

## **STOP BUNCHING!**

Mark 11:1-11

Sermon presented by The Rev. Richard D. Raum, at Old First Presbyterian Church,  
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The Palm Sunday story is difficult to interpret crisply because it's not quite what it appears to be. It appears to be a spirited account of Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. And it is that. The church's Palm Sunday hymns are robust, our atmosphere festive, the occasion joyful. But Palm Sunday ends with a whimper. The crowd seemed to scatter as quickly as it formed. The palms were trampled underfoot. Jesus, left alone, "went into temple," looked around, then quietly slipped out of town. So, there are these two competing themes. Yes, Jesus aroused the enthusiasms of many. May our enthusiasm for Christ also be aroused by Palm Sunday ardor, so that gladness and gratitude burst forth from our overly-reserved, sophisticated spirits, and our lives show forth his praise. But such enthusiasms are notoriously short-lived and unreliable. And, frankly, in a world de-stabilized by mob rule masquerading as religion, the last thing we need is an overheated crowd shouting religious slogans. When the group breaks-up, and the cheering stops, a person is left alone -- alone to decide, "who is Jesus Christ for me?"

In a delightful essay in the *New York Times*, Hampton Sides tells of his experience coaching youth soccer. He writes:

Coaching soccer to young players is a matter of planting one central idea over and over in their little minds until it finally takes root: stop bunching. I tell them to think of themselves as force fields; each force field must have its own separate sphere of influence . . . It's frustrating how long it takes the message to sink in, but when it does, the game takes a quantum leap. The players begin to hold positions. They see new patterns on the field. And then it happens: they begin to pass.

The Palm Sunday story ought to plant this same central idea in our minds: stop bunching. Each one of us might imagine ourselves as a force field of faith, holding to our faith no matter what's going on around us, not darting back-and-forth, this way and that, but focused and disciplined, self-aware and self-differentiated, grounded in devotion to our Lord Jesus Christ. To celebrate the exuberance of Jesus' Palm Sunday entrance without calling to mind, as well, that by day's end he was back with the twelve, that's all, is to read scripture with one eye closed. Faith that depends on a crowd to keep it going is a flimsy, fleeting thing, and very possibly a dangerous thing, as well.

Emerson put it this way; he wrote:

It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinions.  
And it is easy in solitude to live after your own. But  
the great person is the one who in the midst of the crowd  
keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

To be in the crowd, but not of it – that is, to stop bunching – is a great challenge to faith and life, perhaps the greatest. Holy Week brings many tests of this challenge to those in Jesus' circle.

Peter: will you stop bunching with the bystanders who poke fun at Jesus, and hold your position as a follower of Jesus Christ? Sadly, we know how that turned out.

Judas: will you stop bunching with the cynics who think anyone can be bought, who know the price of everything but the value of nothing, and hold your position as one whom the Lord trusted and of whom the Lord expected much? Sadly, we know how that turned out.

Officials of temple and court: will you stop bunching with those in the street demanding Jesus' conviction on trumped-up charges, and hold your positions as leaders and representatives of institutions committed to justice and mercy? Sadly, we know how that turned out.

Is there anyone to be found in the saga of Holy Week who dares to go against the crowd? Are there any who dare to defy the masses, and even when it means standing alone, act from conviction rather than from a need to be well-liked?

Here's the good news: the Bible's stories of bunching and betraying are descriptive, not prescriptive; that is, we're not programmed to do the same, but can choose a different way. As we permit the Holy Spirit to strengthen and guide us, we may rise to the high calling to which we are called as disciples of Jesus Christ.

By a quirk of the calendar Palm Sunday this year falls on the first Sunday of the month, when we celebrate communion. This makes for a crowded service. But it's fitting that on this day we also take a place at table with Jesus Christ. For it was at this table that Jesus told his disciples that God will send the Spirit "to guide you into the truth," "to keep you from stumbling," and to help you "take courage" even when the world turns against you.

The most pressing question facing Christians is how we can live differently, rather than living as the world does. At the most fundamental level, we are different in belief: we acknowledge Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. But we are also to be different in lifestyle. We are to display a different set of values. This is difficult to do, when the whole world, it seems, is heading another way, and coaxing us to come along. Godliness requires more than good intentions, more than will-power, more than self-exertion. It requires the spirit of the living God, who strengthens us to hold our position against temptation, and stirs us to newness of life.

So, let us come to the table he has prepared, and receive the Spirit he has promised.

A lasting gift Jesus gave his own:  
To share His bread, His loving cup.  
Whatever burdens may bow us down,  
He by His cross shall lift us up.

