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“A Complete Stranger”

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Mark 11:1-19
Hebrews 13:2

There is no telling how many people were there on that first Palm Sunday when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. The Bible doesn't tell us, except to say that it was “a very large crowd.” They were thrilled when they saw Jesus and they started waving palm branches in the air and shouting, “Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord!” They were certain that this was indeed the one they had been waiting for. They heard about him walking on water, healing the sick, feeding thousands, turning water into wine. They were certain that he was the one who would redeem Israel, the one who would bring peace and prosperity, the one who would overthrow the Romans and establish Israel as a real power in the world once again. They were so ready for this! You know exactly how it is when you just ache for a better future for your country and your people.

The Israelites were oppressed, poor, and taxed very heavily by the Romans, and they saw the Messiah as the one who would change all of that. Finally they would go from being poor to being prosperous, from having nothing to having everything, and from being on the **bottom** rung of the world's ladder to the top. No wonder they shouted, “Hosanna in the highest! Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord!” They knew that this was the long awaited Messiah who would give them what they wanted, and deliver those things they had been waiting for.

As we know, this particular Messiah turned out to be a huge disappointment. It did not happen as they expected at all. Jesus **didn't** overthrow the Romans, and he **didn't** establish a new monarchy with himself seated on the throne, and he **didn't** prove to be the kind of Messiah the people were looking for. And so what happened to the great big crowd that waved their palm branches on Palm Sunday? Within five short days their “Hosannas” would turn to “Crucify Him!” He was not what they had been looking for and how quickly everything changed.

From the time he rode into Jerusalem that day, Jesus was different. It seems that even those people who had seen him before and witnessed his miracles felt that he let them down. He is finally arriving in the Holy City to usher in his Kingdom and how does he appear? He arrived not riding a stallion or being pulled by a chariot, but on a small donkey. Instead of wearing the clothes of a King, he wore the clothes of a pauper. There was nothing to suggest that this was his moment to claim victory, that he was finally ready to be their King. If he was indeed the Messiah they had all been waiting for, then he should make a grand and triumphant entrance into the Holy City, and declare his intention to overthrow the Romans and establish his rule. But nothing like that happened at all.

Now, I have not been to a rodeo in years, but one of my favorite events used to be the time when the announcer would come on the loudspeaker and say that a brave and mighty cowboy was about to come out of the chute riding the meanest animal in the world. There would be banging and snorting heard in the chute, and you could just imagine this mean and untamed horse. The anticipation grows as you imagine the bucking bronco being tamed by a strong, courageous cowboy. You wait and wait and wait, and then, when the anticipation is greatest, the gate opens and a tiny little burro stumbles out of the gate carrying a goofy looking clown. People laugh and laugh, because this is not what they expected at all.

Well, I am not comparing our Lord and Savior to a clown, but I do know that he was an unexpected sight as he rode into Jerusalem that day. He was not trying to impress anyone; he was totally unpretentious and meek. Jesus had become a stranger, and it was upsetting.

His behavior in the week ahead would be very odd, as well. According to Mark's Gospel, immediately after entering Jerusalem, Jesus puts a curse on a fig tree. He is hungry, so he goes up to the tree to see if it has some fruit. It does not, so he promptly put a curse on it, so that it will never bear fruit again. Odd behavior from a man who was said to feed 5000 people.

Then he goes into the temple and has an angry outburst. He kicks out all of the money changers, turns over their tables, and screams at them for turning the House of God into a den of thieves. He predicts the total destruction of the Temple. People are astonished and some of the chief priests ask him: "Where do you get the authority to do such things?" Jesus answers their question with a question, "Who gave John the right to baptize?" They could not decide if the answer was from heaven or from others, saying "We do not know." Jesus then says, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." He is downright defiant, refusing to answer their questions. Before long he is condemning them all, saying "Guard against teachers of the law. They love to walk around in long robes and sit in front rows at meetings, but they cheat widows out of their homes and pray long prayers just to show off. They will be punished most of all."

Jesus is asking for it. No wonder they start making plans to have him killed. His behavior was bizarre, even to his followers. When you read these accounts of his last week on earth you can feel the growing anxiety as people begin to distance themselves from him. He speaks more frequently of his impending death and you can tell that this is not going to end well. Jesus appears determined to make people mad and dash their hopes for a new beginning and a better future.

Well, just as Jesus had become a stranger to the crowds when he entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, I believe that he continues to enter our lives today as a stranger. He represents something so odd, so different, that it catches us off guard. “Love your enemies, pray for your persecutors, carry your cross, save your life by losing it.” We are in for a radical reversal of mind and heart when we encounter this stranger. He offers us a different way of looking at everything.

On this Palm Sunday I would like for us to think together about what Jesus has to teach us about embracing the stranger, who is Christ himself.

The letter to the Hebrews says “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so you entertain angels without knowing it.” Strangers like Jesus are everywhere—those who defy our expectations and keep us off guard. And these are the very people who are angels in disguise and have the potential to become our teachers, to help us see the world with fresh eyes.

Now, I have not done it enough in my 51 years, but I have always been blessed when I opened my life and heart to those I would otherwise ignore. Several years ago our family was invited to serve as a host family for international students at the Colorado School of Mines. We were happy to do so, and assigned a young woman from Holland who was working on her Masters degree in Geophysics. We really had no idea how this would work out and were a little nervous; having agreed to open our hearts and home to a stranger for over a year, sight unseen. It was a little awkward at first, but very quickly Sanne had worked her way into our hearts. It was so much fun to take her skiing, to observe her first Halloween in America, to learn about Dutch legends and customs,, to play games late into the night, and have her wake up with us on Christmas morning. She enriched our lives in so many ways and became a part of our family.

How easily a stranger can become a friend.

Conversely, **how easily a friend can become a stranger.** Have you ever learned something about a person you think you know very well, and all of a sudden they become a stranger to you? They say or do something that makes you wonder if you had never really known them at all. I remember having lunch with a woman whom I had known for years, and we were talking about our pasts and some of our regrets. And she told me something about herself that was so shocking it took my breath away. Now I am a very tolerant person, and I have seen a lot of things in both my personal and professional life. But this revelation stunned me. I sat in silence as this **friend** became a **stranger**. We just sat there, both of us struggling. Then she said, “You don’t know how many people have distanced themselves from me when they learned of my past. I thought it was safe with you.”

In reflecting on this later I realized how radical that sentiment to extend hospitality to a stranger is. To extend hospitality to **this** particular friend who became a stranger, I would have to let go of my preconceived notions, my self righteousness, and enter into her sadness and regret, even while I held to my own beliefs. The Bible is not only telling us how to behave, it is calling for a radical respect for differences. It calls us to enter into the reality of another and move beyond our own narrow world views.

In addition to extending hospitality to the strangers around us, we also need to welcome the strangers **inside** of us. Poet Jan Richardson offers this prayer to help us do just that: Gracious God,

When we have so diligently welcomed one another,
that we have neglected to provide hospitality to our own selves,
teach us to be mindful of the pilgrim within our own soul,
who longs for a welcoming fire, and for shelter in the dark.

Most of us are **not** very good at being gracious toward ourselves. Who is the pilgrim within your own soul? What parts of yourself have you banished, excluded, marginalized? Might you be willing to welcome them in, seat them by the fire, and give them shelter in the dark? What part of yourself have you denied and repressed-- the anger, the grief, the sadness the broken dreams? It is never easy to welcome the stranger **without**, but even harder to welcome the stranger **within**.

Yet it brings healing and wholeness to accept what we have banished. Jane Vennard tells the story of a woman in her 30's became aware she was avoiding all of her friends who were pregnant and who had young children. "I'm just too busy, and we don't have anything in common anymore," she told herself as she refused hospitality from those she had been close to. One day she passed a pregnant stranger on the street and burst into tears. She was so startled by her reaction she felt moved to look more deeply at what was happening in her heart and soul. "I've had two miscarriages," she said. "No one knew. I faced the loss alone. I think I tried to ignore the part of myself who is still grieving." Such experiences need to be acknowledged, welcomed and honored. It's not easy." It is never easy, but welcoming strangers without and within helps us to recognize the Christ in others and the Christ in ourselves. Offering such hospitality means that we become less judging, separating, oppressing.

Again, writes Jane Vennard, "All strangers, even the depression, the crowd of sorrows, the malice, the shame, come bearing a gift. No matter how frightening the guest may appear or how distorted it may seem, **everything** has something to offer

us. We may not know what that gift is or what we have been missing, until it appears.”

Jesus entered Jerusalem at the beginning of his last week on earth, and acted in the strangest of ways. His arrival was disappointing and his behavior bizarre. During those difficult days everyone backed away from him, close friends pretended not to know him, they all ran away. But Jesus knew that he was accomplishing God’s purposes for human redemption and salvation. He was doing something that had never been done before, and it had to unfold in this unconventional way. It would bring something incredible into the world, an understanding of a God of love, vulnerability, and grace. That stranger, who was God in the flesh, brought the most precious gifts of all—forgiveness, grace, and everlasting life.

So, as we enter this week called Holy, let us be radically open to the strangers around us and within us. When we embrace the stranger, we embrace Jesus Christ himself. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

(Quotes from “*Welcoming the Stranger Within*”, Jane Vennard, Jan. 22, 2009, The Iliff School of Theology)

We begin this Sacred Week with the Sacrament of Holy Communion, a symbol of the living presence of Jesus Christ with us and within us.