Palm Sunday, April 9, 2006
**JESUS! POWER!**
Mark 11:1-11

If you have attended Nebraska home football games, you probably have participated when cheerleaders lead the crowd in shouting from one side of the stadium to the other, HUSKER! POWER! Another way of energizing the players and the crowd is the Tunnel Walk. On the big screens, you can see the coaches and the team, accompanied by appropriate music, entering the field as the crowd welcomes them.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem with his disciples on that first Palm Sunday, it was not nearly as spectacular. No one shouted, JESUS! POWER! According to the gospel stories, they shouted, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David." The crowds expected Jesus to exhibit one kind of power. They did not realize he was bringing a different kind of power. He entered the city riding on a donkey, which is not at all a symbol of the kind of power the people were expecting. He was not accompanied by hundreds of soldiers marching in strict cadence and carrying weapons of death.

It was a different kind of parade. A humble teacher, controversial, followed by a small group of disciples. Enthusiasm is contagious, especially on a religious holiday in Jerusalem. According to the gospel stories, within a short time, the word spread, the crowd grew, and people welcomed him with the hope that he would restore their nation in the tradition of David, their popular king from years ago.

The spontaneity of such devotion is attractive and tempting. But Jesus was not fooled by the crowd's enthusiasm. He knew that much of it was misguided and would be short-lived. Ordinarily, he avoided the spectacular. He knew that crowds can be fickle and turn against you.

Above all, he knew about the use and misuse of power. Earlier in the temptation stories, he refused the tempter's invitation to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple to display his power to the crowds. He refused the invitation to turn the stones into bread and in that way feed the hungry and gain followers. Later, when he was arrested, he did not resist. He came to demonstrate an alternative type of power — the power of the unconditional love of God.

He accepted the crowd's enthusiastic devotion, but he did not attempt to misuse it or exploit it. That had been true of his ministry all along. He knew when to use his power and when not to use it. He refused to use power to dominate and manipulate.

On the other hand, he was by no means afraid to use his power to rescue people when he found them caught in circumstances from which they could not extricate themselves. He would help people when they could not help themselves. He would also use his power to help people help themselves.

He also made it clear in his examples and teachings that you are to follow his example in how you use your gifts. How you use your energy is one of the most important decisions you have to make. In one of his parables, he emphasized how crucial it is to use your power to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, provide clothing to those who need it, and visit those who are sick and in prison. He said that when you do this, you are doing it to him as well.

At the same time, he was reluctant to use his power in such a way as to perpetuate a relationship of permanent dependency. Whenever he encountered the broken and the helpless, he did not gather them in his arms and say, in effect, “Let me carry you around for the rest of your life.” Remember the story of the four friends who brought the paralyzed man to him for healing. Jesus said, “Rise, take up your bed and walk.” In other words, now it’s time for you to begin to use your own power to carry yourself and help carry others.

After healing another individual, and when that person wanted to tag along with him and remain dependent, Jesus gently and lovingly told him, “You need to go back to your own home and your own people and let them know the good that God has done for you, how mercy has broken in and blessed your life, and then you need to pass on to others the kind of blessing and healing you have received.”

It is a misuse of power to help someone and then through that help establish a permanent relationship of dependency. Here’s why: First of all, no human being is good enough or strong enough or permanent enough to be a father or mother figure for another person forever.

Furthermore, whenever you rely too much on someone else’s power, you are at the same time discounting your own, and you are in danger of becoming permanently dependent on someone else. You have power of your own that is meant to be developed and used. Permanent dependency does not work.

Sheldon Kopp, a Jewish psychotherapist, wrote a book with the title, If You Meet Buddha on the Road, Kill Him. His point is that if you encounter anyone who claims he or she 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 all the power and the patient has none. The request is to do something about your problem without it costing you any effort at all. His book challenges this kind of helping.

It’s a request for the misuse of power. As I said before, Jesus was always willing to use his power to help rescue individuals, and he calls you to do the same. But he was also careful not to take what is appropriate under certain circumstances and elevate it to 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. At the beginning of his ministry, he rejected this use of power when he was tempted to turn the stones into bread. On that original Palm Sunday, he refused to become the type of political leader they wanted. He did not enter this world to be the leader of any one people or nation. On the contrary, he came for everyone, everywhere, including especially the outcasts and the non-religious. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” No one is excluded from God’s unconditional love.

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

God's power, as revealed in Jesus, works in ways that often seem to contradict the kind of power people usually support and trust. This does not mean that because he entered Jerusalem on a donkey and refused to be a political leader that he was above politics.

Later in the week, he was not nailed to the cross for being too spiritual. He was killed for being too political. When he taught that the barriers between race and class are human-constructed separations and need to be abolished, that's a political issue.

As is often the case, his enemies understood him better than many of his closest followers. He was executed for his politics, which were labeled as treasonous. He never retreated from the crucial social issues of his day into a world of private piety. As firmly as the prophets before him, he stood for the oppressed and against the oppressors. In the true prophetic tradition, he knew that the real troublemakers in this world are not the ignorant, not the people on the margins of life, but the intelligent and the highly gifted who become corrupt.

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, the problem with violence is not that it changes too much, but that it changes too little. One form of oppression is replaced with another. 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, which is what the crowds wanted on that Palm Sunday. That kind of kingdom is never eternal and in the end always fails. Rather, he prayed that God's kingdom would come to be recognized as already being among and within them. That kingdom is eternal. It is among us and within each one of us. It's Jesus Power!

The story of Palm Sunday in the gospel named Mark has an unusual ending. "Then Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." Mark then goes on to tell what Jesus did on Monday, and that's the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey would say.

Looming over the excitement and drama of Palm Sunday is the shadow of a coming trial and the death of Jesus on the cross. It's helpful to remember that you can't get to the Easter experience from Palm Sunday without going through the trial of Jesus on Thursday night and his death on the cross on Friday.

In her new book, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith, Anne Lamott writes, "I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion... I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb; everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you're talking." (p. 140)

We are Easter people, but we live also in a Good Friday world. Innocent people suffer, suicide bombers kill civilians, young soldiers die. We still kill each other.

Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter go together. Together they tell you about Jesus Power. You can't understand one without the others.

Fred Craddock, one of my favorite preachers, describes the events of Holy Week this way: “A child falls down and skins a knee or elbow and comes running to mother. The mother picks up the child and says, ‘Let me kiss it to make it well.’ She picks up the child, kisses the skinned place, holds the child in her lap and all is well. Did her kiss make it well? No. It was the ten minutes in her lap. Just sit in the lap of love and see the mother crying. ‘Mother, why are you crying? I’m the one who hurt my elbow.’ ‘Because you hurt,’ the mother says, ‘I hurt.’ That does more for the child than all the bandages and medicine in the world, just sitting in her lap.”

“What is the cross?” Craddock asks. “Can I say it this way? It is to sit for a few minutes in the lap of God who hurts because you hurt.”

Jesus Power is seen on Palm Sunday as he enters the city and with courage lives out the last days of his life as one of us, betrayed and denied by friends, unjustly put on trial, suffers and dies.

Jesus Power is love becoming vulnerable, love exposing itself to hate, and love conquering hate. That’s what we will be celebrating next Sunday on Easter. Amen.