

Plot Twist!
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev, Jennifer Gingras
March 25, 2018

John 12:12-19

Today is the only day of the church year where you come to church and we give you not only your regular bulletin, but this eco-friendly palm frond too.

Your palm frond means that it's Palm Sunday, and we're getting really close to the end of Lent and the beginning of Holy Week.

Next Sunday we hope that you will be here with us to celebrate the holiest day of the Western Christian year, Easter: Services are 8:30 and 10am here in meetinghouse, there's also an ecumenical sunrise service at Wolfe Park at 6:30 for you early risers (I'll be preaching).

But for today we have these palms to contend with, and what, from the outside, must look like a very strange tradition.

On Palm Sunday we remember Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, how he rode into the city on a donkey, and the crowds were waiting for him. They had heard about him. They loved him. They threw their coats on the ground, and spread their palms out on the road, and they cheered him on. They were looking for the Messiah and they were sure it was him.

So all these centuries later we gather in community and wave these palms, isn't that something? We celebrate a great parade that took place long ago, the coming of the Messiah to Jerusalem. And as we are so, so close to Easter, we almost want to take this day as a warm-up, a dress rehearsal, a celebration before the big party.

And if you know nothing about what happens between now and Easter, you stay in that celebration. But you know that something happens between these two Sundays, a lot of things actually. And the story isn't as straightforward as it seems, stories about Jesus seldom are.

Next Sunday, NBC is featuring a live broadcast of "Jesus Christ, Superstar". After you've had your brunch, your mimosa, and your nap, be sure to tune in. The musical traces the events of Holy Week and the crowd that followed Jesus. As they waived palms on one Sunday they shouted his praises (hosanna) and sung and called out to him.

But as the week went on, they changed. And by Friday, those same people once shouting their admiration were calling for his death.

It's always stuck with me. That change in feeling, such a plot twist! Jesus goes from the exalted one to the one who is offered up as a sacrifice by the crowd. How can something so awesome make such a tragic turn?

There's something fitting about the fact that our church and many others we will save these palms until next year's Ash Wednesday, when they will be burned and turned into the ashes we wear as a symbol of our humanness and frailty and mistakes.

Because we know that sometimes we get it wrong. But we don't like to dwell on that. We don't like to dwell on those moments of betrayal, denial, abandonment. We like to stick with the Palm Sunday and Easter joy, not the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday pain.

Holy Week can be one of the busiest weeks of the year, both inside and outside the church. Many pastors, whether we admit it or not, know that when we announce extra worship services and activities there's sort of a heavy sigh in the room.

I get it. We're all busy. Sunday morning can be hard enough for many of you good people. Coming here on Thursday night for Maundy Thursday service, after a long day at work, is even tougher. You just want to go home, have dinner, and either tackle the pile of laundry or have a few precious hours to yourself. Maybe you don't want to drive to church, and sit through another service, and one that's not so joyful at that.

But try and get here. We need to hear the messages in the story that takes place between Sundays.

It's a similar message that we clergy hear in our offices during the week. Of course, we don't talk about that much either due to confidentiality or not wanting to depress people. On Sunday mornings, we focus on the joy. We sing uplifting hymns. We try and deliver hopeful sermons. We smile. We hug and shake hands. We dress up. We talk about grace and blessings and gratitude. That's not a bad thing.

Between Sundays we visit with people who face struggles few understand. They're sick or injured. Dying or bereaved. Or depressed, heart-broken, betrayed, alone, and wrestling with doubt or anger. But if you come to

church on ONLY Palm Sunday and Easter, you might not think we know anything about that.

To me, the most comforting part of Holy Week is not the waving of the triumphal palms today, or the flowers and joyous hymns Easter morning.

It's what happens in between.

It's Jesus on Maundy Thursday sharing a table with the people he loved the most. It's him showing that the mark of a true leader is whether they can serve others. And it's Jesus still loving those disciples even though he knew that, at best, they would abandon him, and at worst, they would betray him. And it's Jesus in the garden, alone, heart-broken, and struggling between what he wanted to do and what he knew he had to do.

And on Good Friday, the world turns against him, and the ones who cheered his entry in Jerusalem instead cheer his death. He suffers. He calls out to a God who does not seem to answer. He doubts. He feels pain, and loss, and grief. And in the end, he loses the life he knew.

I've had many conversations with people going through a difficult time. They ask whether God is angry when they have doubts, or when they wonder why God doesn't seem to be answering prayers. Does God understand when we suffer, or when we feel alone?

My response is to point to the Jesus of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. The one who lived as one of us, who loved as one of us, who doubted as one of us. The one who suffered as one of us, and who died as one of us.

And then, only then, do I point to the Christ of Easter morning, the one who rose again, and overcame the worst that the world could throw at him.

I sometimes worry that we forget the lessons of Holy Week the rest of the year. And I wonder if in forgetting them, we lose our ability to learn to sit with others in their struggle, and with ourselves in our own?

What if we became known as the ones who knew how to stay with you when your life was falling apart, just as Christ asks us to do on Maundy Thursday?

The ones who could stand by and still love and respect you even when you call out your doubts, as Jesus did on the cross?

What if we were known first for our Thursday night solidarity, or our Friday afternoon compassion? We have the capacity to be those people, because that is exactly who Christ has called us to be. All we have to do is be willing to make the journey. Not just on Sundays, but on all the days between.

The world has plenty of Sunday morning Christians, it just needs a few more of the weekday ones. Real community.

Today, we wave our palms and shout Hosanna. We look ahead to the Resurrection. And when you leave, it's OK to take your palm with you. Keep it this year as a reminder of who we are on Palm Sunday. And then, when the times get hard, and the week grows tougher, look at them as a reminder of who we could be. Not just the person in the crowd who yells out what everyone else is yelling, but the person who will follow Jesus on this journey... Christ waits for us there. Amen.