

Palm Sunday 2018

Man, What a Week.

I have said before that I tend to struggle with Holy Week and that honestly, if it were all up to me I would just give the next seven days a pass and I'd see you on Easter Sunday. Like 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", she continues, "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".

We are, after all, first-worlders, and it would be easy to pretend that the messiness, the paradox and the suffering of Holy Week never existed, easy to stay indoors and pretend that our own world doesn't currently include violence, deception, Twitter and the poignant voice of our children bravely speaking truth to power. To pretend that *we*, of course, would *never* have made the decisions like the ones that betrayed the son of God.

There's a lot made of the act of foot-washing, and I hope that many of you choose to participate in that powerful act on Maundy Thursday, but for Reverend David Gray, a Presbyterian minister from Bethesda, it's all about our hands. He says that even as the crowds who came to Jerusalem strewed Jesus' path with palm fronds, "many locals put up their hands in confusion asking, 'who is this?' who is causing all the trouble? The establishment in Jerusalem was angry and raised fists in defiance. Jesus criticized the uneven burdens in Jerusalem saying that the Pharisees and scribes would not 'lift a finger' to help those in need. Instead they put thirty pieces of silver in Judas Iscariot's hands to betray Jesus so they could put him on trial." Reverend Gray points out that we literally wash our hands all the time and challenges us, at the beginning of Holy Week to look at them and how we choose to use those hands. He asks, "Are you prepared to lift a finger to help those in need? Will you come to our Maundy Thursday service and join in laying down your burden and sins...at the foot of the cross? Will you be there on Good Friday...as we ask forgiveness for the ways we have crucified our Lord? And will we walk the week with compassion, holding hands with each other through it?"

He reminds us that if we try to ignore our sins, as Pilate did, we are stained by them. If we try to wash our hands of the needs and problems of the world, we will find that we are bound to them. There are two sides to this day, reflected in its two names, Palm and Passion Sunday. Reverend Gray, quoting Anne Lamott again, reminds us that we are both sides of Holy Week, we are Easter people living in a Good Friday world, a world of many traumas and challenges where innocents are too often mistreated in too many ways. We can be the crowd confidently shouting Hosanna at the same time that we are fickle and intransigent, turning our backs when we don't seem to be getting what we want or what we feel we deserve. We love our neighbors as ourselves but only as long as they look like or believe like, well, ourselves. We are not perfect. Deeply as it pains me to admit it, *I* am not perfect.

Rachel Held Evans articulated this for me in her story about using *her* hands to make crosses out of palm fronds, a skill that still eludes me. The effort of trying to manipulate the too-short leaves was an exercise in frustration and for her, "the crumpled fronds and awkward crosses spread across my dining room

table spoke not of holiness, but of imperfection. Messy, screwed-up, real-life imperfection. It took a few hours and a few completed crosses for me to realize that this is how it's supposed to be. That the symbolism was perfectly imperfect."

My week has included reminders of our own passions, examples of how our world has turned upside down. Painful visions of our leadership washing their hands and turning their backs on the pleas of their people, visions tempered by the uplifting sight of our next generation teaching their parents how it can be changed. Our kids were just amazing yesterday and I couldn't be prouder or more moved. Teach your parents well.

And now we turn to Holy Week. Ms Evans reminds us that it wasn't a great week for the disciples. That they betrayed, ran away, lied and doubted.

It certainly wasn't a perfect week for Jesus. He wept, he wondered if there was another way. He asked why he had been forsaken.

She suggests that Holy Week isn't even perfect for God, "as he looks down on the messes we have made, the stupid wars that we wage and the imperfect representation of his son that we clumsily project to the world."

Remembering the collection of clumsily made palm crosses, she concludes that "maybe that's how it's supposed to be. Maybe Holy Week isn't about perfection maintained, but about imperfection restored- an execution device transformed into a symbol of pardon, three denials transformed into three declarations of love, and a tomb transformed into the birthplace of hope."

We are a people of Good Friday and of Easter. A people of hands and of feet, of cheers of hosanna and cries for crucifixion. A people who can forgive and be forgiven. Like those poorly made palms, we are perfectly imperfect.

Amen.