Palm Sunday, March 31, 1985
SOME WAYS WE GREET JESUS
Mark 11:1-11

A question which I often hear people ask is: ”How can I meet, or perhaps greet, Jesus in today’s world? Where do I find him?” Maybe they´ve heard their friends talk about accepting ”Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.” Or they’ve read about people who have had unusual religious experiences and wonder why they have not had similar ones? The story of Palm Sunday is, among other things, a story of people meeting and greeting Jesus.

For some people, it was the first time they had ever seen him in person. Others in Jerusalem that day had heard about Jesus and were puzzled about who he was. Still others had met him previously and were anxious to be near him again. Jesus and his disciples were coming to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. A Jewish religious holiday which remembered their slavery in Egypt and God’s leading them out of slavery under Moses. It was, and still is, one of the most important holidays in their religious history. The best way to celebrate this occasion in Jesus´ time was to go up to Jerusalem. So it was that while Jesus and his disciples were on their way to the Holy City, a kind of spontaneous parade and demonstration developed with Jesus at the center. People were greeting him and hailing him as their new King. They saw him as the successor to King David of old. They shouted, ”Hosanna, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming.” These people met and greeted Jesus in a high festive moment. And no doubt many of them misunderstood what kind of Savior he was and thought Israel would become a worldly empire once more.

There are times today too when we meet or greet Jesus that we misunderstand the nature of this mission. We can and do easily remake him into the kind of Savior we want him to be. We too like that crowd say: ”Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” not realizing that one who comes in the name of God may require something quite different from us than we expect. In our time we can greet Jesus in the festive times of worship such as Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday, Christmas Eve, wedding celebrations, in the singing oh hymns, times of prayer, or listening to a sermon or an anthem by the choir. But we can also greet Jesus in some unlikely places too.

Here´s a young minister´s story — not mine although I´ve had experiences similar to it, He will never forget a man named Arthur Forte, a member of the church he served. He describes Arthur as being unkempt, obscene, arrogant, old, lonely and bitter — but one whose soul has never ceased to teach him. Arthur lived in a shot-gun house, so-called because it was three rooms in a dead straight line, built narrowly on half a city lot. More properly, Arthur lived in the front room of his house. Or rather to speak the cold, disturbing truth, Arthur lived in a rotting stuffed chair in that room, from which he seldom stirred the last year of his life. Nor during That year did anyone mourn his absence from church and worship. Most people were grateful that he had turned reclusive, for the man had a walk and manner like a toad, a high-backed slouch and a burping contempt for fellow parishioners. His mind, thought mostly uneducated, was excellent, he had written poetry in his day, both serious and sly, but now he used words to shiv Christians in their pews.

Thus, none of his fellow parishioners felt moved to visit the man when he became housebound, except his pastor. It was his job and Arthur phoned him to remind him of his job. But to visit Arthur was grimly sacrificial. After several months of chair-sitting, both Arthur and

his room were filthy. Roaches were everywhere. The TV flickers constantly. There were newspapers strewn all over the floor. There lay a damp film on every solid object in the room, from which arose a close moldy odor, as though it were alive and sweating. But the dampness was a blessing because Arthur smoked. He had a bottom lip like a shelf. He placed lit cigarettes on that shelf and then did not remove them again until they had burned down, when he blew them toward the television set. Burning, they hit the newspapers on the floor. But it is impossible to ignite a fine moist mildew. Blessedly they went out.

Then the old man would sharpen the sacrifice of his pastor´s visit. Motioning toward a foul and oily sofa, winking as though he knew what mortal damage such a compost would do, he would say in mostly tones, “Have a seat, why don´t you reverend?” From the beginning this young pastor did not like to visit Arthur Forte. Nor did he make his ministry any easier. He did not wish a quick psalm, a professional prayer, devotions. Rather, he wanted acutely to dispute a young clergyman´s faith. Seventy years a churchgoer, the old man narrowed his eyes and debated the goodness of God. With incontrovertible proof, he delivered shattering damnations of hospitals (at which he had worked) and doctors (whom he had observed). He vowed that he would never go to a hospital as a patient.

Each time the young pastor left Arthur, he was empty in soul and close to tears. His own faith seems stale and flat. He didn’t like to visit Arthur. Then came the days of Arthur´s incontinence, both physical and religious. The man was, by late summer, failing. He did not remove himself from the chair to let the pastor in, nor even to pass urine. The August heat was unbearable and dangerous to one in his condition, therefore, the pastor argued that Arthur go to the hospital despite his criticisms of the place.

But he had a better idea. He took off all his clothes. Naked, Arthur greeted the pastor. Naked, finally the old man asked for prayers and together the young pastor and Arthur prayed. Naked, too, he demanded Communion. These were not the conditions the young pastor had imagined. It is an embarrassing thing to put bread into the mouth of a naked man. Later still, the naked Arthur Forte asked the pastor to come forward and put his slippers on, his undershorts and his pants. And the pastor did. His feet had begun to swell, so it caused him terrible pain in those personal moments when the pastor took his hard hell into his hands and worked a split backed slipper round it. He groaned aloud when he stood to take the clothing, one leg at a time. And he leaned on the pastor and the pastor put his arms around his naked back and drew the pants up his naked leg.

In those moments, the pastor began to know certain wordless affection for Arthur Forte. All that Arthur yearned for was for one human being to touch him and not to judge. The old man was saying to the pastor without words, ”Love me.”

At the end of the summer, one day the young pastor found Arthur on the floor. He´d fallen from the chair during the night, but his legs were too swollen and his arms too weak for climbing in it again. The pastor said, ”This is it, Arthur. You´re going to the hospital.” He was tired. He didn´t argue any more. He let the pastor call two other members of the congregation. While they came, the pastor dressed him, and Arthur groaned deeply. He groaned when they carried him to the car. He groaned even during the transfer from car to wheelchair. But once inside the shining building, his Groaning took new meaning. “I´m thirsty,” he said. “He´s thirsty,” the pastor said to the nurse. “Would you get him a drink of water?” “No,” she said. “He can ingest nothing until his doctor is contacted.” “Not even water?” “Nothing!” “Would you contact his doctor, then?” “That will be done by the unit nurse when he´s in a room,” Arthur slumped in his

chair and hurting, said ”I´m thirsty.” The pastor asked, ”Can I wheel him to his room?” ”I´m sorry, no,” she said. ”Please, ”he said, ”I´m his pastor. I´ll take responsibility for him.”

”In this place, he is our responsibility, not yours,” she said. ”Be patient. An aide will get him up in good time.” Even in his room they took the time to wash him, to take away the stink before they brought him water. He slept and hour, while the pastor sat at bedside, his face in his hands. Then suddenly, Arthur started to awake and started about himself. ”Where am I? Where am I?” he called. ”In the hospital,” his pastor answered. And he groaned horribly, ”Why am I?” The hospital knew no relative for Arthur Forte. Therefore, at eleven o´clock that same Saturday night, they telephoned the pastor. Arthur had died. The pastor laid the receiver and had cried as though it were his father who had died. Arthur had not consciously chosen to give the pastor the last year of his life, nor did he choose to teach the young pastor anything. Yet by his mere being, by forcing the young pastor to take that life, real, unsweetened, bare naked, hurting, and critical, by demanding that the pastor serve him altogether unrewarded, by wringing from him first mere gestures of loving and then the love itself—-but a sacrificial love, the Christ-like love, being love for one so indisputably unlovable, Arthur prepared the young man for his ministry.

Jesus did not say, ”Blessed are you if you know or teach or preach these things.” Jesus said, rather, ”Blessed are you if you do these things.” When on the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus had washed the disciples’ feet, he sat and said, ”If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another´s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.... If you know these things,” Said Jesus, ”Blessed are you if you do them.” What are you some the ways in which we greet Jesus? Not only in Palm Sunday festival parades. Not only in claiming to have made Jesus Christ our personal Savior. Not only in the high or deep religious experiences of prayer and meditation—-but also in simple, routine service to others. Arthur Forte met Jesus in the person of this young minister, and this young pastor greeted Jesus in the person of Arthur Forte, for as Jesus himself said, ”I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me... since you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it to me.” Amen.