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 1950's and the 1960's, "walks" protesting segregation and in support of integration could be found in many cities. There were also many "walks" against the war in Viet Nam.

It's been helpful for me in understanding the

story of the first Palm Sunday, to visualize it as a kind of spontaneous "protest walk." It wasn't highly organized and promoted as are 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 one-in-a-lifetime experience for some because it was made in the company of Jesus of Nazareth. Each of the four gospels has a little different description of what happened, but they all have the same theme. Jesus made plans to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the

Passover. With his small group of disciples, his Palm Sunday 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 the city, he proceeded to the Temple. He went inside, 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 minds of the

bystanders when they welcomed him as their savior; 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 follows 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, many of

which are still relevant today.

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 which 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 margin, to the radically impure. Since God was holy, you had to be holy

and that meant you had to be pure. Your 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 or 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 cause you to be considered

impure. Shepherds were considered impure as were tax collectors and poor people.

Men were considered to be more pure than women. That's because the natural bodily processes of childbirth and menstruation were considered sources of impurity and these led 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 all 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 not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.

The point is, 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.

In addition, Jesus emphasized purity on the inside, "Blessed are the pure in heart," rather

than on the outside. One of his most familiar parables deals with the purity issue, the parable of the good Samaritan. It is frequently interpreted as a story about loving your neighbor and describes neighbor as anyone who is in need. However to those who heard the story when Jesus first told it, it was also a powerful protest against the way of life organized around outward purity.

The priest and the Levite who failed to help the injured man in the ditch did not do so because they were obligated to maintain a certain level of purity. Contact with a man who was so injured that he could've been dead was a source of major impurity. So they avoided the injured man because they were observing the purity laws.

The Samaritan (who, not incidentally, was radically impure according to the purity system), is the one who acted with compassion.

Another way that Jesus protested against the purity system was in his eating habits. He ate with sinners, women and other outcasts. His was an open and inclusive table. Eating with somebody had a social and religious significance in the social world of 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 imbedded 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

not eat with somebody who was considered impure and no decent person would eat a meal with an outcast.

Jesus frequently ate with outcasts and with 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 which 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.

The point is, Jesus was the focal point of 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 which emphasize holiness and purity as the Christian way and they attempt 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 also 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 world-view, 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.

However a lot of 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 the conventional wisdom

in today's powerful youth culture tells young people to think of themselves first and that style and fashion are what counts in getting ahead. A lot 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.

Our culture's dominant conventional wisdom for young people and adults supports values that one commentator calls the three "A's," achievement, affluence and appearance. You are urged to base your lives on these values and to believe that your self-worth and level of satisfaction are dependent on how well you live according to these values.

Jesus really got into trouble when he 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 it 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.