Palm Sunday, April 16, 2000
WHO TO FOLLOW?
Mark 11:1-11

How do you tell genuine authority from counterfeit, true religion from false, good religion from bad, one who truly represents God from someone who does not? How do you know who to trust and who to follow? When Jesus entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, these were some of the key questions people had to confront. Some shouted, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” while others were sure he was the enemy. They were so convinced that he was dangerous that, a few days later, he was killed.

In fact, on the Friday following Palm Sunday, Pilate, the Roman Governor, gave the people a clear choice. He asked, “Do you want me to release Jesus or Barabbas?” Both had been sentenced to death. It was a Roman tradition to release one prisoner on a festive holiday as a gesture of goodwill. In an indirect way, Pilate was asking, “Who do you want to follow? Jesus or Barabbas?”

The crowd overwhelmingly chose Barabbas to be set free. When Pilate next asked, “What do you want me to do with Jesus?” they answered, “Crucify him.”

Why would the people choose Barabbas to be set free over Jesus? When you think about it, it’s not much of a surprise, even though we don’t know much about him. What we do know is this: the gospels tell us that he was a rebel who had committed murder in the insurrection. It is taken for granted that we will know what insurrection it was. He was not a common criminal but rather a political activist, totally committed to overthrowing the hated Romans. Remember that Jerusalem in Jesus’ day was an occupied city. Like all occupying powers, the Romans were constantly on the alert for acts of violence by those who hoped to incite rebellion.

So maybe it’s not so surprising that the people chose Barabbas to be released after all. He was the kind of hero people — even today — appreciate. It all depends on which side you’re on.

Think of our own country’s history: the Boston Tea Party, Patrick Henry shouting, “Give me liberty or give me death,” the farmers who ambushed British soldiers at Lexington and Concord. To us, these deeds were acts of heroism; to the British, they were acts of terrorism. To the Romans, Barabbas was a terrorist murderer; to many of the people in Jerusalem, he was a hero. The crowd chose Barabbas because he represented what they hoped for: freedom from oppression, an overthrow — violent if necessary — of hated Roman rule.

Jesus, by contrast, was a big disappointment to them. Some had hoped he might be the kind of Messiah they were looking for. There were those who wanted another warrior king, like King David had been. But the way of Jesus was not the way of that kind of warrior. In another gospel story, we are told that when Pilate asked Jesus what kind of king he was, Jesus said to Pilate, “My kingship is not of this world.”

And so the choice was made. Jesus would be killed. Barabbas would go free.

Who to follow? What kind of power truly changes us and the world — the power Barabbas represented or the power Jesus taught and lived? We face that choice each day. I believe we

can learn more about who to follow and about the use and misuse of power from Jesus than we can from Barabbas.

Note first that Jesus knew about the temptations of power. He faced the issue in his own life all the time. He resisted the temptation to turn stones into bread in order to feed the hungry so they would follow him. He would not perform miraculous acts for the purpose of gaining followers. He refused to try to overpower those who arrested him. He would not use his power to dominate or manipulate.

He knew that power can have a number of definitions. There is the kind of power that Barabbas personified — the kind of power that relies primarily on being the strongest in physical terms, which can include having the largest army or the best-equipped armed forces. At the same time, he knew that the use of that kind of power is sometimes necessary, but in the long run, we need more than that. As a friend of mine used to say, “You can’t kill an idea with a gun.”

Jesus was willing to use his power to rescue people when he found them caught in circumstances from which they could not extricate themselves. In other words, he knew when to help people who could not help themselves, and he also knew how to use his power to help people begin to help themselves. There were times when he directly intervened in the lives of people, as he healed them of their diseases.

He also made it clear in his life and teachings that we are to follow his example in how we use our power. For example, who can hear his parable of the last judgment and not realize that what we choose to do with the power that has been given to us is one of the most important decisions we have to make?

In that parable, those on the right hand, who were invited to enter into God’s eternal joy, were those who had seen people in desperate and needy circumstances and had been willing to use their power the way Jesus used his — to help those who cannot help themselves. “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and in prison and you visited me.”

Jesus showed us that we are all made in the image of a generous God who blesses and helps us and who expects us to do the same with the power and blessings God continually gives us.

At the same time, while Jesus was willing to use his power to help others, he was very careful not to misuse it in a way that perpetuated a relationship of permanent dependency. Whenever he encountered the broken and the helpless, he did not gather them up in his arms and say in effect, “Let me carry you around for the rest of your life.” On the contrary, having released the paralytic, who had been brought into his presence by four of his friends because of his immobilizing guilt, Jesus immediately said to him, “Rise, take up your pallet and walk.” In other words, now it’s time for you to begin using your own power to carry yourself and help carry others.

In another case, after he had healed a man, that individual wanted to tag along after him and in that way remain dependent. However, Jesus gently and lovingly refused that person’s request and told him, “You need to go back to your own town and your own people and let them know the good thing God has done for you. You need to pass on the same kind of blessing and healing you have received.”

The 12th step in A.A. carries the same message. It reads, “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.” When you have been helped, then use the new power that has been released in you to help others.

It is a misuse of power to help someone and then through that help establish a permanent relationship of dependency. Here’s why. First, no human being is good enough or strong enough to be a father or mother figure and provide for someone else totally forever. Only the eternal God is capable of that, and you make a grave mistake if you put another human being on that kind of pedestal and expect that person to be everything for you, or if you expect to be everything for someone else.

Furthermore, whenever you rely too much on another person’s power, you are, at the same time, discounting your own, and you can become permanently dependent on someone else. Jesus taught that God has given each one of us power on our own. When you have the image of yourself or someone else as a helpless victim, you are not being true to all that is in you and in that other person. Permanent and complete dependency does not work. It is a misuse of power and leadership.

What Jesus did was take people who had seen themselves as powerless and worthless and awaken them to the marvelous power within them.

Sheldon Kopp, a Jewish psychotherapist, wrote a book entitled If You Meet Buddha on the Road, Kill Him. His point is that if you encounter anyone who claims he can do everything for you and solve all your problems, the wisest thing you can do is to move to kill that illusion immediately. Kopp points out that many times, patients come to him the way a little child takes a broken toy to a parent and says, “Please fix this for me,” implying that the doctor has strength and the patient has none. The request is to fix the problem without costing any pain or effort at all.

Kopp’s book challenges this form of helping and leading. Jesus also challenged this form of helping and of using power. It is a misuse of power. As I said before, Jesus was again and again willing to use his power to help rescue individuals, and he calls us to do the same. But he was also very careful not to take what is appropriate under certain circumstances and elevate it into a permanent way of life.

In the same way that he was not willing to misuse his power with individuals, he was also not willing to misuse his power on a larger scale. In the beginning of his ministry, as I have already mentioned, he resisted the temptation to turn stones into bread.

The same thing happened on Palm Sunday. He would not allow the crowd to be lulled into the lie that the right kind of hero or leader could save them without any response on their part.

This is not to deny that good leaders in any enterprise — be it politics, business, education, or the church — are vital and necessary. But no one ever does it all alone.

In fact, one of the key principles of being an outstanding leader is that such leaders empower and give power to others. Strange as it may sound, great leaders gain authority by giving it away. One of the greatest leaders of this nation was truly gifted at giving his power and authority to others. His name was Abraham Lincoln. The depth of Lincoln’s security as a leader can be seen in his selection of his cabinet.

Most presidents pick like-minded allies. But not Lincoln. At a time of turmoil for the country when disparate voices were many, Lincoln brought together a group of leaders who would unify his party and bring strength through diversity and mutual challenge. He lived the principle of empowerment. His security enabled him to give his power away. It was even more so with Jesus. That's why so many people were willing to follow him. He gave them power.

Jesus was then and still is a different kind of leader and Savior. He did not come into the world to be the leader of one nation, one people, or one religion. On the contrary, he came for everyone, including especially the outcasts and the non-religious. "God so loved the world that God gave the only Son." No one is excluded from God's love.

When he spoke of enlarged borders and a greater destiny, he was not speaking of conquest and more territory; rather, he was talking of broader sympathies and breaking down the barriers that separate race, class, and nations.

God's power, as seen in Jesus, works in ways that often seem to contradict the kind of power we usually support and worship. That's what the crowd on Palm Sunday and on Good Friday did not understand.

Let us not, however, make the mistake so frequently made by people, that because he entered Jerusalem on a donkey and refused to be a political leader, he was above politics. Later in the week, he was nailed to the cross not for being too spiritual but for being too political. When he taught that the barriers between race, class, religions, and nationalities are not created by God and that all people are created by God as equal in God's realm, that's almost always also a political issue.

Jesus never retreated from the crucial social issues of his day into a world of private piety. He stood firmly in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets when he took the side of the oppressed and against the oppressor, and in the true prophetic tradition, he saw that the real troublemakers of this world are not the ignorant, not the people on the margins of life, but the intelligent and the highly gifted who become greedy and corrupt.

Many of the common people heard him gladly because he spoke against the evils of corruption in high places, but the common people did not hear him gladly when he spoke against the temptations and evils of violence to accomplish their goals.

As Jesus saw it, and here's where he differed with Barabbas, the problem with most violent revolutions is not that they change too much but that they change too little. One form of oppression is too often replaced with another form of oppression. Non-violence is more radical than violence. The power of love is always stronger than the power of hate.

Thus, Jesus prayed not for the second coming of the Kingdom of David but that God's kingdom would come to be recognized as being among us and within us. That kingdom is eternal.

I wonder what happened to Barabbas. Was his life changed forever? After he got his release, did he join the crowd that watched Jesus on his way to the cross? Did he return to terrorism? Who to follow? It's a choice each one of us has to make every day. Amen.