

“Faithful Even to Death”

John 12:20-43

Last week, in the extended optional Gospel reading (which I did not include in the service) we are told of how the chief priests and Pharisees knew that Jesus was actually from God or at least was a prophet of God, but they wanted to kill Him anyway, because they wanted to keep things just the way they were. Jesus was inconvenient because they did not want to change. Only Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea made public their faith in Christ, and that was only after He was dead. Today, in John’s Gospel, we hear that “many of the authorities believed in Him,” but feared what would happen to them if they made their faith known.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we hear St. Paul exhort all people to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and to give glory to God the Father. “At the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” The reality is that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The only question is “when?” If that does not happen until the Day of Judgment, it will be too late.

It is a strange thing to come to worship, to preach, to confess our faith in God, and to do so without me being able to see those worshipping together. And likewise, you can see me and perhaps members of your family gathered together, but this is a strange way to celebrate Palm

Sunday. The crowd on Palm Sunday was certainly not practicing “social distancing,” but we are today.

Today, I chose to use the alternative Gospel reading rather than the appointed Passion reading from the Gospel of Matthew, because that is also the appointed reading for Monday of Holy Week and I am going to be focusing on those readings as we gather in the morning online over the next few days, rather than the Bible class focusing on the Lord’s Prayer as we have been. It is Passion Week. We are going to focus on the Passion readings.

During this time when we are all asked to sacrifice, we will spend time each day this week hearing the Good News of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for the forgiveness of sin, and receive the sure promise of eternal life and salvation found in Christ’s Body and shed Blood. It is such a loss that we cannot gather on this holy feast day and participate in the Body and Blood of our Lord. But we will in the not too distant future. And I am optimistic that this pause from activity, this hiatus from public gatherings, this quarantine from social contact will create a hunger and thirst for what has been missing.

The reality is that Christ has not been missing; Christ is not absent from the church, because you are the church. What has been missing is the Sacrament, the vehicle by which we get to participate in the miraculous as the Son of God comes to us.

There is something else that we are missing out on today. This day was to be a day in which eight of our children of God (the largest confirmation class I have ever had); this was to be the day in which they

were to confirm the faith of their Baptism and publicly confess their faith in the one True God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

They were to make the same pledge of faith that I made and most of you made when we were their age. After they have stated the words of the Apostle's Creed, reaffirming the faith created in them at their Baptism, I was to ask them several questions.

And there will come a day in the not too distant future when I will ask them: "Do you intend faithfully to conform all your life to the Divine Word, to be faithful in the use of God's Word and sacraments, which are his means of grace, and in faith, word, and action to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?" And they will answer: "I do, by the grace of God."

This is a very important question. This is a question that many of the people in Jerusalem, in Jesus' day, were unwilling to answer. Many of them liked Jesus and believed He was from God, however, they did not want their faith to cause them any inconveniences.

If you are focusing your attention on God only when it is convenient for you; if you are gathering for worship only when it is convenient for your schedule, you are rejecting the confession of faith made at your confirmation. I long for the day when the body and blood of the Son of God, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins is offered here each week once again. Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of Me." It is here that God gives you forgiveness, life, and salvation. If this is not of the highest priority, then you are rejecting the confession of faith made at your confirmation.

This past week, in Bible class, I cynically asked, "How many people

who vowed before God that they would rather die than fall away from their faith – they vowed they would be faithful unto death – how many are secretly a bit happy that they don't have to feel guilty about not coming to church?" Unfortunately, I don't think I really want to know the answer to that question.

We have gathered together today (as much as this can be called a gathering), but we have joined together to hear the great Good News that there is One who was faithful, even to the point of death, even death on a cross.

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us," Paul tells us. "We have been justified by His blood . . . saved by Him from the wrath of God." And all of this while we were still His enemies. It is beyond our wildest expectation of how we would imagine the Almighty God to be. Why should He care about us so much?

The Son of God leaves the glory of the heavenly realm so that He can be lifted up upon a cross because that is the only way to bring healing to the nations. So that he can bring peace to those who hate Him. So that He can open the eyes of those who are blind to the truth, whose hearts are hardened. Our Lord wants every knee to bow and every tongue confess Him as Lord and be saved. Even from the cross, Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Jesus entered into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday thinking about you. You were His highest priority. He poured out His blood as the ransom price for your slavery to sin, to rescue you from the depths of death and hell. Jesus says, "when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." Amen.