

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALM SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
LOVE IS DEFINED BY WHAT IT DOES
Philippians 2:6-11&Luke 22:14-23:56
March 28, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES

Jesus did not meet the people's expectations of a victorious warrior and a powerful king. It was difficult for Jesus' own followers to embrace the idea that he came to be a king of love and a suffering servant.

Perhaps more than any other word, **"love"** needs a cleansing bath. It is used to refer to so many different feelings and experiences that it is a wonder it has not lost its usefulness altogether. Practically, love is ultimately defined by what it does. Love that devours its object is very different from love that protects and enhances its object.

A Broadway show tune may become better known than the show that featured it. For example: **"Kiss today goodbye, / The sweetness and the sorrow. / We did what we had to do; / And I can't regret / What I did for love, what I did for love. / "Look, my eyes are dry. / The gift was ours to borrow, / It's as if we always knew: / And I can't forget / What I did for love, what I did for love."** It is hard to forget what you did for love, especially if regret is involved. But at least some of our best work was probably done for love. When we are genuinely motivated by love, we rise to our best selves and fulfill some of our most sublime potential. If you are impressed with what you did for love, however, wait until you see what love did for you.

You may see a predictable sermon coming. It's Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. Here comes a sermon about what sinners we are, and about how bad we should feel about the price Jesus had to pay for our sins. This is when we hear about first-century execution practices, and the conniving Jewish officials, and the brutal Romans, and nails, and blood, and how long it took a person to die on a cross. The bottom line is that all this happened because God loves us. It is a little like listening to an irritated parent rattle off all the things they have given up for

you. It makes you feel really bad about yourself. We can become so convinced that we know all about Palm Sunday and Holy Week that we miss what was really going on. It would not be the first time that people were so sure they knew what they were seeing that they were blind to what was actually happening.

They were all blind that day, that wide-eyed throng shouting ***“Hosannas,”*** waving their palm branches, and jockeying for a better position to see the One who had come. A blind multitude stripped off their outer garments to make a carpet over which he could ride. They were blind, all those who ran out to meet him and then preceded him toward the city, and all those who surrounded him and made the slow procession with him. They could not even see that he was not in a chariot drawn by a powerful stallion, but was riding a small beast of burden. They passed the word, ***“Tell Jerusalem her King is coming!”*** But he would not turn out to be the king they were looking for. As the first Holy Week unfolded everyone turned against him, and even those who had shouted ***“Hosanna!”*** ***began to cry, “Crucify him!”***

In this dramatic season of the Christian year we focus on the cross of Christ. We ask: **“How does the cross accomplish our salvation?”** **“How should we think about the cross?”** **“What does the cross mean for us?”** To properly answer such questions, there is another we must ask: What did the cross mean for Jesus?

It has been suggested that Mark Twain’s **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn** perhaps inadvertently asks a serious religious question. The question is, For what would a person be willing to go to hell?

In a chapter titled **“You Can’t Pray a Lie”** Huck finds himself in a **“tight place.”** He has hidden and protected a runaway slave named Jim. To make matters worse, Jim belongs to Miss Watson, who has befriended Huck. Jim is captured and held for a reward. Huck has serious pangs of conscience about having hidden a slave and believes he is bound for hell as a result. He decides to write Miss Watson and tell her where Jim can be found. Immediately he feels better. He has done the right thing, and has escaped the torments of hell. But then he starts thinking about Jim, the friend he is about to send back into slavery. Jim had done everything for Huck, and had told Huck he was his best friend in the world. Huck is trapped between wanting to avoid hell and wanting to protect Jim. Under this great pressure Huck finally says to himself, **“All right, then, I’ll go to hell,”** and he tears up the letter to Miss Watson.

Hell is understood in many different ways, but it is generally understood to represent the very worst that can happen! It is the one place, or condition, we hope above all else to avoid. What is the very worst that can happen? A theologian might say that the worst of all bad possibilities is to be separated from God. **“To be fully conscious of the nearness of God and yet to be excluded from God is what the ancient dogmas saw as the tortures of hell.”** (Pannenburg) In other words, hell is the ultimate in estrangement and isolation. Why would anyone willingly embrace hell? It could only be a most remarkable love that would do that. Jesus said, **“Greater love has no one than this, that one’s life be laid down for a friend.”** Surely that is enough. You may be able to think of certain people you would die for. But Jesus did more than die for us. He suffered terrible physical pain and utter humiliation. But Jesus did more even than this.

Love did not just suffer and die for you, as incredible as that is. The great Apostles’ Creed, from the fourth century, declares that Jesus **“descended into hell”** as part of his death on the cross. Listen to his most horrifying words from the cross: **“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”** Jesus experienced the worst that can happen. Jesus knew separation from God, utter alienation, God-forsakenness. Often the artists and poets have a more vivid sense of the meaning of hell than anyone. T. S. Eliot, in *Cocktail Party*, wrote: **“What is hell? / Hell is oneself, / Hell is alone, the other figures in it / Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from / And nothing to escape to. One is always alone.”**

Love, in the person of the crucified Christ, endured the worst of all human possibilities for you. In the **“harrowing of hell”** Christ set its prisoners free. When Christ makes us free, we are free indeed!

The search for purity in love is a noble but daunting pursuit. In the name of love so many utterly selfish things are said and done. All human love is tainted with elements of self-interest. Given our ambiguous human nature, it cannot be otherwise. W. B. Yeats wrote: **“Only God, my dear, / Could love you for yourself alone / And not your yellow hair.”** In Jesus Christ we see the purity of God’s love. God loves us for ourselves alone.

If you have the courage to become a loving and faithful servant of God, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.