Palm Sunday, March 28, 1999
LESSONS FROM PALM SUNDAY
Matt 21:1-11

On that first Palm Sunday, there were people in Jerusalem, as there are in every city and town, who were waiting for a hero — someone who would lead them, someone in whom they could put their trust, someone who would give them hope.

It's possible to confuse heroes with celebrities, but there's a difference. Some heroes become celebrities, but not nearly all celebrities are heroes or heroines, and not all heroines or heroes become celebrities.

A celebrity is a person who is known for being known or famous for being famous. Because of television and other mass media, there are now more celebrities than ever. You can even be a criminal and be a celebrity. There are people who become celebrities by spending time with other celebrities. I've never been able to understand why there are people who seem to worship celebrities.

The demand in our culture for information about celebrities is insatiable. Think how many tens of thousands of readers pore over celebrity magazines every month. Even news magazines claim they would have difficulty surviving without including stories on the rich and famous. People Magazine has an annual double issue that features "The 25 Most Intriguing People." I'm not sure what the criteria are for choosing those who make the list. It could be that they are intriguing to some simply because the magazine includes them in their list.

Even though there are more and more celebrities, some people claim that there is an increasing shortage of heroes and heroines. Maybe? The fact is, we don't know if there's a shortage because many heroes and heroines remain largely unknown. They do heroic deeds and live heroic lives without anyone noticing. Many of them prefer to remain anonymous and are embarrassed when discovered.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, was he greeted as a hero or a celebrity or a little of both? We don't know for sure. If you had been a blind person who had been healed by him, you would have seen him as a hero. If you had only heard about some of his works, maybe to you, he was a celebrity.

Many Biblical scholars believe that the first Palm Sunday celebration was a minor event, that Jesus was greeted and cheered by a relatively small number of followers who were not quite sure why they were celebrating except that something drew them to this "spirit person."

He spoke in puzzling parables. He challenged some of the conventional wisdom. When he healed someone, he told them not to tell anyone. He was not swayed by current trends. He was not concerned with money. He loved people in a way they had not been loved before. He was a friend to the friendless. When he was criticized for eating at the same table with sinners and outcasts, he did it anyway.

Increasingly, as I read stories like this one from the Bible, I find myself asking, what lessons does this story teach us about our own day-to-day living and about the way in which the power of God is at work in the world?

One lesson from the Palm Sunday story is this: what we often define as success, whether big or small, is temporary. From all outward appearances, when Jesus entered Jerusalem, it was the high point of his ministry. He was getting the acclaim he deserved. But it was a temporary triumph. He knew it, but that didn't bother him. He had had short-term success before. There were individuals who said they would follow him and did so for a time but then drifted away. He healed people, and they were impressed and grateful, but soon after, they forgot all about him.

Some people followed him but misunderstood his teachings. Even his own family had their doubts in the beginning, and the religious leaders of the day excluded him from their gatherings. After preaching his first sermon in his hometown synagogue, the congregation threw him out. His closest disciples did not always catch on to what he was saying, and one of his trusted disciples betrayed him, and another denied ever knowing him.

Not many days after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he was put on trial, first before the religious authorities and then before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. It was with some amusement that Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Pilate was no doubt thinking to himself, "You stand before me beaten and ragged; you have no evidence of rank or nobility; you have no weapons or army — what a failure you are." If Pilate were alive today, what would he see? Jesus never attempted to overthrow the Roman Empire by leading an armed revolution. But today, the movement which Jesus began is alive and worldwide, while the Roman Empire is dead.

Jesus standing before Pilate reminds me of Gandhi of India, appearing at Buckingham Palace one day for tea while he was in the midst of trying to lead India out from under the rule of the British Empire. As usual, in addition to being a small man, he was dressed in his simple, homespun cotton loin cloth and shawl with a dollar pocket watch suspended by a safety pin from his waist. The people in power wondered what kind of leader he could be. He had no army or weapons. A reporter asked him later, "Don't you think you were a trifle underdressed for the occasion?" Gandhi answered, "His majesty had enough clothes on for both of us."

Pilate was right. Jesus was not a success in the way in which Rome defined that term, nor was he a success in the way in which the religious authorities of his time defined that term. And he was not a success in the way in which we usually define it. The usual definition of success from the world's point of view consists primarily of such things as power, wealth, prestige, status, and fame. This defines a celebrity more than a hero or heroine.

In their insightful study of American life, published in the book Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah and his colleagues observed, "The American dream is often a very private dream of being the star, the uniquely successful and admirable one, the one who stands out in the crowd of ordinary folks."

Above all, to be successful in the way in which the world usually defines it, one has to win. Losers are rarely thought of as being successful. Certainly, winning is one form of temporary success in this world, and I'm not saying it's bad to win — only that there are some very important things in life that cannot be judged as being successful in terms of winning or losing.

There's one kind of winning that too often is thought of as a sign of success but which leads to what C.S. Lewis called the "great sin, the sin of pride." This kind of winning gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next person. It's the kind of attitude that coined the phrase, "The one who dies with the most toys wins."

C.S. Lewis puts it this way, “We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, clever, or good-looking, there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.”

Many years ago, when LaGuardia was mayor of New York City, he launched New York’s City Center of Music and Drama, but he never attended the ballet there. Someone asked him why not, since he otherwise seemed to be a supporter of the arts. He replied, “I’m a guy who likes to keep score. With ballet, I never know who’s ahead.” There are people who see life only in terms of keeping score. They want to know who’s ahead and who’s losing, and that’s their only definition of success.

There are some things, however, which do not lend themselves to keeping score. Relationships, for example, have a way of refusing to go by the numbers. That’s why some people have trouble with relationships, whether it be with others or with God. Unless they can keep score and know who is ahead, they do not even want to attend the performance. Fortunately for all of us, God does not keep score in terms of winners or losers in life.

Martin Marty is a church historian. Someone asked him what he saw happening in the reversals, the topsy-turvy situations, and the crumbling of empires and ideologies as a church historian and from God’s point of view.

Marty replied, “I don’t speak for God or know much about God’s point of view except as I get glimpses from the Scriptures. From God’s point of view as seen in the Bible, the first thing one learns is that humans are not as much in control of history as we like to think we are, and that if we assume we are and write history in terms of winners and losers, we usually misinterpret history.”

To repeat, one lesson from the Palm Sunday story is this: what we often, from our human point of view, define as success is temporary, and it usually has nothing to do with success as far as God is concerned.

Another lesson we can learn from the Palm Sunday story is how to deal with the fact that all success in this world is temporary.

Here’s what Jesus did. He lived his life from the inside out. He knew what he stood for. He had a strong sense of what God’s will was for him, and he had a sense of being connected to God through regular worship and prayer. He also knew that this life is only temporary while life with God after this life is eternal. He had an eternal perspective.

That does not mean that this life is unimportant, but that it needs to be seen in a long-term perspective. Because of his deep convictions and his abiding faith in the power, goodness, and love of God, he could handle temporary successes and passing failures. When people praised him, he did not become overly proud, and when they reviled him, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten. Rather, his trust was based on the strength of his own inner character and in the power of God, who judges justly. He lived from the inside out.

There are too many people who do the opposite and live from the outside in. Then praise or any momentary success gives them an over-inflated sense of elation, which usually doesn’t

last very long and only causes them to want more and more of it. Criticism and failure can depress them more than it should because it only confirms their own shaky opinion of themselves.

The Palm Sunday story teaches us to live with a sense of unattachment. Unattachment is the release of the need or expectation associated with a specific outcome. We can become too attached to the way we envision something working out and struggle to make circumstances bend to our desires. We can become overly attached to our desire for a new car, more money, or our status as a senior vice president.

Being unattached does not mean being disinterested, removed, or not taking life seriously. In our spiritual lives, it means not allowing worldly values or self-centeredness to distract us from what is essential in our relationship with God and with each other. It is not resignation but a vigilance that allows a person to recognize that whatever comes is a gift from God.

That's why Jesus was able to graciously accept and enjoy the praise and recognition on that first Palm Sunday, even though he knew it was temporary and that some people were cheering him for the wrong reasons.

One more lesson from the story of Palm Sunday is this: the power of God can be seen working through small temporary successes and even through what looks to us like failure or defeat.

Like Jesus, we can creatively handle life's temporary successes and failures when we remember that our worth and loveability are unrelated to others' approval or disapproval. God never intended us to be imprisoned by the narrow confines of someone else's opinion.

Furthermore, even though we live in a world where power politics, aggression, suspicion, hate, violence, and greed are still very much present, God's overall triumph is assured. In the meantime, we can see the activities of the true heroes and heroines as little breaks of light in the darkness of the world. These activities are more frequent than we sometimes think. What a list we could make if we had knowledge of all the ordinary women and men who, in the midst of confusion and the problems of everyday life, live in the spirit of Jesus and triumph over seemingly insurmountable problems and who help others to do the same. God works in so many mysterious ways.

Finally, remember this: the cross of Christ, the center of the greatest and most enduring victory in history, looked like a horrible defeat. But from this defeat, God is still bringing forth healing and help. Amen.