

"Give It Up For..."

Palm Sunday / Sunday of the Passion
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Sunday, March 28, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Philippians 2:5–11c

One of the expressions we hear these days as people are introduced to an audience is "Give it up for Fred, or Bono, or Taylor." I remember being a keynote speaker at a large youth event and having the person who introduced me use that phrase: "Let's give it up for Pastor Ludwig." I wasn't sure what they were going to give up for me, but as I mounted the stage, they clapped politely.

Maybe if that expression had been around that day Jesus processed into Jerusalem, someone might well have instructed the crowd to "Give it up for Jesus." That expression would have seemed appropriate amidst the waving palm branches, the garments on the road, and the shouted hosannas.

There is little doubt that this was an exciting time. This Jesus of Nazareth was an exciting guy. He had the spunk to stand up to the self-righteous Pharisees. He made the little people feel just as important as the powerful. He spoke with such authority that even the Roman soldiers seemed to listen to him. He befriended everyone – saint and sinner alike. And those stories about him – it was said he healed the sick; he gave sight to the blind; he could touch someone's crippled leg and make it whole again. There were even stories that he made dead people come back to life.

Now that's exciting stuff! Some people were even saying that Jesus was the Promised Messiah – the long-awaited Savior of the people; the one who would lead Israel back to the greatness it had known under King David.

So why not "give it up" for Jesus? If all this was true – the stories about him, the speculation, the miraculous abilities, the proven leadership potential he seemed to display – Jesus deserved the adulations. It was a reception fit for a King, and now they had one – a King strong enough to deliver them from this awful Roman oppression. That's what it felt like that palm-waving day.

And this is precisely the temptation Jesus faced on that Sunday of long ago: to be who the people wanted him to be and not who he really was. The temptation to give in to the desires of the crowd; to be worshiped and lifted up as a great charismatic leader; to fulfill the political agenda that others had in mind; to free the people from the Romans, and not from their sinfulness; the temptation to exploit his equality with God.

But, as we know who listen to this story year in and year out, Jesus didn't give in to the temptations. He didn't flinch from the course that was set for him. He could have. He could have done a lot of things, and in our imaginations, we can conjure up all kinds of different endings to Jesus' mission and ministry. He could have mounted a throne the crowd wanted him to instead of a cross; he could have led Israel to worldly domination by crushing the Roman Empire with the mighty hand of God. He could have eliminated pestilence and disease. He could have fed all the hungry of the world with a bumper

crop of manna from heaven such that Israel had never seen before. He could have eradicated evil from the face of the earth and set up his Kingdom right then and there.

He could have. He could have. But he didn't. He didn't because he was Jesus, and that wasn't what Jesus was about. That was what those people, the crowd that day, were about. They celebrated him one day, and when he didn't meet their expectations, they condemned him the next. That's what they were about. And we're like that, let's confess right now, when we try to make Jesus into something that he was never meant to be. We're like that when we still try to tempt Jesus by waving palms and carrying a banner that makes Jesus out to be the leader who exemplifies our politics or our expectations or our wishes.

Jesus was never what people expected him to be. He wasn't obedient to the passing whims and zealous aspirations of others. He was obedient to his Father in heaven, even to the point of dying for those who turned their backs on him at his greatest hour.

Jesus, you see, turned the phrase of the day around, for he gave it up for us. As the early Christian hymn Paul quoted in his letter to the Philippians, our second lesson for this day, so wonderfully and poetically expresses. Hear it, again, but this time through the imaginative interpretation of Dr. Eugene Petersen as he translates this passage for us in language we can grasp:

He (Jesus) had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human*! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that – a crucifixion.

As the crowds "gave it up for Jesus" and then, when their wishes weren't fulfilled, gave him up to the authorities, Jesus gave it up, gave it all up -- his breath, his blood, his body, his life -- for us. As one theologian has so insightfully written about what Jesus did: "Jesus came not to save us from our humanity, but to give full expression to his and in so doing set before us new possibilities in our own."

Finally, let's notice one more important thing about what Paul wrote. Look at how Paul introduced this hymn into his letter. He wrote: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." What we witness in Christ this Palm Sunday is nothing less than an image of the lives we are meant to live – obedient, faithful to our callings, emptying of self so that we can give to others. To let something be, as Paul encourages us, is a restful, gracious reception. It is not a grasping, but a welcome. We see this in baptism where the one who is being baptized cannot possibly give assent to the event but can only be given what the church offers through Jesus Christ. To let something be is visible today in the reception of bread and wine when we are handed the elements in which Jesus has located his presence. We don't take the body and blood; we receive them.

So, says Paul, "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," and receive from him this day, gifts for living and serving as he lived and served among us.

On the rock band U2's album *Rattle and Hum*, the great blues guitarist B.B. King sings a moving Gospel song. He lists the shortcomings of his life. He enumerates the damage done in relationships – each time adding a refrain about his new life, in which he sings,

“When love comes to town I want to jump that train,
When love comes to town I wanna catch that flame.
Maybe I was wrong to ever let you down,
But I did what I did before love came to town.”
Today, friends, Palm Sunday, love has come to town.

AMEN.