

Sermon Notes for 3/20/16 (Palm Sunday)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Philippians 2:5-11

Theme: HUMBLY SERVING NEIGHBORS IN A VIOLENT CULTURE

Hymn: LBW 118 (Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle)

The Point: Jesus renders obedience that will not quit so that we will bend our minds and hearts in that same direction to glorify His Father.

Introduction: Violence seems to be an assumed reality in this world. Around the world today, 10 wars are each taking more than 1000 deaths a year, with another 5 conflicts taking 200-999 lives a year. (15 other armed conflicts are taking fewer than 200 lives per year.) We live in an increasingly violent culture. News reports of mass shootings have become almost routine. Violent crimes such as murder, rape, kidnapping and the like continue to plague many areas of our society. Abortion still takes over a million unborn lives each year in the USA. Popular video games portray maiming, killing and death as if it were child's play. Video games bring in \$21B annually, and half of the top 50 games are oriented toward violence. Domestic violence is on the increase in most states. So how do we as people of God respond? What does it mean that we are called to be HUMBLY SERVING NEIGHBORS IN A VIOLENT CULTURE?

The first discovery is that our minds are bent in a totally different direction from that of Jesus. By nature, we are bent toward serving ourselves, toward doing things in our way, toward fulfilling our desires, regardless of what it means to those around us. Violence grows out of this self-centeredness. We see this playing out with the account of Jesus' crucifixion that we have read this morning. The crowds, Pilate & Herod, the soldiers, the criminals all seem bent on having things done to please themselves. Some were more than willing to take advantage of their status of power over against the Lord. They want to get rid of Jesus, whatever it takes, so that He will no longer keep confronting them with their need to repent and be forgiven. They do not want to deal with their sin in God's way, but in their own way. They want to justify themselves, to be seen as the ones in the right. This sounds so familiar, doesn't it? We also want to justify ourselves. We love to be seen as being in the right. We want to put ourselves in the driver's seat.

Self-exaltation is our chosen way of life. Don't let anyone else tell me what to do! I am the expert and will not have my rulings questioned. We like to "pull rank" on others while telling ourselves that we are really only doing what is best for them. When we impose our wills on others, the inevitable result is violent interaction. Herod wanted Jesus to do some miracle, some wonderful sign. He wanted to get some thrill out of this practitioner of magic, as it seems Herod saw Jesus. Our self-exaltation exposes us to God's judgment. The end result: Those who exalt themselves will be humbled ultimately, in a way that will not please us, by a God who will not be taken in by our protestations. The absolutely righteous God hates our self-promotion and will not be hindered in His final judgment by our ideas of what is right and wrong.

Coming to live in this world of violence and anger and bitterness, Jesus did not "pull rank" on us. He did not "play the God card." He certainly had every right to do so, being "in the form of God," possessing "equality with God," and you don't get any higher than that. But He did not come into the world to push His agenda or to manipulate people into doing what He wanted them to do. In fact, He humbled Himself and lived a life of total obedience, an obedience that would not quit, even when it led Him to the brink of death and that the death of the cross.

Jesus put Himself totally under the will of the Father, even when it demanded of Him that He walk the way of the cross, the way of suffering, the way of death. He willingly submitted to the violence, the hatred and the anger of those who wanted to put Him to death. He rejected the ways of violence, even spurning the attempts of His disciples to fight on His behalf. He suffered because by doing so He showed up the

emptiness of violence and hatred and demonstrated the power of His love. As a direct result of this willing emptying of Himself (as Paul puts it), “God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.”

Since God has exalted Jesus because of His humble service, we are called to live with that same spirit of humbling ourselves in service to others. This means quite often being willing to become a servant in an unpleasant or unexpected role. One of my favorite mentors (who has served as an example to me in this regard) has been Bob Holst, former president of Concordia University here in St. Paul. If you watched Bob walk around campus, it would not be unusual to spot him stopping on his way to pick up a discarded pop can or a McDonald’s wrapper that was blowing around the campus. He did not assume (as he might have) that such jobs were the responsibility of the maintenance crew and far beneath his position. Rather, if something needed to be done, he was willing to do it, even picking up trash.

So where in your life is there an opportunity to be a servant? Is it with that neighbor who is sick and needing help with some of life’s daily chores? Is it with your fellow-student struggling with a topic that comes more easily to you? Is it a matter of putting aside one of your pleasurable activities to be a volunteer at the local grade school? Is it witnessing to a friend on Facebook who may be indifferent or even hostile to the Gospel because of a personal crisis in his or her life? Is it even in suffering patiently the blows that some give to you because you are a follower of the Savior Jesus? There is no place for selfish violence in the lives of God’s people.

Jesus humbled Himself to death, even death on the cross. As a result, Christ’s final outcome is that He receives all praise, glory and honor. God has exalted Jesus to the place of highest rule and authority because of His willingness to serve and to suffer for us. Jesus received the name that is above every name: LORD! He stands as the Conqueror through His endurance as the Conquered One. He is Lord because He was willing to be slave and servant, to endure violence in order to save those who have turned to violence as the solution to their problems. He is full of honor and distinction because He was willing to empty Himself as a sacrifice for our salvation. Our final outcome, our salvation – and it doesn’t get any higher for us – is to render Him our praise and glory into all eternity.

On May 24, 1996, a group of Islamic terrorists announced that they had “slit the throats” of seven French Trappist monks whom they had kidnapped from a monastery in Algeria and held as hostages for two months. Prior to the kidnapping, the superior of the monastery, Father Christian de Chergé, had left with his family a testament “to be opened in the event of my death.” This is part of Father Chergé’s writing.

“If it should happen one day—and it could be today—that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to encompass all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country. I ask them to accept that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. . . I ask them to be able to associate such a death with the many other deaths that were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity. My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value. . . I have lived long enough to know that I share in the evil which seems, alas, to prevail in the world, even in that which would strike me blindly. I should like, when the time comes, to have a clear space which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of all my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.”

Conclusion: Jesus renders obedience that will not quit so that we will bend our minds and hearts in that same direction to glorify His Father. Are you thinking that some level of service is beneath you? Think about Jesus, who came from the throne above to earth, not just to live among us, but to serve. It would have been absolutely understandable if He had come expecting to be served, to be respected, to be

honored, to be dignified. But He humbled Himself so that He could win our salvation. What a Savior! And this Savior calls us to live as His servants to those who are in need in our schools, neighborhoods, shops, and homes. May you know the power of His Spirit for that service to which He has called you this day and each day, to Jesus' honor and praise! AMEN!