

Matthew 21:1-11

“And when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and he will send them immediately. “This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

*“Tell the daughter of Zion,
Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on an ass,
and on a colt, the foal of an ass.*

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the ass and the colt, and put their garments on them, and he sat thereon. Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” And when he entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, “Who is this?” And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.”

Not long ago I watched a program which was about professional athletes discussing “When the Cheering Stopped.” Thinking about a conversation I had a while back started me thinking about that very thing. I was asked by someone how long I competed in weightlifting contests. I thanked them and said I never competed in weightlifting but I did compete in bodybuilding. I was asked how I became interested in lifting weights and explained it was through our high school football team. See all football players were required to attend wrestling practice and one thing led to another and before I knew it I was a wrestler.

Actually I played three sports in high school, but was really known for wrestling. I am still asked today by people I went to high school with if I still wrestle. In college I played two sports but was known as a wrestler. Everywhere I went I was asked about wrestling. Professors asked me to have lunch and/or dinner with them and their families. I went to cook outs, picnics, and even a pig picking with my college professors and families. I received extra portions in either of the school cafeterias. I was even helped along in classes which I struggled in by professors and/or their assistants because of being an athlete.

This preferential treatment continued even following graduation. In local restaurants, locals would buy my lunch or pay for snacks I may be buying. This special treatment was a kind of cheering which continued even after I stopped competing not as often; eventually it stopped.

It happened that way to Jesus. When Jesus emerged on the public scene He was an overnight sensation. He would try to go off to be alone and the people would follow Him where-ever He went. The multitudes lined the streets as Jesus came into town. On this particular Sunday, this Palm Sunday, the people lined the street, they spread their cloaks and/or palm branches before Him and as He rode by they shouted loudly shouts of “*Hosanna*.” In shouting *Hosanna* what the people were in effect saying “*Save us now*” Jesus. Large crowds came from far and wide to hear Him preach and see what He would do next. A wave of religious expectation swept the country.

But the cheering did not last too long. There came a point when the tide began to turn. People still came to see Him, but the old excitement was missing, and the crowds were not as large as they had been. The critics who were privately attacking Jesus now began to publicly attack Him. Earlier the religious leadership had been afraid to speak out for fear of the people, but

now they began to see the wavering public support, and they believed they could turn them against Him. Soon this opposition began to snowball. When they discovered that they could not discredit Jesus' moral character, they began to take more desperate measures. Before it was all over a tidal wave rose up which brought Jesus to His knees under the weight of a cross.

Why did the people so quickly turn against Jesus? How did their shouts of Hosanna on Sunday transform into the shouts of "*Crucify Him*" by Friday? I am not just talking about the immediate events that may have brought it about, but the deeper causes. What were the underlying issues of this turning against Jesus? In five days everything fell apart. Why? That is the issue that I would like for us to concentrate on this morning. "Why did the cheering stop?"

One reason why the cheering stopped is that Jesus began to talk more and more about commitment. During the last week of Jesus life something very interesting occurred, and even more significantly, it occurred in full view of the people. A rich young ruler came enthusiastically running to Jesus. Jesus said: "*Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and then come follow me.*" The people were stunned. They were troubled first

for a theological reason. They had been raised to believe that God had always blessed the rich. Yet, here is Jesus turning the big money away. I wonder how many churches would do that today. What would the administrative council do if I turned off the big money people? Today many church leaders think that people who are wealthiest and most prominent are the individuals who need to be recruited and cultivated. That's what is written about in most books on building and/or growing a church. We are taught their success will lead to our success within the church. It bothered the people to see Jesus turn away this rich man.

The people were also bothered for a second reason. Prior to this, Jesus' message had largely been one of grace. When the 5,000 were hungry He fed them freely. When they brought their sick to him, He healed them freely. When a woman was caught in adultery and was about to be stoned, it was Jesus who came to her rescue and saved her freely. The message of Jesus' ministry these three years was one of grace upon grace upon grace.

But now Jesus seems to be saying, "The time for miracles is over. Now it's time for commitment; your commitment!" It's interesting to note that in all four Gospels after Jesus enters Jerusalem to the shouts of Hosanna, cloaks,

and palm branches, there is not another miracle recorded. There are some events we might count as miracles, but no miracles are done for the people. On one side this may not seem significant, but when you consider that nearly one half of all the Gospels is devoted to the last seven days of Jesus life, then you understand significance of this. Open your bibles and see if that is not true. But note: While there are no miracles recorded in these chapters what you will find is a persistent call to commitment.

Hungry one morning Jesus stops by a fig tree and finds no figs. He withers the tree because it is producing no fruit. Jesus demands fruitful committed lives. A Parable is told: Who is more committed? The son who says, "I will work" and then does not or the son who says, "I will not work," repents, and gets the work done? It is the son who does the work.

The greatest commandment is given: Love God and Love your neighbor; again, a call to commitment.

Jesus' teachings, "*be watchful for we do not the day or hour of his return,*" is also here. After Jesus' triumphal entry He consistently asked for commitment and devotion from the people and what He heard as their response He did not like.

A Methodist minister tells a story that occurred several years ago. He was on the campus of Nebraska Wesleyan talking to a group of students who had expressed an interest in ministry. When asked how many of them were definitely committed to going into the parish ministry, only one raised her hand. This young lady spoke up and said: “I have a problem with your use of the word commitment. That sounds really binding and restricting.”

Listen to what retired Bishop Kenneth Carder from Tennessee wrote: “The church of today has become an institution in which even belief in God is optional or marginal. Marketing techniques for a multiple option institution have replaced response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the means of membership enlistment. The basic appeal is to self-defined needs rather than a call to radical discipleship. The church’s mission all too often is to meet its members perceived needs rather than to serve God’s need for a redeemed, reconciled, and healed world.”

The world’s concept of consumerism has crept into the church. To recruit persons and to be marketable we think that we need to be able to say: “Look what our church can offer you.” In this atmosphere of making everything about what we want, talk the talk of real discipleship is muted.

Real discipleship means knowing who Jesus Christ is not just of Him, and following the revelation made known to us in His teaching, death, resurrection, and presence. Commitment means after shouting Hosanna we are then to pick up our cross and follow Him to Golgotha carrying our cross.

I would suggest to everyone this morning that when that rich young ruler walked away sorrowfully that day, he was not the only one. I think it would be safe to assume that a host of uncommitted people also walked away with him. Jesus was no longer talking only about grace. He was now speaking about the other side of religion obligation. He began to talk about the obligation that rests with a person who has accepted God's grace. The cheering began to stop when Jesus began to speak of commitment.

Secondly, the cheering stopped when Jesus dared to suggest that all people are worth loving. Now look what happens on that first Palm Sunday. Jesus goes to the temple and drives all the moneychangers out. After the temple has been emptied, however, He then invites in the lame, the poor, the sick, the outcasts of society. He dares to bring into the church those whom we would refer to today as those seedy street people. Someone needed to explain to Jesus that is not the way to win friends and influence people.

By bringing in these people it was His way of saying all people have access to God. It was His way of saying that this is what the Kingdom of God is going to be like.

I cannot help but notice the chain of events as Jesus comes to Jerusalem. The ones who are constantly making reference to Jesus' Messiahship are the disenfranchised of society. On the way to the capital city a poor blind beggar cries out: "*Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me.*" And what was the response of the crowd? They rebuked him and told him to shut up. Then Jesus makes His triumphant entry into the city and there are shouts of Hosanna, blessed be the son of David, but look who it is in the temple court that is yelling out this proclamation: We are told that it is none other than the children. It is the children who are getting under the skin of the Pharisees. You know the little ones many churches today don't have in services they send them elsewhere to be entertained while mom and dad are entertained.

They ask Jesus, "*Do you hear what these children are saying? Are you going to allow this Jesus? Do you not deny this?*" Jesus says: "*If I tried to quiet them the very stones would still scream it out.*" The point is that time

and time again it is the ones who are powerless and are on the fringes in society who recognize Jesus' Messiahship not those of power and means.

Those who have power and means often resist because they believe they can do what needs to be done on their own with their own power.

The one time retired Bishop Jack Meadors tells a wonderful story of an incident that occurred during the Special Olympics. Nine children lined up for the 100-yard dash. The gun sounded and the race was off, but only a few yards into the race, one of the children fell and began to cry. For some reason these physically and mentally challenged children did not understand the world's concept of competition and winning; of taking advantage when a competitor was down. The other eight children stopped running and came back to their fallen runner. A young girl with Down's syndrome kissed him and brushed him off. The children lifted him up together, arm in arm; they ran over the finish line. The audience rose to their feet in applause: there was not one winner there were nine winners on the field and countless who were fortunate to be witness.

For a fleeting moment these so called challenged children showed us what the Kingdom of God is like. They challenged the world's concept that first place is everything. In the race that we're in everyone matters, particularly those who have fallen and/or are on the outside.

Listen as I read a post I put out on Facebook, which was used in a sermon by my minister friend ... I read his father's letter last week.

"We don't wear jeans here".

"Tattoos are not allowed here".

"Divorcees cannot serve here".

"No pants can be worn here, ladies".

"We don't fellowship with smokers".

"If you drink, go someplace else."

"Homosexuals not allowed".

"If you aren't white, there are other places for you".

It isn't the devil who is keeping so many people from attending church. It is statements like these which have been made by church members to wounded seekers and the unchurched. On behalf of God I want to apologize for the ignorance and indifference which was displayed to you by someone in your past. God does not endorse every statement some church people make. I don't think he endorses all that some pastors make either! Bring your divorced, tattooed, jean-wearing, drinking, smoking, alternate lifestyle, non-Caucasian self on to worship with us this Sunday at Landrum UMC at 9 or 11 AM. You'll fit right in with the rest of us folks who God is still working on.

“Why did the cheering stop?” Because on that first Palm Sunday, Jesus opened the doors of the church to everyone. It angered the people back then, and let me tell you; it will anger and bother people today.

Finally, I would suggest to you that the cheering stopped because Jesus began to talk more and more about a cross. In the early part of His ministry Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God. This they wanted to hear about, especially since they misunderstood this kingdom to be a restoration of Israel to the days of King David's glory. But increasingly Jesus began to talk about sacrifice—even giving up your life.

The story is told of a pee-wee baseball game. When the young boy got up to the plate he looked over to the coach, and he saw him give the signal to sacrifice bunt. He then promptly proceeded to take three big swings and strike out. The coach ran up to him and said: "Didn't you see me give you the signal to sacrifice?" "Yes," the boy replied, "but I didn't really think that you meant it."

Isn't that what we so often say to God? Yes, lord, I heard that talk about sacrifice but I didn't really think that you meant it. The cross says emphatically that He did mean it. I began this sermon this morning with the question, "Why did the cheering stop?"

It stopped because Jesus more and more began to talk about commitment; it stopped because Jesus opened up the doors of the church and invited all people everyone to come in. But most importantly of all, it stopped because Jesus began to talk about a cross.