
Palm Sunday - Beyond Barriers
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
April 5, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 8:26-40 and Matthew 21:1-11

If our readings from today came with labels, I wonder if the labels would read, “danger, sharp learning curve ahead.” Because I’m not just sure how to read the story about the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. Obviously, the story is about Philip accepting a person who was considered an outsider by many others. But there are simply so many cultural references embedded in the story and it’s hard to work out which ones were important to the author. We are tantalized with the details but not exactly sure which ones are key. Why was the story of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch so important to the early Christian community that it was worth recording? Why should we read it today? And how can that story possibly relate to Palm Sunday? How the story relates to Palm Sunday is Rev. Paul’s problem, but he’s in a sharing mood today.

In the early chapters of Acts, many people were baptized. What was it that made it important to include this particular story from the many many stories that were circulating at the time? Was it because the man in question was a eunuch? Was it because he was a foreigner? Was it because he was not only a foreigner but from a land very far away? Was it because the man was very likely dark-skinned while local people had olive skin? The man has so much that is uncommon about him (compared to the general population in Palestine at the time) that we are left wondering which characteristics of the man were the most “exotic” in the eyes of the author of the book of Acts.

Or perhaps it was simply another case where the early Christian community welcomed a person who was not welcome in traditional Judaism. The man may or may not have been a convert to Judaism, but he would never have been welcomed. It is clear in Deuteronomy chapter 23 that a eunuch could not be “admitted to the assembly of the Lord”. That may be why the person in the story is always referred to as “the eunuch”, never as “the man”.

But forgive me, I think I inadvertently slipped into a parallel universe and

neutralized some history there. I was suggesting that the man was rejected by the Jewish community but was of course warmly welcomed by the Christian community. But we all know that's not how the story turned out. We all know that many people - even today - that have non-traditional gender identities are not always welcomed in Christian communities. Philip may have welcomed and baptized the man, but that does not mean that the community accepted him. In fact, in many churches across North America today, this man would also not be “admitted to the assembly of the Lord”. Perhaps because of his gender-identity, perhaps because of his skin colour, perhaps because of his country of origin, or perhaps because of his social status.

It's easy to say that we love everyone, but accepting others turns out to be no so easy after all. And perhaps, that's a good thing really. Because it forces us to reflect and to feel more deeply about our own identity. It forces us to think more deeply about what it means to really accept other people. Hey - if it was easy, everyone would be doing it, right?

To me, that is the gift of the United Church of Canada. In my mind, the United Church embraces differences. But I don't mean that in the simplistic way of just imagining that we are all of one mind. I mean that in a deeper way - that we can accept people who are different from ourselves, and that we can work with different people without hoping that they become just like us. When we have a baptism - as we are scheduled to have in June - we welcome someone new into this congregation. But we are not hoping that they become exactly like us. We are hoping instead that we will all grow in new ways because of the presence of someone new in our midst. New members here do not become one *of* us, they they become one *with* us. This is the United Church of Canada after all - not the Uniform Church of Canada.

On an unrelated note: How many of you have done any weeding yet this spring? Do you enjoy weeding? I used to hate weeding - until I learned to do it properly. Actually, I learned 2 ways to get rid of weeds. One method I learned from the wise sage and philosopher, Red Green. He has a method that is very simple. Just close your eyes and you can't see the weeds any more. But for all that I like Red Green, in this case his method seems to be lacking in something. But what about this - instead of closing your

eyes to get rid of weeds, open your eyes. Open your eyes wider than you have ever opened them before. Open your eyes so wide that you learn to appreciate the beauty and value of those “weeds” and then - as if by magic - they will not be weeds any more. Don't kill the weeds, just convert them into non-weeds with your own mind. Simple, right? It's a method that is 100% effective and environmentally friendly! It's 100% effective because it was your mind that declared it to be a weed in the first place!

And that method does not just work with weeds. Think of people or situations in your own life that feel like weeds. People or situations for which your first (and possibly second) instinct is to exterminate. But just maybe, if we can learn to look at the person or the situation with larger eyes, we could see the great gifts that they offer to us. Perhaps they could be embraced, rather than exterminated. Perhaps they would stop being weeds in your life and become rare gifts.

Can you think of a story from your own life where you “got rid of” a weed by deciding that it was actually a flower you had not previously appreciated, and therefore not a weed at all?

Now even online I can feel some of you squirming. I've preached messages similar to this before you know, and have always been attacked after service by people who say things to me like, “You're just being lazy. My brain knows the difference between a flower and a weed. It's ridiculous to simply ignore the difference. What about the gift of discernment?” Well, certainly, discernment is a gift. But more often than we realize, our brains lie to us about what we see. And since we are worshipping online today and nobody can attack me after service, I'm going to prove that to you! I'm going to prove that - at least sometimes sometimes - your brain lies to you and classifies things as different, even when they are actually the same.

Just excuse me a moment, I need the whole screen here.

[checkerboard movie clip]

Your brain does not lie to you because it is evil or nasty. Your brain lies to you because it is just trying to help you live in a reality that makes sense. And seeing that

image as a checkerboard is a way of making sense of that image. It's simpler. It's convenient. But it is also wrong. Human brains have lied to their owners since time began, and again, not to be nasty but as a way to make sense of the world.

The true laziness is to not challenge what your brain is telling you. That's why for thousands of years the general public accepted artificial barriers that brains inserted which bore no relationship to reality. Like the idea that "A" was a dark square and "B" was a light square when in fact they were the same colour. The eyes saw the truth. But brains wanted to see an artificial barrier - in this case colour - when none existed.

Human brains have created all sort of artificial barriers: gender, sexuality, skin colour, ethnicity, which have caused great pain and suffering over the millennia. And even today, when we question our brains and go with what our eyes tell us - perhaps by visiting with "strange people" and realizing how similar they are to us after all, we finally realize that our brains have been lying to us. But don't worry - we can learn to see more clearly. We can learn to see beyond these artificial barriers like the difference between "dark" and "light" squares on a checkerboard. Remember, if you brain is what placed the barrier in the first place, then your brain can remove it.

The Jewish people living in Palestine at the time of Jesus were politically and economically dominated by Rome. Passover was approaching, and that meant that many Jewish pilgrims were heading to Jerusalem. And passover for Jewish people represents a story of liberation from slavery and domination. Passover in Palestine would be a reminder of liberation in a place where Jewish people did not feel very liberated. Tensions would naturally be high. In order to keep the peace, Pilate would have brought in extra troops to help control the crowds - to make sure that the passover festivities did not become a catalyst for civil unrest and rebellion.

And so, on the original "Palm Sunday", we would have had 2 parades. Through one gate, we have Pilate, riding on a war horse, leading a large, well-equipped and well-trained army. That parade represented power, force, control, and domination.

Through the other gate, we have - Jesus. Riding on a donkey, with no army, no wealth, nothing of power. But where Pilate would have been greeted with a mix of indifference and fear, Jesus was greeted with joyful crowds, grateful crowds.

Modern biblical scholars agree that the parade that we celebrate on Palm Sunday was not an isolated event. It was in fact a parade in response to Pilate's parade. Jesus's parade was actually a parody - a lampoon even - of Pilate's parade. Jesus's parade was criticism. It was ridicule. It was sarcasm. It was the sort of mocking response to authority that can get you killed!

I'm reminded of a scene from the 1979 Monty Python movie, "The Life of Brian". The movie takes place during the time of Jesus, and feature a character - Brian - who is mistaken for the messiah. In one scene in the movie, a small band of Jewish people are plotting rebellion against the romans. And the leader says, "The romans have taken everything we had. And what have they ever given us in return?" This is of course, the final challenge. The rhetorical question that proves that the romans are evil, a question designed to galvanize the group into action against the romans. A question designed to reinforce the barrier of hatred between Romans and Jews. And yet, out of the silence that ensues, a timid voice speaks up and says, "the aqueduct?" And then, everyone in the group starts to put ideas out as to what the romans have in fact accomplished with and for society in Palestine. And of course, the romans contributed a great deal to the life and times of the people. But the leaders responds like this. "All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health ... what have the romans ever done for us?"

As human beings, we so easily fall into the mental trap of creating barriers against people and ideas that are different, that we don't understand, that we don't like. As human beings, it is easy to place barriers between ourselves and people like the Ethiopian eunuch, and power structures like the roman empire. But Jesus and Philip remind us that those barriers are only mental barriers. And, more importantly, those barriers are our own creation! We choose the barriers that we wish to live by. We also choose whether or not we want to acknowledge those barriers.

And so, as we enter Holy Week, I invite each of us to reflect deeply on any "weeds" in our own lives, and decide if this year we are prepared to open our minds enough to eliminate unhealthy barriers that we are carrying around. To turn those weeds into flowers. To accept others for who they really are. To accept ourselves for who we

really are. That will take time. That will take reflection. That will take forgiveness.

So please come back for our Good Friday service. Not only will I finish this sermon during that service, but we will celebrate together a service of forgiveness and of healing. Because after we forgive others, and after we forgive ourselves, we will truly be ready to share in the celebration of Easter!

Amen.