

“Christ’s Example and Sacrifice”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, April 1, 2007

Text: Philippians 2:1-11 Luke 19:28-40 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, enable us to hear and receive your message of truth for us today. Amen.

WHAT’S THE SENSE IN LIFE?

The number five song on Billboard’s Adult Contemporary chart this week is titled “The Riddle.” In this song the singing group Five for Fighting, explores the question, “What’s the sense in life?”

It is an intriguing song. It begins, “There was a man back in ’95/ Whose heart ran out of summers / But before he died, I asked him / Wait, what’s the sense in life?” Then the refrain, “Here’s a riddle for yah/ Find the Answer/ There’s a reason for the world/ You and I . . . “

The song continues, “There are secrets that we still have left to find/ There have been mysteries from the beginning of time/ There are answers we’re not wise enough to see.” Then the song gives a clue to the reason for the world: “I love you free/ I love you freely.”

I agree that this is a clue to the reason for the world. Self-giving love is the reason for the world. It is life at its best.

Last week I was talking with a friend. His college-age son had flown somewhere for spring break and left his car at home. My friend took his son’s car to the garage to have the oil changed and two tires replaced. After he picked up the car, he thought to himself, it is pretty dirty. It could use a car wash. So he washed the car. Then he

thought, waxing the car would really protect it. Now this is a fellow who doesn't even wax his own car! Then he waxed his son's car.

Later my friend reflected on what he had done. He realized that his son didn't deserve all of that. His son really would not appreciate it. But that didn't matter. He took the time to repair and wash and wax his son's car, because he loved his son.

Self-giving love is the reason for the world. Jesus' self-giving love, even to the point of death, is our supreme example. There are two very important elements of Jesus' example for us. Jesus loved people, and Jesus was obedient to God the Father.

The mission of Duke Memorial United Methodist Church is sharing Christ from the heart of Durham. Exactly what are we sharing with people? An important part of what we are sharing are Christ's example and sacrifice.

THE KING APPROACHES JERUSALEM

On the Sunday before the Passover feast, Jerusalem is already bursting at the seams with faithful pilgrims. Jesus approaches Jerusalem on a road from the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives, filled with olive trees, is a ridge a little more than a mile long, separated from Jerusalem by the Kidron Valley.

Responding to Jesus' command, the disciples bring Jesus a donkey to ride on. Jesus deliberately chooses to enter Jerusalem mounted on a donkey to claim publicly that he is the chosen Son of David. He is the One to sit on David's throne – the One of whom the prophets had spoken. He is the king. He is the Lord.

As Jesus begins riding down the path from the Mount of Olives, the crowd of disciples begins to praise God joyfully in loud voices, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" (Luke 19:38)

Jesus was a king, but no ordinary one. He was the king of fishermen, tax collectors, Samaritans, prostitutes, blind men, and demoniacs. In the parade praising Jesus that day was a Samaritan leper with a heart full of gratitude, a crippled woman

who had been unable to stand straight with dignity for 18 years, and blind Bartimaeus (formerly blind Bartimaeus) who had followed Jesus all the way from Jericho.

This crowd had seen Jesus perform so many miracles. They watched as he raised Lazarus from the dead. They witnessed him miraculously providing food for 5,000 people. They had seen Jesus heal boys and girls, women and men. Jesus had befriended prostitutes. He had forgiven people caught in adultery, tax collectors who cheated people and many others.

Jesus was the king of the oppressed and suffering. He shared their hardships and relieved their suffering. He accepted them when others deemed them unacceptable. Jesus gave them hope and embodied God's love for them. Now they came to cheer and to rejoice and to march with him into the holy city.

Jesus loved these people, and they knew it. Jesus had given himself to these people. It was self-giving love.

Jermaine Washington, 26, did something that amazes many people. He became a kidney donor, giving a vital organ to a co-worker and a friend. Jermaine met Michelle Stevens, 23, when they began working together at the Washington, D.C., Department of Employment Services. Occasionally they would have lunch together. Michelle says, "He was somebody I could talk to. One day, I cried on his shoulder. I had been on the kidney donor waiting list for 11 months, and I had lost all hope."

She told Jermaine how depressing it was to spend three days a week, three hours a day, on a kidney dialysis machine. She suffered chronic fatigue and blackouts and was plagued by joint pain. Jermaine could already see that she had lost her smile. Jermaine recalls, "I saw my friend dying before my eyes. What was I supposed to do? Sit back and watch her die?"

Michelle's mother, suffering from hypertension, was ineligible to donate a kidney. Her two brothers were reluctant. Michelle said, "I understood. They said they loved me very much, but they were just too afraid."

Jermaine was tested to see if his kidney would be a match for Michelle. When the results came back positively, they scheduled the transplant surgery. When someone asked Jermaine where he had found the courage to give away a kidney, he replied, “I prayed for it. I asked God for guidance and that’s what I got.”

Michelle received healing through a modern-day miracle. Part of the miracle was the self-giving love that Jermaine demonstrated.

Jesus is leading the parade down the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. Not everyone in the crowd is cheering. Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” (19:39) The Pharisees thought, “Now, wait a minute, Jesus. You’re not the Son of David. You’re not the Messiah. You’re not the King.” They also realized, “Jesus’ popularity is a real problem.”

Jesus replies, “I tell you, if these people were silent, the stones would shout out.” (19:40) There is no stopping this parade, this celebration, this acknowledgment of my kingship.

OBEDIENT TO DEATH

During Holy Week, this coming week, we recall Jesus self-giving love. Jesus had demonstrated self-giving love throughout his life. Jesus self-giving love, even to the point of death is our supreme example.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians describes this self-giving love. Even though Jesus was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. Jesus became a human. Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. For the rest of this Holy Week, Jesus is taking an excruciating journey to his own execution on a cross. It is painful to recall. Jesus died as someone cursed. Crucifixion was the most degrading kind of execution that could be inflicted on a person in the first century.

The book of Hebrews tells us that Christ has offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins. (Hebrews 10:12) Through his death on the cross, Christ is our full, sufficient and perfect sacrifice. Jesus made a once-and-for-all sacrifice for us.

In his book Written in Blood, Robert Coleman tells the story of a young boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. The doctor explained that she had the same disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier. Her only chance for recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was the ideal donor.

"Would you give your blood to Mary?" the doctor asked. Johnny hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he smiled and said, "Sure, for my sister." Soon the two children were wheeled into the hospital room--Mary, pale and thin; Johnny, robust and healthy. Neither spoke, but when their eyes met, Johnny grinned. As the nurse inserted the needle into his arm, Johnny's smile faded. He watched the blood flow through the tube.

With the ordeal almost over, his voice, slightly shaky, broke the silence. "Doctor, when do I die?" Only then did the doctor realize why Johnny had hesitated, why his lip had trembled when he'd agreed to donate his blood. He thought giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. In that brief moment, he had made his great decision. Johnny, fortunately, didn't have to die to save his sister. However, Jesus died for us. That's how much he loved us.

We witness this incredible self-giving love of Jesus throughout Holy Week. Jesus gathers his disciples together in an upper room. At this Passover meal, Jesus radically alters the traditional liturgy. He tells how the bread represents his body about to be sacrificed. The wine represents his own blood, about to be shed. Jesus then takes a basin of water and a towel and washes the feet of his disciples. All of this time,

Jesus knows that Judas Iscariot is preparing to betray him to the Jewish leaders – for 30 pieces of silver!

After the supper, Jesus walks with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, near the foot of the Mount of Olives. It is a terribly difficult time for Jesus. He asks his disciples to pray with him. His trusted disciples, Peter, James and John, fall asleep while Jesus is fervently praying.

Judas leads the Temple guard and the Roman soldiers to arrest Jesus. After Jesus is arrested, he appears before the vindictive high priest and Jewish leaders. After their interrogation, they spit in his face and hit him.

Peter and John have followed Jesus to the home of the high priest. They are sitting outside in the courtyard. Three times people come up to Peter and identify him as being a person who was with Jesus of Nazareth. Peter is frightened for his life. Three times he denies that he even knows Jesus.

Eventually Jesus is brought before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. It is Pilate who has the authority to authorize punishment by death. During the Passover it was a custom for Pilate to release a prisoner to the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. Pilate had interrogated Jesus. He realized that Jesus was not guilty of any crime warranting death. Pilate asked the crowd about what he should do with Jesus who is called the Messiah. They cried out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" What a turn of events from the Palm Sunday parade entering Jerusalem!

Pilate orders Jesus to be crucified. The soldiers whip him. The soldiers then stripped Jesus of his clothing. They put a scarlet robe on him. They twist some thorns into a crown and they push it onto his head, so the thorns sink into his skin. They put a

reed in his right hand. Then they kneel before him and mock him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews! They spit on him and strike him with the reed.

It was so wrong.

A new Marine recruit went into training at Paris Island, SC. He was one of those people who seem to be a bit out of step with the norm. He quickly became the subject of ridicule from some of the other recruits.

The other young men did everything they could to make a joke of the new recruit and to humiliate him. One day, someone came up with an idea that could scare the daylights out of this new recruit. Someone would drop a disarmed hand grenade onto the floor and pretend it was about to go off. Everyone else in the barracks knew about this, and they were all ready to get a big laugh.

A recruit threw the hand grenade into the middle of the floor. Someone yelled, "It's a live grenade, it's a live grenade! It's about to explode!"

They fully expected that the young man would get hysterical and jump out a window. Instead the young marine fell on the grenade. He hugged it to his stomach, and yelled to the other men in the barracks, "Run for your lives! Run for your lives! You'll be killed if you don't!" The other marines froze in stillness and shame. They realized that the one they had scorned was the one ready to lay down his life for them.

That's what Jesus did for us. Jesus was ridiculed, and he gave his life for us.

Then the soldiers crucify Jesus. About noon on Friday, they nail him to the cross. As he is dying on the cross, curiosity-seekers, passers-by, the chief priests, elders and scribes, even the robbers who were crucified with him mock him and insult him. They said, "He saved others. He cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel. Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" (Matthew 27:42-43)

Still, Jesus loved us! Jesus' self-giving love, even to the point of death, is our supreme example.

A medieval monk announced that he would be preaching the next Sunday evening on "The Love of God." As the shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows, the congregation gathered. In the darkness of the altar, the monk lighted a candle and carried it to the crucifix. It was a larger than life sculpture of the wounded Jesus, hanging on a wooden cross. First of all, the monk slowly illumined the crown of thorns. Next, the two wounded hands. Then the marks of the spear wound. In the hush that fell, he blew out the candle and left the chancel. There was nothing else to say. . . . I agree.

Today I invite you to respond to God through prayer. I am going to be kneeling and praying at the chancel rail, "Jesus, thank you for loving me so much." You may wish to come and pray that prayer or pray, "Jesus, I accept you as my example, my sacrifice, my Savior." Or there may be other needs on your heart today. Frank and I will be praying here. If you would like one of us to pray with you, simply kneel or stand beside us as we pray. I invite you to come and kneel and pray as we sing our next hymn.