

From Hollow to Sweet Hosannas

Palm Sunday

March 31, In the Year of Our LORD, 2010

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gloversville, New York

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Luke 19:28-40

The vitriolic, nearly insane if not irrational protests over health care - and in particular those of the last month in Washington D.C. - engendered some vivid memories. In my more than five decades of life, I have participated in one public protest. It was 1978. That spring, I drove a car load of students from Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts to Washington DC to be among 8000 people seeking to draw national attention to the plight of the "Wilmington Ten." Racial strife in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1971 culminated in riots during which a grocery store was bombed. Eleven persons were convicted of the crime. The only Caucasian person was released on parole. The others, all African-American, stayed in prison until the powers-that-be finally agreed that eyewitnesses had lied and that the ten were, as they had always claimed, not near the grocery store when it burned.

History proved our protest justified. The wrong people were convicted of the crime and their conviction had clear racial overtones. However, there were and still are some major problems with the case of the "Wilmington Ten" and the protest in which I so willingly participated. First, that the "Wilmington Ten" were actually innocent *does not mean that everyone convicted before or since is, by definition, also innocent.* There are currently some celebrated cases that appeal to the argument that because "the Wilmington Ten were wrongly convicted, *therefore* this person was wrongly convicted." Do innocent people ever get convicted and spend time incarcerated unjustly? Apparently, yes, but that does not mean *everyone* is innocent.

Another problem with the protest of March 18, 1978 which was more immediate and pressing was with the composition of the crowd. Many of us marched because we thought an injustice had been perpetrated in the State of North Carolina. Once the march started, however, we became *very* uneasy. Among the participants in the crowd were members of the Communist Party. Then, as the parade weaved through the streets of Washington D.C., we were joined by people who simply loved a parade and in particular one that was apparently anti-establishment and a protest of the conviction of innocent African-Americans. The assumption of these "joiners" was that we anti-everything! These persons didn't have the foggiest idea (and didn't care) who Ben Chavis was, what the issues were or why we were there! They joined in the chants, they echoed our words, but their words were, frankly, *hollow*, meaningless, and shallow. They had no idea what they were saying much less why.

My fear was that my parents, who graciously housed my group the previous night at their home in Falls Church, Virginia, were watching television. I pictured my father, a thirty-five year career OSS/CIA Officer, who, albeit a liberal Democrat, nonetheless would turn on the local news station and see me in the company of communists!

Since then, I think of March 18, 1978 in the context of what occurred on that first Palm Sunday. I think of persons two thousand years ago who knew what they were saying when they greeted Jesus and shouted hosanna and other words of praise. Many of them had listened to and followed Jesus during His three years of ministry. I suspect a few even knew Jesus' preaching was not about a kingdom in the political sense but actually about the Kingdom of God as known and experienced in the depths of peoples' souls. A few, and not necessarily the twelve disciples, understood Jesus' definition of Messiah, that it was, as MacLean Gilmour once wrote a "Messiah ... [who] would come in meekness and in peace" not one carrying a sword and wanting to wear a crown.

Back to my memories of 1978: I wonder what Jesus' faithful thought of those who joined the parade on that day of palms who had no idea as to and about whom they were singing hosanna! Indeed, some in the throng on that Palm Sunday were Zealots, a group of men and women who sought to overthrow the Roman occupation by any and all means – including violence. Their theory was that if Jesus could stir a crowd that there could be some incredible political benefits! In the 1973 Rock Opera, "Jesus Christ Superstar," Simon the Zealot sings:

"Christ, there must be over fifty thousand screaming love and more for you! And every one of fifty thousand would do whatever you asked them to! Keep them yelling their devotion, but add a touch of hate at Rome! You will rise to a greater power! We shall win ourselves a home!"

Hindsight tells us that many of the hosannas and other words of praise offered by the people in that crowd on what we call Palm Sunday were as of dubious a nature as the words of many who joined that protest in 1978 clamoring for the release of the "Wilmington Ten." It is true that many who hoped for independence from Rome were not as fanatical as the Zealots, just as many of us in 1978 were not communists, but all too many of them missed the point that Jesus did not arrive in Jerusalem to restore the political and royal Kingdom of David but to introduce the Kingdom of God as experienced in peoples' lives and journeys of faith. The biggest tragedy was that some of the very same people who shouted hosanna on what we call Palm Sunday were among those who five days later called for Jesus' crucifixion. The evidence is clear: *their* hosannas were misplaced, hollow, shallow, *not* heart-felt. For many, their cries of praise were born of bitterness with Rome instead of filled with the sweetness of God's grace and love, more about that which they feared and hated than about that which they loved and would embrace! Just think how often protests are born of that to which people object, fear and hate – and probably do not fully understand! The lasting memory from the recent months of protests over the now passed health care reform legislation is the older adult holding the sign that read – Keep the Government out of Health Care – who, when reminded that Medicare is a federal government program called the reporter a liar and a communist. The reporter then asked if the person deposited her social security check at which point the lady acted as though she would use the sign as a club.

In 1906, Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian economist, created a formula, Pareto's Principle, the 80/20 Rule. Pareto observed that 20% of the people owned 80% of the wealth in his country. Subsequently, Dr. Joseph Juran, working in the US in the 1930s and 1940s, recognized a principle he called the "vital few and trivial many," that 20% of work is often responsible for 80% of the results. This became the new definition of the 80/20 Rule. Juran's study helps Project Managers know how 20% of the work (usually the first 10% and the last 10%) consumes

80% of their time and resources. Some business people claim 20% of their stock takes up 80% of their warehouse space, that 80% of their stock comes from 20% of their suppliers, that 80% of sales come from 20% of their staff, that 20% of their staff will cause 80% of their problems, and that 20% of their staff will provide 80% of their production. The “rule” seems to work in many ways. I wonder if 20% of the crowd on that morning in March of 1978 caused 80% of the turmoil, bad publicity and problems that left that march identified with the Community Party!

Two thousand years ago, it was a handful of Zealots who stirred the crowd on Palm Sunday to call for an end to Roman occupation – and it was only a handful of people in the crowd five days later who stirred the crowd to accomplish an about-face and call for Jesus’ death.

The 80/20 Rule is, for better or worse, applicable to and in the life of Christ’s church. Many congregations are classic examples of the phenomenon. After a year and a half in your midst, I am not sure about us, for in many ways, we are an unusual lot! I can attest that in the three parishes I served in the past, 20% of the people did 80% of the work, 20% of members and friends of the church gave 80% of the money, 20% of the membership filled 80% of the positions on boards and committees or served in some other significant capacity as being a Sunday School teacher.

The 80/20 Rule *is* problematic for Christ’s church if only 80% of the energy, passion, love and devotion engendered of our faith is borne by only 20% of the people, if the hosannas we sing this morning only stirred the hearts of but one-fifth of us and were hollow for the other 80%. We have no way of knowing for whom what is the case because faith in God is expressed in a multitude of ways. Some people feel called to lives of prayer, worship and devotion, visitation of the sick or shut-ins. Others hear a “different drummer” and respond in faith to calls to active peacemaking or mission work on the local, national or international level. There are those who lead us in song, in music, as lay readers, ushers, who feed us so well in our times of fellowship, who work the fundraiser projects or who take care of our building and lawn. Most of us know the myriad of tasks that comprise the ministry and mission of this congregation. Each of us is called in different ways.

The *true* “test” of the 80/20 Rule on this Palm Sunday in this the Year of Our LORD, 2010 is known in the depths of our hearts and souls as we seek to define our relationship to and with our Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God – during this Holy Week and for all days to come. Whether the hosannas of the crowd in Jerusalem two thousand years ago were hollow or sweet, shallow or deeply-felt, driven by self-interest or a desire to be a true follower of Christ is not as important as looking in the proverbial mirror at how *we* sing God’s praises, proclaim hosanna, and profess our faith. Whether our hosannas are hollow or sweet is a matter of whether or not our faith makes a difference in our lives and whether the sacrifice and ways of service of Jesus Christ moves us in the ways of compassion, service, faithfulness, grace, peacemaking, joy, hope, reconciliation, sacrifice, giving, devotion, forgiveness, commitment and a love that echoes the wondrous and incredible love of God that comes to each of us in Jesus the Christ – the one Who entered Jerusalem to the shouts of hosanna two thousand years ago and the one Who enters our hearts and souls and minds today!

Amen