

What Is Reconciliation? Crowdsourcing

John Wilkinson

Third Presbyterian Church

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Philippians 2:5-11 and Matthew 26:14-27

Holy Week is upon us. It is a full week and a significant week. It begins this morning. And it begins with two questions.

1. What do we call this morning?
2. And what is reconciliation on a day like this? How does it matter? What will it look like?

The simpler question would seem to be what do we call this morning. In all my memory, and perhaps yours, it's been called Palm Sunday. Thanks, Captain Obvious. We wave palms – even we adults – and we sing uplifting hymns and we mark Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It's a festive day – Palm Sunday.

Yet there are other approaches. Some traditions, and perhaps some of you, called it, or call it yet, Passion Sunday, Passion being the word used to describe the cadence of Jesus' trial, betrayal and crucifixion. This affirmation tips the hand more clearly about what is to come soon, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

There are no right or wrong answers to this for us Presbyterians. None of this is prescribed. But I have noticed over the last decade more and more of my colleagues even calling this day Palm/Passion Sunday. I understand that, even though I am not quite there yet.

Still, you will note what we have done today. We have begun worship with the narrative of the triumphal entry and the singing of hymns and waving of palms. We have just heard a later portion of Matthew's gospel, the betrayal narrative, and other music will mark that experience. Palm Sunday, with a clear recognition that the triumphal spirit won't last long.

So in that context, we move to the second question, about reconciliation. If ever we've doubted that this theme has run its course, this week's events have

underscored its timeliness, whether in Syria or Sweden or Egypt or acts in our own nation and community.

What is reconciliation? At a Session meeting in January, we spent some time discussing this question. One of your elders framed the question with clarity. **How do I reconcile my faith and my every-day living?** The persons seated around the table nodded in agreement. How do I live out what I believe in a world that does not always embrace what I believe? How do the values and practices I experience at church make a difference in the world?

For her, and many of us, the tug-of-war between faith and culture, between belief and daily behavior, seemed almost irreconcilable. There are choices to make. One choice, of course, does not worry about it, sees no connection at all between this hour on Sunday and all the rest of the hours “out there.” Another would so equate faith and culture that there is no difference, a position which almost necessarily removes you from living in the real world. Neither seems acceptable, sustainable or even faithful.

So, for those of us who cannot say that faith means nothing in culture or faith calls us apart from culture, we face an inherent messiness that undergirded our elder’s question. How? How? How do we seek reconciliation?

If you want to see how messy that question really is, how conflicting and contradictory, just look at this morning, and this week.

Imagine yourself as a sports fan attending a game. Your team is not expected to win. Perhaps some of us can imagine that more easily than others! Your team is not expected to win, and yet they are playing with energy and enthusiasm and have actually taken a surprising half-time lead. As the team runs off the field to the locker room, you find yourself cheering, yelling even, at the top of your lungs, along with thousands of others. You will pay for it the next day but you don’t care. Your team, a notable underdog, is playing great and they are positioned to pull off an upset. So you yell, and cheer.

The second half begins, and reality takes over. Depending on the game, errors are made, strikeouts happen, interceptions are thrown, fumbles, easy shots are missed. The unimaginable becomes the inevitable as defeat is snatched from the jaws of victory. And you find yourself, and those sitting around you, producing voluminous noise again, but this time not so positive. Cheers turn into jeers,

shouts of joy turn into boos. You might even utter words or phrases you might otherwise not utter in polite company, directed at a referee or even your own team – a coach, an overpaid player. Your voice will pay for it the next day, but you don't care.

Same game. Same crowd. Two entirely different reactions.

How do we reconcile faith and culture? How do we reconcile Palm and Passion? How can we find ourselves in the crowd this morning, waving palms, throwing our coats on the ground, shouting "Hosanna," cheering, singing, and then find ourselves in another crowd just a few days later, jeering, booing, shouting "Crucify him."

So one answer to the elder's question – how can we reconcile our faith and our living – is that we can't. Or we don't. Or we don't try to. In some ways that would make sense. The gap is too big. The discomfort and unease would be too great. So we just compromise, if we try at all.

Some of you know that my parents made an annual habit of coming to Rochester and Third Church during Holy Week each year, and my dad came after my mom's death.

My dad liked to say that in his later years he became more conservative theologically and that therefore he became more progressive politically. For him, as an Ohioan, that meant, because of his faith, he became strongly opposed to the death penalty. Now I believe that people of faith can disagree on a great deal politically, but the death penalty, to my dad, and to me, seems pretty clear.

This week, as we rehearse the scandal of one execution, the state of Arkansas is preparing to execute eight death row inmates. I am sure there will be crowds outside those prisons, and that people of faith will both be pleading for a halt and cheering for the result.

What that seems to say to me, however, is that reconciliation cannot look like compromise. It cannot smooth over differences. It must live with tension and paradox.

We do not like paradox. We like clarity and simplicity, whether it's each of us as individuals or all of us as a part of a community. And the truth is, if we are to take ourselves seriously, we all live in overlapping communities whose values may

compete, may conflict. We will find ourselves in conversations, or read a Facebook post, and find ourselves caught up. And then we pause and contemplate. How does that moment connect with other moments in our lives?

The “What Would Jesus Do” question from several weeks ago which seems on a surface level to simplify, actually can complicate. And it presumes that we are eternally consistent, either more than human or less than human and immune to crowd psychology, to mob mentality. We are not.

If you want to see paradox, look at the two crowds – “Hosanna” and “Crucify.” It is not likely that these same people would have been in both crowds, but we know how easy it is to get caught up.

If you want to see paradox, look at Judas. In Jesus’ inner circle, marked for leadership, trusted. Yet Judas conspires to betray Jesus, for blood money to be sure, but also because he was convinced that Jesus was not the kind of messiah he needed to be, or that Judas needed him to be.

Miroslav Volf writes that “Jesus is caught in the field of social forces with religious, ethnic, and political bases, all interested in maintaining and bolstering their power.” (Exclusion and Embrace, p. 264)

The paradox here is between the power of violence and the power of truth. Power and truth. Truth and power. Sometimes that power, for us, will be political. Sometimes it will be economic, made manifest in our privilege. Sometimes we will recognize ourselves in that second crowd, even when we have happily participated in the first. We don’t like paradox, and we seek simple reconciliation between life at church and life in the world. But we know better.

To the Philippian church Paul wrote about Jesus’ humanity, how he emptied himself, humbled himself, to the point of death. But because for that, Paul writes, God “also highly exalted him...”

There is paradox in that little word, “*also*,” and there is power in it. Death on the cross – *also* – knees bending at the name of Jesus.

How do we reconcile, we who find ourselves in many crowds? Faith, like Holy Week, is filled with tension and contradiction and paradox, from without and from within. Faith, like Holy Week, is a journey, and the good news is that there is

one who journeys with us, and who even then, stands apart from the crowd, leading us ever forward, showing us what reconciliation looks like. Amen.