Palm Sunday, April 13, 2003
A PROTEST WALK
Mark 11:1-11

It has become commonplace in today's world to organize all sorts of "walks." There are walks against cancer and all sorts of other diseases. There are walks protesting war, and walks in support of our troops engaged in war. At the height of the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and the 1960s, walks protesting segregation and in support of integration could be found in many cities. There were also many walks against the war in Vietnam.

It has been helpful for me in understanding Palm Sunday to think of it as a kind of spontaneous protest walk. It wasn't highly organized and promoted like many of our protest walks today. It sort of happened as part of the pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem, which took place every year as people from all around the countryside came to the city to join in the celebration of the Passover.

But in this one particular year, the pilgrimage was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for some because it was made in the company of Jesus of Nazareth. Each of the four gospels has a slightly different description of what happened, but they all have the same theme. Jesus made plans to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. The journey began in the village of Bethany, a small town close to Jerusalem. As his little entourage traveled the short distance from Bethany to Jerusalem, some people along the way recognized him and welcomed him with shouts of praise and joy.

According to Mark's account, when the small group reached the entrance to the city of Jerusalem, Jesus went into the city alone. Once inside, he proceeded to the Temple, looked around, and then returned to the city gate where he met his disciples and returned with them to Bethany.

Whatever may have been in the mind of the Savior, and whatever may have been in the minds of the disciples who accompanied him to the entrance of the city, no one knows.

Here's why it's helpful to think of the event as a kind of protest walk. Although there is only a hint of protest at first, later in the week within the city of Jerusalem, protest followed protest. Furthermore, before coming to Jerusalem, Jesus had serious disagreements with the religious authorities over the interpretation of scripture and tradition. The Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem and the days that followed, leading up to his trial and crucifixion, were the culmination of a long list of things Jesus had protested in his ministry.

First of all, he protested against a religious system that separated people into categories of righteous and unrighteous, pure and impure, saved and lost. Purity systems are found in many cultures. They are systems of classifications, lines, and boundaries. A purity system is a cultural map that indicates a place for everything and everything in its place.

In the time that Jesus lived, the purity system connected with his religious background established a spectrum of people ranging from the very pure through varying degrees of less purity to people on the margins and to the radically impure. Since God was holy, you had to be holy. Purity status depended to some extent on birth. Priests and Levites came first. At the bottom of the list were children born of parents who weren't married, followed by those who were physically or mentally handicapped at birth and those who were considered to lack

physical wholeness because of accidents or illness, such as losing a leg, an arm, or an eye, or being a leper.

Your purity or impurity also depended on your behavior. If you followed all the religious rules, you could become pure. If you did not or could not follow all the religious rules, you were considered impure and an outcast. Your occupation could also cause you to be considered impure. Among these were tax collectors and poor people.

Men were considered more pure than women. That's because the natural bodily processes of childbirth and menstruation were considered sources of impurity, leading to a more generalized sense of the impurity of women. This was consistent with the status of women in that culture as distinctly second-class people — a problem that is still too much present today in cultures and religions around the world.

The effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and broken, Jew and Gentile.

The point is that in the message and activity of Jesus, you find an alternative social vision: a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion and equality. Jesus deliberately replaced the core value of purity with compassion. God is compassionate; therefore, you are to be compassionate.

In addition, he reminded his listeners that every human being is created in God's image and is already good and pure in God's realm. He emphasized purity on the inside, saying, "Blessed are the pure in heart," rather than focusing on the outside. One of his most familiar parables, the parable of the good Samaritan, deals with the purity issue. It is frequently interpreted as a story about loving your neighbor and describes a neighbor as anyone in need. However, to those who heard the story when Jesus first told it, it was also a powerful protest against a way of life organized around outward purity.

The priest and the Levite who failed to help the injured man in the ditch did so because they were obligated to maintain a certain level of purity. Contact with a man who was so injured that he could have been dead was a source of major impurity. So they avoided the injured man because they were observing the purity laws. The Samaritan, on the other hand — radically impure according to the purity system — was the one who acted with compassion.

Another way that Jesus protested against the purity system was through his eating habits. He ate with sinners, women, and other outcasts. His was an open and inclusive table. Eating with someone had a social and religious significance in that time that is difficult for us to imagine. It was not a casual act as it can be in our fast-food world. Rules surrounding meals were deeply embedded in the purity system. The rules governed not only what could be eaten and how the food should be prepared, but also with whom you could eat. Those who considered themselves pure would never eat with the impure, and no decent person would eat with an outcast.

Jesus frequently ate with outcasts and others who were considered impure. To make matters worse, these meals were often festive occasions — parties, celebrations. He was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. The eating habits of Jesus symbolized his alternative vision of an inclusive community, a movement that did away with the boundaries of the purity system. His community included women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and some people of stature who found his alternative vision attractive.

Jesus was leading a boundary-breaking movement. “Be compassionate as God is compassionate.” Whereas purity rules divide and exclude, compassion includes and unites.

This same struggle goes on in the Christian movement today. There are church groups that emphasize holiness and purity as the Christian way, attempting to draw their own sharp social boundaries between the righteous and the unrighteous, the saved and the lost. It is a sad irony that these groups, many of which are seeking to be faithful to the Bible, end up emphasizing those parts of scripture that Jesus challenged and protested.

Palm Sunday can also be understood as a kind of protest walk because Jesus protested and challenged much of the conventional wisdom of his day. In its place, he taught an alternative and subversive wisdom.

Every culture has its conventional wisdom, its worldview, its image of reality, its common knowledge of the way to live. It covers everything from highly practical matters such as etiquette—"Don’t chew with your mouth open,” “Don’t take the biggest piece of cake,” “Always say please and thank you"—to the central values and images of the good life and how it can be found.

Some conventional wisdom is good and helpful. But other conventional wisdom can be limiting and damaging and needs to be challenged. Conventional wisdom in the time of slavery in our country said that Black people were less than human and were meant to be slaves. When slavery was abolished, conventional wisdom supported segregation. Black people and white people could not sit at the same lunch counter or use the same toilets or the same drinking fountains. Before women had the right to vote, conventional wisdom said that women were second-class citizens. Even today, some churches will not let women vote, hold leadership positions, or serve as ordained ministers.

Sociologists tell us that conventional wisdom in our time teaches people to think of themselves first and that style and fashion are what count in getting ahead. Much of present-day conventional wisdom says that you need to live according to the “performance principle,” in which everything in life depends on how well you perform and how well you conform.

Jesus also protested against the conventional wisdom in regard to its image of God. In its religious form, conventional wisdom then and now frequently defines God primarily as judge and lawgiver. God becomes the One you must satisfy and please. One popular image of the Christian life is that it is a life of fulfilling the requirements.

His alternative vision invited people to see God not as the judge, not as the One who has requirements that need to be met, but as gracious and compassionate. His basic message was that sinners do not get what they deserve because God is gracious and compassionate.

His alternative vision of God invites you to accompany him and other followers on a spiritual journey. It is not primarily a journey of believing the right doctrines or of being good, but a journey of a continuing and maturing relationship with a loving God within a loving and forgiving community. This journey will not leave you unchanged, but will transform you into a more compassionate person. “Be compassionate as God is compassionate” is the defining mark of this journey. On this Palm Sunday, you are invited to join Jesus and his many followers in a protest walk against much of today’s conventional wisdom. But it is much more than a walk of protest. On the positive side, it is above all a journey of joyful living. Amen.