United Methodist Church, accept women as pastors, we believe that you should be able to worship where you want regardless of your race. In all of this we can celebrate.

Yet there are struggles. We struggle to understand and accept that what I like in music might not be what you like. We are grappling with how technology is changing our world and our faith communities. We are confronted with issues about sexuality that we never had to face before and what it means to be welcoming and affirming. It is easy to go back to us and them. To “we have always done it that way” kind of thinking. Jesus says that when we are trying to shut things down the stones will cry out. God is in the business of transformation, of making all things new.

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week. During the week we move from the triumphant procession of today through the times of confrontation and teaching in the temple. From turning over of money changing tables as Jesus confronts faith models that exploit, to times with disciples at table where we are commanded to love. We will move through betrayal, arrest, humiliation, crucifixion, and death. There will always be those in power who proclaim that what is happening is for the good of all. And then we have Jesus saying, “Celebrate what God is about.” If you shut them down God will rise up others to join in the celebration. The very stones will cry out.”

Here is my only “us and them” instead of “we” statement of today. You have to choose. Are you one of those on the top of the wall trying to silence change? Or are you one in the crowd celebrating the ways God is at work? Are you one who stands with the elite and yells crucify or do you stand at the foot of the cross in tears?

We know where God is at work. The very stones will cry out in favor of what God is doing. The question is where do we stand?