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 through all this demonstration 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. Or was what happened simply the spontaneous response of people to something that was innate in Jesus and which they recognized, which he did not invite or particularly appreciate? Whatever took place, it was a temporary triumph.

We know that from the very beginning there was a magnetic quality about Jesus and therefore his life was filled with temporary triumphs. When he asked people to follow him, many did. When he talked to people and said, "You have heard that it was 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 they were deranged, they were people with mental diseases and neuroses who were not able to live their lives as whole human beings as God hoped they could, and when Jesus commanded these spirits to come out of them, they did.

From the beginning of his public ministry, people were drawn to Jesus because of this magnetic, this authoritative quality, this capacity to teach in such a way that people listened and changed. He had many triumphs, some temporary and some longer-lasting. We know that.

At the same time there were other people who were not impressed by Jesus. They missed the splendor of life that was right in front of their

eyes. They saw in him a wandering preacher, rather unusual, strange in ideas (after all he said, "Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you)." "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also." They were not impressed and were sure that he would be forgotten in the next few years.

Like your life and mine, 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 who

were eager to follow him and did so for a time but then 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 successes. Others saw him as a possible political leader who could lead a revolution against the Romans who occupied the country.

He was surrounded by all sorts of temporary triumphs and defeats. The people in his home town had trouble accepting him. Even his own family had doubts about his claims. The religious leaders of the day did their best to discredit him and discourage people from following him.

Palm Sunday was perhaps the most notable temporary triumph. For a short time on that day

his simplicity, his unconditional love of people triumphed over all 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 still is not organized according to the principles of Jesus. The practice of unconditional love is still the exception and not the norm. 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 also true that millions of individual's lives are, and in those lives down through the ages, those lives in which the spirit of Christ lives again, you see repeated over and over again 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 that is Christ and it shines out every now and then when you least expect it and splits the darkness, and we are here today to thank God for that, and to rejoice in that.

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 of the temporary triumphs of Jesus and of 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's 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 triumph's together over a period of 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 you 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 temptation of a different kind in the future. The most successful moral lives are lived on the basis of one temporary triumph followed by another and another, step by step, day by day. Endurance is the most important charac-

ter 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 that we can learn from temporary triumphs that gives me hope such as that one on Palm Sunday and those before that in the life of Jesus, is that in our world these temporary triumphs are more frequent that 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, sleazy behavior." What we need to remember is 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 that they encounter.

I remember a young woman some years ago who at age 23 had an operation on her spine, after months of suffering, with the future still uncertain, and yet through it all she was so radiant

and 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 after 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 that I so behaved 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 is the last time that could of

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 a planned defiance. Most often our lives begin to fall apart in small ways, when we no longer have those temporary triumphs but instead one little moral defeat after another, one small broken commitment after another, giving in to one little 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 as 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 in any way 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 tempo-

rary 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, the spirit of good will and love and honesty, will offset a thousand defeats that scoundrels and dishonest people have brought about.

That's because the power and love of God is

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.