

The Ironies of the Passion – Palm Sunday

Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. ¹³ *“It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a ‘den of robbers.’”*

¹⁴ *The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.* ¹⁵ *But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant.*

¹⁶ *“Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him.*

“Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read,

*“ ‘From the lips of children and infants
you have ordained praise’?”*

¹⁷ *And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night. (Matthew 21:12-17)*

Do You Hear What These Children Are Saying?

A pastor I know has a large family. He likes to tell the story of one hectic Sunday morning. His son couldn't find his belt. He and his wife looked for it, but they couldn't find it, either. The pastor was getting more and more frustrated as the clock kept running and he was going to be late for church. Then his son, who was seven or eight, asked a simple question: “Dad, have you prayed about it?” That knocked the wind right out of the pastor's sails. Who had spent the last seven or eight years teaching his son to pray when he was in need? And who remembered to apply that lesson in a moment of frustration? During the season of Lent this year, in our midweek services, we've been considering the ironies of the passion. Irony is an outcome that's the opposite of what you might expect. You wouldn't expect a child to take a minister to school on such a basic matter of faith. But that's what the Scriptures say about children and their faith. Today is Palm Sunday. We just sang, “Hosanna, loud hosanna, the little children sang.” This morning, we want to consider the incident that inspired that stirring hymn. We want to see the irony in the question Jesus' enemies asked: **Do you hear what these children are saying?**

I.

God doesn't tell us what he thinks about every incident that is recorded in the Bible. He often lets us wrestle with the good and the bad. But that's not what we he did today. Matthew says, **“But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things [Jesus] did ...”** What does wonderful mean? “Really good!” right? That's true. But the Greek word Matthew uses here means more than that. It means something that causes people to wonder – to be amazed. Jesus did things on this day that caused people's mouths to hang open in surprise, things that caused people to praise God for his unexpected blessings.

What things were so wonderful? The great Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem certainly caused people to sit up and wonder. But this incident happened after that. In fact, it happened the next day. That's not obvious from Matthew's account of it, but Mark makes it absolutely clear. So on Monday of Holy Week, Jesus went to the temple. What did he find there? Money changers and merchants. You see, this was the week of Passover. God's law required every Jewish male to come to Jerusalem to celebrate this festival. Jews came from all over the Roman world. God allowed people who came from far away to purchase their lamb for the Passover meal at the temple. But the priests insisted on being paid in Jewish shekels rather than in any other currency. They did that on purpose. It allowed them to manipulate the exchange rates and make more money. The merchants overcharged for the lambs. It was kind of like buying a hot dog at a football game. It costs a whole lot more there than it does at the grocery store.

The money changers and the merchants were cheating the people. And while the Bible doesn't make the connection for us, most of the writers from that time do: the priests were getting a cut. So Jesus drove out the money changers and those selling livestock and he called them thieves. This was actually the second time he did this. The first time was at the beginning of his ministry. Now, like a book end, Jesus repeated this action at the end. That was the first wonderful thing – the first amazing thing – he did that day.

The second was different. And yet it was the same. Matthew says, **“The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.”** Now, Jesus had been healing people for three years. Yet, he did it one last time, before his ministry ended. And there was even a third wonderful thing, a third miracle Jesus did that day. He called forth a response of faith. Children were shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Obviously, they had marched the day before with the crowds that waved their palm branches and spread their cloaks and welcomed Jesus. They were still singing the praises that had excited them so much the day before. All three of these wonderful things meant the same thing: Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. All the amazing things Jesus did were messages. They all said: “See! The one you’ve been waiting for is here!”

The children understood that! “Hosanna” means “Save!” It was the traditional welcome cry for the promised Savior. The Son of David was the title of the King who was coming to set God’s people free. That’s what these children shouted to Jesus! But they didn’t say those things on their own. The Holy Spirit was working that day to bring forth the fruits of faith. That’s not ironic. We expect God to work through his word to change hearts and open mouths. The irony lay on the other side. Matthew says, **“But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David,’ they were indignant.”**

The priests and the teachers of the law were the experts. They spent their days reading the Bible. But when these things happened just like God promised they would in the Old Testament – when the Savior came, they didn’t recognize him. They were angry that other people claimed he was the Messiah.

Children knew their Savior while the theologians didn’t. My friends, it’s no different today. The pointy-headed intellectuals of our society smirk at foolish people like us who need to believe in a “Disneyland in the sky.” People who don’t believe in Jesus think we’re just stupid. One of the saddest realities of the Christian Church in the 21st century is that a huge number of pastors and professors do not believe in Jesus anymore – at least not the way these children did. They don’t accept a Savior who died and rose to give us eternal life. They don’t claim that God came in the flesh to pay for our sins. They deny that God prophesied in the Old Testament that this Savior would appear. That’s sad because God lays it all out before them in his word. But all over the world, people refuse to see it. Why?

Because they don’t want to believe it. People today will believe almost anything. Angels solving our problems? Sure. God talking to us through our feelings? Why not? But God coming down here to pay with his own blood for our sins so that we don’t go to hell – well, not that! Why not? Because that would mean God is a judge. That would mean that there is an absolute standard of right and wrong that every person on earth must submit to or suffer the consequences. Our society does not buy that. They think right and wrong really mean what’s best in any given situation. Eternal standards, absolute rules – people today won’t swallow that because it would finally mean that some people are wrong. It would mean that I am guilty and I deserve to suffer in hell forever.

But you know what? Simple Christians the world over see Jesus with the faith of a child. They recognize the Savior who came to give us peace. They know that the only answer for the guilt we feel over our sin and for the hurt and sadness that sin causes in our lives, is Jesus. Yes, that does mean that there is absolute right and wrong. Sin is rebellion against God. The simple, humble Christian has no problem saying, “I have rebelled against God over and over again in my life.” But Jesus rode into Jerusalem to be our Savior. Palm Sunday is the beginning of the end of Jesus’ life. Five days after the crowds welcomed him, the same crowds were chanting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” How’s that for irony?

Jesus wanted that to happen. Jesus wanted the Romans to nail him to a cross. He wanted to hang there and be abandoned by God. Jesus wanted to die. Why? Because we have broken God’s absolute laws and that was the only way to erase our record. Unless Jesus hung on that cross and felt his Father’s wrath, unless Jesus suffered an eternity of hell and punishment on Good Friday, every one of us and every other person on earth would be doomed to hell. So Jesus rode into Jerusalem, and on the next day, he healed the sick, and he cleansed his Father’s house and he inspired the children to sing their song of praise so that untold generations of Christians would see their Savior and trust that he has taken our place. He has paid for our sins. God has forgiven us. God has given us eternal life. My friends, **do you hear what these children are saying? Understand these wonderful things!**

II.

“Do you hear what they’re saying?” That question often means we’re in trouble. Several years ago, we visited my wife’s family in Wisconsin. And as embarrassing as it is to admit it, they’re all Packer fans. Well, while we were visiting, my sons taught their 18 month old cousin to say, “Go Bears!” And when he did it, my boys rolled on the floor laughing. Of course, their little cousin thought that was really cool! So, he kept saying, “Go, Bears!” Now, his parents never said anything to me. But I wonder if his father didn’t ask his mother later, “Do you hear what your son is saying?” That formula question is almost always a rebuke.

That’s what it was when the Jewish leaders confronted Jesus. **“Do you hear what these children are saying?”** These men were horrified that Jewish children would call Jesus the Messiah. They actually seem to have imagined that Jesus would be embarrassed enough to silence the children. But once again, they failed to understand God’s plan. Jesus replied, **“Yes, ... have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise’?”** Jesus not only heard what they were saying, but he approved of it. This was exactly what God wanted to happen.

Jesus quoted Psalm 8. That psalm is all about how God the Son would leave his throne of glory and live here as a humble carpenter’s son. In that psalm, God taught his people that he treasured the praise of children because it comes from faith. Most Jewish people in Jesus’ day recognized that Psalm 8 is a prophecy about the coming Savior. So when Jesus quoted it, he left his enemies sputtering. They didn’t know what to say. Then he left them. But he had given them something important to think about. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had taught them that only those who have the faith of a child will see the kingdom of heaven. Now, he reminded them that it is the faith of a child that brings forth the praise God is looking for.

God ordains praise from children’s lips. What does that mean? Going back to that pastor and his son and the prayer for the belt, it’s God who causes things like that to come out of our children’s mouths. Through their baptisms, through the gospel they hear in church and school and Sunday school and at home, God reaches into their hearts and fills them with joy in their Savior and confidence in his promises. Why didn’t that pastor lead his family to pray in that minor crisis? Why did the words come from a child? Because we adults often poison our faith with our reason. We limit our faith by our assumptions, “God isn’t going to get involved in something so trivial.” But children take God at his word. When parents and Sunday school teachers and Lutheran elementary school teachers and pastors teach children that God answers all our prayers and that we should go to him when we need help, those children take our words to mean exactly what they say. They teach every one of us a lesson about limiting our trust to things we think God will deal with.

Where can we adults get faith like little children? Only in one place: the gospel. The gospel comes to us in the word and in the sacraments. The message that our Savior died and rose for us and we are forgiven is the gospel. Every promise that Jesus works for us, that he helps us, that he loves us and cares for us is gospel. From that gospel comes first a change in our hearts. God gives us faith. Every time we hear that gospel message, God renews and strengthens that faith. And through that gospel comes a change in our lives. God calls forth our praise.

We praise God in all the ways we trust him. We praise God in all the times we turn to him and ask him to help us. We praise God when we lift up our voices and sing to our Savior who has loved us and changed us and made us his. We praise God in every way that we serve him with our lives. My friends, praise him! Praise him because you are his. The beauty of this lesson is that God reminds us that he himself is the source of our praise. He ordains praise from our children and even from us adults. My friends, **do you hear what these children are saying? Join them in their song of praise!** Amen.