

What Is Left Unsaid

Text: Mark 11:1-11;14:1- 15:47

It is a common feature of human communication that what is said and what is actually heard are often two wildly divergent things.

Consider what happened during a morning chapel at Princeton Seminary some thirty plus years ago. This was a time of ferment in theological education, particularly as more and more women were entering the ministry. Resistance to this fact by some of the more conservative men caused a number of women seminarians to become quite active in asserting that they and their education were not to be afterthoughts, nor was this education to be given to them condescendingly. It also caused some of them to be highly sensitive to these issues and a bit combative, as well they might be when there were people who told them that God didn't want them there. Well, it was at this time during one morning in chapel that the admissions department tried to present to the student body a new promotional film for the seminary that they intended to show prospective students. They began by announcing its title, "Meant for Ministry." But before they could start the projector rolling, one young woman who had been very active in the Women's Center, but who was not a very good listener, stood up and loudly proclaimed: "Men for Ministry! I think not! Sisters, are you with me?"; at which point she promptly stormed out of the chapel, leaving everybody else in her wake, including all the sisters, in slack-jawed amazement, wondering what had just happened.

Now, it is because it is so frequent that what is said and what is heard do diverge from each other, that some of the best advice any minister can receive is to be sparing in his or her use of irony in sermons, and particularly in the use of irony's bitterest form, sarcasm. In a situation where there is already so much potential for misunderstanding, one doesn't want to confuse

things more. This is particularly likely to happen when one uses irony, for irony is usually a matter of saying one thing while meaning its opposite, and where the real intent is signaled by the use of a slightly mocking tone, or some other kind of unusual inflection. The problem is that sometimes the tone is missed, and people actually think you actually mean what you just said, when you really meant them to understand its opposite. Thus sometimes people can come away from a sermon thinking that you just told them extraordinary things such as that God doesn't exist, that God hates certain people, or that God is a male or a Republican – or a Democrat, or similar religiously counter-intuitive things. You expect people to know as a matter of course that you couldn't mean *that*; *that*, though, is precisely what some come away thinking you mean. Sometimes, too, people only hear the mocking tone, and think you are just making fun of people.

But, if one is well advised to avoid irony in the pulpit, there are times that it is unavoidable simply because the biblical text itself is so ironical. One thing seems to be going on in the story, but deeper down something else quite different is actually the case. Often the irony is not even gentle irony, but bitter.

Consider, for example, a well known miracle story in the Gospel of John. Jesus heals a man born blind, but does so on the Sabbath. When the Pharisees ask the man born blind who healed him, he replies that he doesn't know. When they keep pushing him on the issue, he asks them if they, too, want to become the healer's disciples. They tell him to shut up and mind his manners. They certainly don't want to become the healer's disciples. Yet as the story progresses, it becomes very clear that these ones who claim knowledge and insight are the ones who are really blind. Jesus has said that he is the light of the world, indeed, the light that enlightens every person. Yet, they can't see it; they don't even know where he comes from, although every miraculous event would indicate that he comes from God. He remains an unknown to them. The

man born blind, however, once he finally comes face to face with Jesus, the one who healed him, confesses, “Lord, I believe.” It is hard in a sermon not to underline what the Pharisees miss and their blindness in missing it; it is hard not to make fun of them. After all, the text seems to do so.

This morning, Palm Sunday, is also an instance of biblical irony. On the surface the story of Palm Sunday is a wonderful story about the royal greeting that Jesus receives when he rides into Jerusalem. He is received as a king, and when the Pharisees complain about all the fuss that is being made over him, Jesus tells them that if the people were quiet, then the very stones would cry out. But as it turns out the kingship that Jesus is willing to claim, and that the people think his kingship is about, are quite different things. They think they are celebrating a secular king; he claims that his kingdom is not of this world. And as if to prove it, when his would-be subjects turn on him by the end of the week, it is clear that his kingdom is not of this world, for he is powerless in the face of the rebellion. He is crucified as a common criminal and even his friends desert him. This is not royal treatment; a real king wouldn't put up with it.

As the Gospels tell it, that parade for Jesus on Palm Sunday was the beginning of the end. It was because they celebrated him as a king that he met his cruel end. The parade and Jesus' visible popularity with the crowd drew the resentment of the religious authorities. It worried the secular Roman authorities. They started to plot ways to kill him. Initially they were worried about what the crowds might do. As it turned out they didn't need to be worried at all. Crowds are always shallow in the depth of their commitment. With them it is always a matter of “what have you done for me lately?” and a sort of political buyer's remorse, a sort of shame over the unbridled enthusiasm. So in quick order even the crowds turn on him.

Yet here is the irony. In the case of Jesus, it was not that after the parade he was no longer the king they proclaimed him to be. It was not that he once was king and then ended up in

ignominy because of the events of the next few days. Rather, he actually *became* the real king by what happened to him over the next few days. He became the king by his faithfulness to them when they turned on him. The irony is that he was the real king because he wasn't the sort of king they thought they wanted and that they thought they were celebrating.

On Palm Sunday we are right to sing "Hosanna!" We are right to do so and to proclaim Jesus as King, and we are right to pray that he might ride into our hearts and reign there. But the reason we are right is not because he rode into Jerusalem as any other king might, but because of all that we just read that happened to him *after* the parade on Palm Sunday.

For the fact of the matter is that Christ deserves loud Hosannas not for his immense pre-Holy Week popularity nor for his *appearance* as a triumphant king nor for the winning season he just had as a great preacher and teacher. Instead, he deserves hosannas for giving Judas the freedom to love and serve him, which is also the freedom to betray him. He deserves hosannas for going humbly like a lamb to the slaughter, opening not his mouth. He deserves hosannas for his being betrayed, mocked, spat upon and unjustly murdered because in all these things, he saved the crowd. He deserves hosannas for the love that he had for all of those who after they shouted "hosanna!" quite deliberately betrayed him and whom he never betrayed. He deserves "hosannas" for his humility, for that humility saved a world, conquering it by love and patience and care, not by violence or force. He deserves the accolades and parades fit for a king because in the end he chose to act *not* like kings normally act.

St. Paul underlines this and recommends that very mind set to us when he says so frankly: "Have therefore this mind which is yours in Christ Jesus, who although he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled

himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. *Therefore* God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Friends, this Sunday, Palm Sunday, is a festival day. Next Sunday, Easter, is a festival day, too. The reason that either of them are times of rejoicing is because of all that happens in between them. Pay attention to what happens. Watch, wait, weep. Throughout this week do not be like those in the crowds who initially cheered him on but then could not walk with him or watch with him. Instead, be in all things faithful; walk with him and watch with him all this week. Walk with him to his death that you may have the life he gives.