Palm Sunday, March 23, 1997
WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM TEMPORARY TRIUMPHS
John 12:12-16

Life is filled with temporary triumphs, and the life of Jesus was no exception.

When Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, the people treated him like a king. They spread their garments in his way as they would for royalty. They cut down branches from the trees and waved them as they would if they were welcoming a conquering hero, and they shouted, “Hosanna in the highest.”

Exactly what went on in the mind of Jesus during all this celebration we will never know. Those who wrote the gospels assumed that Jesus did what he did deliberately — that he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to make clear his messianic claim and to let people know what kind of a Messiah he was. But whether or not that was his purpose, we have no way of knowing. Was what happened simply the spontaneous response of people to something that was innate in Jesus and which they recognized, though he did not invite or particularly appreciate? Whatever took place, it was a temporary triumph.

We know from the very beginning that there was a magnetic quality about Jesus, and his life was filled with these kinds of temporary triumphs. When he asked people to follow him, many did. When he talked to people and said, “You have heard it said of old, but I say to you,” many listened.

People who were possessed by evil spirits, according to the interpretation of the time — that is, those who were mentally ill or otherwise unable to live their lives as whole human beings — would be healed by Jesus’ command. His power, it seemed, had the ability to release people from those struggles, and many were drawn to him because of this magnetic, authoritative quality. He taught in such a way that people listened and changed. He had many triumphs — some temporary, some longer-lasting.

At the same time, others were not impressed by Jesus. They missed the splendor of life that was right in front of their eyes. They saw him as a wandering preacher with strange ideas. After all, he said things like, “Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you,” and “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” He told them, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” For some, his message was too radical, too outside the norms of the time, and they believed that he would soon be forgotten.

Like our lives, the life of Jesus was filled with temporary triumphs, and Palm Sunday was one of them. As noted earlier, he had had temporary triumphs before. There were people eager to follow him, but they often returned to their old ways. Some followed him for the wrong reasons. They were impressed by his healing power and wanted to be associated with his success. Others saw him as a political leader who might lead a revolution against the Roman occupation.

He was surrounded by all sorts of temporary triumphs and defeats. The people in his hometown had trouble accepting him, even his own family had doubts about his claims, and the religious leaders of the day did their best to discredit him.

Palm Sunday was perhaps the most notable of these temporary triumphs. For a short time on that day, his simplicity and his unconditional love for people triumphed over the pomp and circumstance of kings and queens. For a short time, people hailed him as the Messiah of God. Temporarily, his moral power triumphed over the power of armies and military weapons. Temporarily, his absolute, downright honesty triumphed over all the subterfuge of people. His love for humanity triumphed over its lust for power, and his spirit triumphed over the selfishness of the world.

These temporary triumphs of Jesus have gone on through the centuries. The world is still not organized according to the principles of Jesus. The practice of unconditional love is still the exception and not the norm, and the power of evil continues to work in the world.

At the same time, I am not discouraged. God's will is most often accomplished through temporary triumphs. Even though the world is not as a whole organized on the principles of Jesus, it is true that millions of individual lives are. In those lives, down through the ages, where the spirit of Christ lives again, you see repeated over and over these temporary triumphs — these breaks of light in the darkness of the world. I like to think of these people as having "lighted lives," and the light that is in them, of course, is none other than the light of Christ. It shines out every now and then when you least expect it, splitting the darkness, and we are here today to thank God for that and to rejoice in it.

As I go about in my ministry, my life is inspired daily by the temporary triumphs of ordinary people who are living quiet yet heroic lives and, because of their countless temporary triumphs, are making life better for all of us.

What, then, are some of the things we can learn from the temporary triumphs of Jesus and countless other people? What do they have to say to us about how God works in and among us?

First, all triumphs, all victories, are temporary. That's the way God has made the world. This is one of the important lessons I have learned from my friends who are recovering alcoholics. Note the word "recovering." It is in the present tense. The alcoholic who is a faithful member of A.A. does not ever say, "I am a recovered alcoholic." Each minute, each hour, each day without a drink is a temporary triumph. The members of A.A. are taught to live on the basis of these temporary triumphs, one after another. However, when you string all these temporary triumphs together over many years, it adds up to a great victory.

It's a basic principle of living. Let's say you want to lose weight and practice the discipline to do so. It's only a temporary triumph. Unless you keep to the discipline, you will soon regain the weight you have lost. If you overcome one temptation, that's no guarantee that you will overcome the next one or a different temptation in the future. The most successful moral lives are lived on the basis of one temporary triumph followed by another, step by step, day by day. Endurance is the most important character trait of all.

The triumphs of God at work in our world are the same. God accomplishes God's will through one temporary triumph after another. As the old saying goes, "The wheels of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine." No victory in this world is final. Every triumph of every kind is temporary.

The second thing we can learn from temporary triumphs, which gives me hope, is that they are more frequent than we sometimes think.

We've all said at one time or another, "The news each day is filled with so many stories of violence and evil behavior — stories of drug use, of abused spouses and children, drive-by shootings, corrupt politicians, and sleazy behavior." What we need to remember is that these stories make the headlines because they are the exceptions.

Think of what a long list of temporary triumphs we could make if we were to publish the names of ordinary men and women who, in the midst of all the confusion and problems of life, live in the spirit of Jesus and triumph day after day over the temptations and obstacles they encounter.

I remember a young woman some years ago who, at age 23, had an operation on her spine after months of suffering. Though her future was still uncertain, she was so radiant, so full of life and faith — even though she was unable to move — that people came to see her because they were inspired by her day-to-day temporary triumphs.

The third thing we can learn from temporary triumphs, like that of Palm Sunday, is that in the long run, we will be judged by the frequency of those temporary triumphs in our own lives.

My hope is that, as a result of hearing this sermon, you will be asking yourself, "When was the last time I behaved in such a way, under difficult circumstances, that someone looking at me would say, 'The love of God, as revealed in Christ, hasn't triumphed over the world as a whole, but there at least is one of the temporary triumphs of Jesus in the world'?" When was the last time that could have been said of you? Your life and mine will be judged by the frequency of those triumphs of the love of God in us over the forces and factors in the world that threaten to pull us down.

Remember, we hardly ever separate ourselves from God by standing up and shaking our fist and renouncing God with planned defiance. Most often, our lives begin to fall apart in small ways — when we no longer have those temporary triumphs but instead experience one little moral defeat after another, one small broken commitment after another, giving in to one small temptation after another.

It's not the big temptations that should worry us. It's the countless alluring, seemingly harmless little ones that come day after day and gradually wear us down, like running water gradually cuts a channel through hard rock.

Remember, too, the most dangerous temptations come dressed up in positive clothes. The tempter does not say, "Come, I'll teach you something evil; I'll show you a sin." Rather, the temptation is, "Come, I'll teach you something interesting, something glorious, something that will give you a thrill and give you a chance to live your life to the fullest."

One other thing we can learn from temporary triumphs is this: one such triumph offsets a hundred defeats. That, of course, does not minimize the seriousness of the defeat, and it does not excuse us when we let ourselves slump into a defeat, but it is true that one such temporary triumph does minimize the defeats that have surrounded us for years.

Let me repeat this point. One temporary triumph offsets a hundred defeats. One person who does something because it is right and not because it will win an election will roll back the clouds of darkness for days to come. One person who is honest, without any thought of what will happen to him or her, will make a crack in the clouds of night. One person, no matter how

obscure he or she may be, who is willing to let the love of God shine through his or her life, will offset a thousand defeats that scoundrels and dishonest people have brought about.

That's because the power and love of God are working in and through every temporary triumph in your life and mine, and nothing can ultimately defeat the love and will of God.

On this Palm Sunday, we can be thankful for the many temporary triumphs of Jesus and for the countless temporary triumphs of faithful people through the ages. God grant that you and I will also have the courage and endurance so that faithful temporary triumphs will be a part of our living. Amen.