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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Mark 11: 1-11

“Lift Up the Healed”

I want to be on the right side!

Who doesn't want to be on the right side?

Last week Henry helped me fill out my NCAA bracket. I thought that was pretty cool of him since I'm a nerd when it comes to college basketball.

“Kentucky or Hampton, Mom?” I know enough to say Kentucky, by the way. Cincinnati or Purdue? West Virginia or Buffalo? Etc., etc.

When I asked Henry on Thursday how my bracket was doing, he laughed at me. Apparently when it comes to basketball, I'm on the wrong side. Which isn't shocking considering most of my picks guesses were at best. Occasionally I asked Henry a question about a team, occasionally. My route to a winning bracket was going to be sheer beginner's luck. That's how I was going to get to the right side.

I want to be on the right side. It's a great statement, and a great entry into Palm Sunday. Because my hunch is that everyone who cheered Jesus on that day wanted to be on the right side, too. They knew the poor or sick or destitute deserved better, but they disagreed on how to make it better. Jesus advocated one way, and the Romans and religious leadership advocated another. Which way was it going to be? They knew people deserved better, but they disagreed whole-heartedly on how to get there, which is why just days later some of the folks were yelling “Crucify!”

Because we have the gift of hindsight, we wonder on days like today how anyone could possibly yell “crucify”, but when you really think about it, it's not that hard to figure out why. The people who yelled crucify were scared. They were scared half to death that what Jesus actually preached might come true, and that was too scary to consider. And not because what he preached would not have benefitted them – for most of the people there, what Jesus preached would have benefitted them. I think they knew that in the long run his side was the right side.

What I think they feared, and why I think they ultimately yelled crucify, was that they didn't want to take the path that Jesus promoted to get there. Because that path was completely foreign, very risky, and too far outside their comfort zone. So they yelled crucify, because sometimes the devil you know is better than the devil you don't.

And that's what I want to talk about today.

Because we've all done that. We've stuck with a familiar but unpleasant situation because it's easier than embarking on an unfamiliar situation that may turn out to be worse. Whether it's a bad marriage or job, or a situation or group, we stick to the familiar even if the familiar isn't working anymore. ~~But why? Why do we do that?~~

I've been reading a lot lately about leadership, and change, and how to get where you want to be. Obviously, I've been reading this with my ear tuned to the church – and thinking about where I want the church to be in the next few years and how to get there. But this reading doesn't only pertain to the church, it relates to any professional or personal situation you find yourself in that doesn't seem quite right – like you know there could be more, that things could be better, but you're just not sure how to get there, and what you've always done to get where you want to be just doesn't seem to be working anymore.

One of the most difficult things for leaders is to imagine something that is beyond our own experience. Actually, I think this is true of all of us. More often than not, the futures we imagine are slightly idealized versions of our pasts. When you think about the church, not necessarily this church but other churches, we look to the past and remember when the pews and plates were full, and the Sunday School and choir was, too. So, when we look to the future, that's the future we envision. And in order to get there, we come up with a list of solutions that have worked elsewhere, or solutions that worked in the past but this time with a new twist that we hope will bring about a better solution this time around.

And this makes complete sense when you think about it. We take the tools we know and the experiences we've had and apply that to problems in front of us. It makes sense, and often works reasonably well. Except when we're in situations of adaptive change. In those situations, the context we're working in has changed so much that the old assumptions and rules don't apply any more. What we

always did just doesn't work, no matter how many tweaks we try. A colleague of mine used to call this the Wild E Coyote way of doing ministry, but it's true of any situation. You know Wild E Coyote from the Bugs Bunny cartoons. He tried every trick in the book to catch the road runner, but he never caught him. All the tweaks in the world didn't catch him.

Right now, there are a whole lot of congregations, schools, businesses, and other groups caught up in this kind of massive cultural change and the challenge they face is to avoid doing what they've always done but do it a little bit better – because it won't work – and instead dream things they've never experienced before.

Take, for example, Kodak, Borders and Blockbuster. These were big, successful companies that some of us here probably could never have imagined going out of business. But they did. Now why is that? They certainly tried their best and tweaked what they were doing – like putting a coffee shop in the store or enticing customers with better late fees on their movies or improving their film – but those technical fixes never quite hit the mark. I think most experts agree that they couldn't embrace the new world of digital photography, digital books or digital home entertainment. They couldn't adapt to that huge cultural change. But while **they** tried every technical fix in the book, companies like Panasonic, Amazon and Netflix were embracing the change and they could adapt.

Ronald Heifetz, whose best-selling book Leadership Without Easy Answers, has become a best-seller for businesses and organizations, talks in that book about technical change and adaptive change. Technical changes requires us to do things differently, but adaptive changes requires us to think differently about what we're doing and requires a change in values and beliefs as well as behavior.

When we think about problems, we usually come up with technical fixes.

Example: Imagine you go to see a cardiologist. And the doctor tells you that you have a problem. You will need heart surgery, and you have to lose 25 pounds and quit smoking. Which of those things can the doctor do for you? Well, certainly the heart surgery. And that's a technical fix. And an important one.

But losing 25 pounds and quitting smoking are adaptive challenges. Those things require a change in behavior and a change in one's mindset. You can slap a warning on a pack of cigarettes or a nicotine patch on someone's arm, but for

most smokers that's not enough. Why? Because quitting smoking requires a change in behavior. The same thing with eating. I know eating healthy is the best thing for me; but I still eat food that isn't good for me because it's good. If I want to lose 25 pounds, my lifestyle has to change.

Heifetz says adaptive challenges occur "when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge." When you hold up that statement with the Palm Sunday story, it might make sense to you now why people yelled crucify. Jesus challenged their long-held beliefs; he told them that the values that made them successful were no longer relevant; and his message, while legitimate, was a competing perspective.

The people, including the disciples, were still under the impression that the Messiah would conquer the Romans with power and might; they still believed Jesus would end up on a throne and they'd get little thrones; they still expected a real crown, not one made up of thorns. That's how the kingdom would be won!

But here comes Jesus, riding that colt into Jerusalem, proclaiming that there's another way – a completely different, never before heard of, way. And the way to resist judgment and fear and suspicion and violence wasn't with more of the same, or tweaking it here and there; or being just a little less like David, whose throne he was claiming; it was by being something completely and utterly different. Really, Jesus? People must have thought. Really? You're going to bring about God's kingdom with a towel and washing people's feet? Do you know how ludicrous that sounds?

I think we do, because we're still resisting it. We're still tweaking. Thinking that a few adjustments here, and a few adjustments there, will get us the kingdom we want.

But the hard message of Palm Sunday is that it won't. It'll only get you the kingdom you've always had just in a different sort of way.

And Jesus advocated more; went to the cross for more; suffered for more. But this suffering does not have to be; Jesus doesn't suffer for the sake of suffering. Jesus suffers and dies so that things will change.

Friends, in order for things to change we have to change, our behaviors have to change; our mindsets and lifestyles have to change. And that's hard! As my Dad used to say, "You can't change anyone." And my grandmother used to say, "The person you marry will only get more so the older they get!" In order for things to change, people need to take ownership and responsibility for problems, because only then can we be a part of the solution. This true in the church, in business, in life, in our government, in anything.

And that's hard. That's why the people yelled crucify; it's why we still yell crucify, we just do it with a different name.

But Jesus called for change.

As Robert Plant sang in 70s: Yes there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run, there's still time to change the road you're on.

Amen.

Sources:

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Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume Two, commentary for Palm and Passion Sundays

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