

The Shouting of the Stones

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 19: 28-40

Delivered on April 14, 2019 at Northminster Presbyterian Church

Sometimes it seems to me that as a pastor, I have a full-time job in straightening out people's misunderstandings of our faith. I don't mind doing that, I think a pastor should do that, but I also find there are quite a lot of misunderstandings out there. For example, one thing that people often say to me is "Rich, aren't you a Reverend." No, I am not a Reverend. I am a pastor, and you can also call me a minister. But saying aren't you a Reverend is sort of like coming up to a judge and saying aren't you an honorable. She's a judge, not an honorable, although you may call her honorable if you like. Another one I get is this. Every now and then when we say the Apostle's Creed someone will come up to me and say "Rich, I don't say that part of where it says I believe in the holy catholic church. I don't agree with the Catholics about this and that, so I don't say that." My friends, it doesn't mean were Catholic, it isn't about the Roman Catholic church. And then a third one I get some time is people will say, "So, you say you're a pastor, well, what religious sect do you belong to?" I don't belong to a sect. I belong to a denomination. Denominations and sects are not the same thing.

Well, I bring all this up, because today is the appropriate time to talk about misunderstandings of our faith, because one big misunderstanding or maybe I should say one thing that leads to misunderstandings is whenever I am in worship on Palm Sunday and I see people half-heartedly waving their palms and quietly singing hymns like Hosanna, Loud Hosanna under their breath. Folks, dear friends, Palm Sunday is anything but quiet. Palm Sunday is loud. Palm Sunday is loud enough to be confused with the roar of a jet engine. Palm Sunday is loud enough to be confused with a heavy metal concert. Believe it or not, Palm

Sunday is even loud enough to be confused with a birthday party for a three-year old. Palm Sunday is loud. Palm Sunday is the day when Jesus comes into Jerusalem, the capital of all Judea and he is welcomed as a conquering king. You and I may not think of Jesus as a conquering king because he doesn't come into town with soldiers and chariots and war horses. But he is a conquering king even if he does not come to town to conquer flesh and blood, but the spiritual powers of the devil and all the forces of darkness in this world. Jesus may be different from other conquering kings because of who he is conquering, but who he is conquering makes him more of a conquering king, not less of one, and I have never heard of a conquering king being welcomed into town silently.

And because Palm Sunday is loud today in our text as Jesus is parading into Jerusalem and the crowd is cheering and waving palm branches in the air some of the Pharisees turns to Jesus and says order your disciples to stop. And that's probably a nice translation, sanitized for our reading. Make your disciples shut up, they probably say.

Now, why do the Pharisees say make your disciples to shut up? Is this just a matter of being concerned about noise pollution? Well, that may be part of it. But I also think that the Pharisees probably recognized that cheering crowds can be awfully seductive. They can be intoxicating.

I came of age during what can probably best be described as the era of arena rock. When I was growing up and you went to a rock concert, no longer did you go see Buddy Holly or the Everley Brothers in venues of 1000 people, but you saw bands like Journey and U-2 and Van Halen in venues with 10 to 20 thousand people, maybe even 50 thousand people. Now, you may say who in the world wants to be around so many people. After all, you have to stand behind all of them at the concession stand and you have to take an hour to follow them all out

of the parking lot on the way home. Who needs that? But here's what I think. You see, when you are in a stage of life when you feel absolutely powerless because someone else is making all the rules, when you are at a stage in life when you have all this youthful energy and there is nowhere that you can express that youthful energy, there is nothing like being able to feel like you are at one with a cheering screaming crowd of tens of thousands of people. Crowds are seductive.

And what Jesus' opponents are afraid of is that in being caught up in the power of this crowd, rational people, intelligent people, will find themselves being hypnotized by this man who comes in the name of love and forgiveness, instead of self-righteousness and judgment. This man who comes in the name of peace instead of in the name of violence. This man who comes to Jerusalem to wear a crown of thorns instead of a crown of gold and jewels. This man and his values threaten them and they see the appeal of joining this crowd. And so they try to silence this crowd. But our Lord will not be silenced. Jesus says even if these disciples are silent the stones will shout out.

Well, we know how the story ends. A week later, these same opponents of Jesus would try and silence him by nailing him to a cross, and on the third day, the stones really did shout out. A stone that was rolled away from an empty tomb shouted out with a message that would never be silenced again.

Isn't it interesting, isn't it interesting that in this world there is still an effort to try and silence our Lord? I often hear people say to me that they think people in the church are persecuted, that Christians in America are persecuted. Well, I don't know much about that. I personally have never felt persecuted. Persecuted, after all, is a pretty strong word. I've never

known anyone in this country to go to jail for sharing their faith, I've never known anyone to be tortured executed or exiled for sharing their faith, not now, not ever. And because there are people around the world who experience these kinds of things, I think we ought to be careful before we say we're persecuted. It tends to trivialize their experience. But I also know that there may be many people in this sanctuary today who wouldn't dare go out and share the good news of our Christian faith, not because we are afraid of arrest or exile, or torture, but because we might be looked at differently. We might be seen as intolerant or forcing our faith down someone's throat. We might be seen as naïve for believing something that others regard as a superstition. We know that people need to be saved and that they need to know the love of Christ in this loveless and hopeless world. We know that but we are afraid of what people think if we share the gospel and so we are silenced. Don't get me wrong, dear friends. I understand that there is a value to silence sometimes. There is sometimes a value to not saying anything. Part of wisdom, I believe is knowing when to speak and knowing when to be silent, and sometimes it is true that we can say quite a lot by not saying anything at all—sometimes, but not all the time.

Sometimes we in the church allow ourselves to be silenced and sometimes we silence each other. I was at a conference in Pittsburgh recently for other pastors and the person making the presentation had a question for all of us. He said how many of you, how many of you pastors out there would like to say something to your congregations in a sermon that you believe the gospel says, but you are afraid to, because you are afraid of what will happen to your jobs if you do. How many hands do you think went up? Do you think it was ten percent, twenty percent? You may be interested to know that about half the hands went up in the room, about half.

Now, that may surprise you, it doesn't surprise me at all, but it may surprise you. And I can tell you this, when I was a kid sitting in the pew and listening to my pastor Bob Howell preach, it never would have occurred to me that he was afraid to say anything. I thought he was just giving me the pure gospel as he saw it regardless of what anyone thought. Had I thought otherwise, it may have changed the way I looked at him, and it probably would have changed the way I looked at God. Isn't it a shame that we silence ourselves? Isn't it a shame that we silence each other? But while we can be silenced for a time, here's what I believe our Lord is saying in this story. The gospel cannot be silenced forever. For have you ever had some truth to tell and you have been afraid to tell it for such a long time, but eventually you got to a point where you said to yourself you know what, I am just tired of being afraid, I'm tired of being afraid and I'm tired of being silent, so here goes nothing, I'm just going to let the truth come out. And I may be able to control how nicely it comes out, and I may be able to control how it is expressed, but what I can't do and what I won't do is stop it from coming out, because I am sick and tired of being afraid. Do you know what that is? That is the voice of God inside you. That is the Holy Spirit burning inside you. The stones will shout out. You cannot stop God's truth from being proclaimed. God's truth will come out in spite of all our cowardice and all our fear.

So if you are afraid, or if you have ever been afraid, here's something I have to say to you. Forgive yourself. Go easy on yourself. God is a lot bigger than your fear or even your cowardice and we are all cowards from time to time. Don't think that you are so big and so important that whether God's truth gets proclaimed depends on you.

While you still have eyes to see, look all around you and see how many wonders of this world proclaim the majesty of God. Go to the Rockies that reach and reach and reach to the

sky. Take a look at the stars on a clear night and see how many you can count. While you still have time this Spring, take a look at the daffodils and the crocuses that push up through the cold hard earth that just a few weeks ago was covered with snow. The stones shout out all around us. Even those things that don't seem to speak at all speak about the majesty of God. Regardless of how cowardly anyone is, regardless of how much anyone tries to stop it, the Lord will be heard in this broken and desperate world of ours.