

“We Are a Group Project.”

Luke 19: 28-40

Gaspee Days Parade

I have been living in Rhode Island for four years now but unfortunately, I have never seen the Gaspee Days Parade. I am sorry to let you down, my fellow Rhode Islanders! I have not been able to enjoy this popular Parade because the New England Annual Conference is always the same week as the Gaspee Days Parade. As you have enjoyed the exciting parade, I have been in New Hampshire, enduring long and tedious full-day sessions.

So tell me about what goes on at the Gaspee Days Parade? [ppt] Eating food and enjoying the art festival. [ppt] At the same time, you burn a boat, cheering and celebrating “America’s first blow for freedom.” You also see the colonial guard and various marching bands and groups march on Narragansett Parkway. When the colonial guard passes, what do people normally do? People wave their hands, cheer and shout! People are excited! Think of that moment as you hear the story of Jesus marching into Jerusalem.

Two parades

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. It all starts with a parade, but a different kind of parade. Rev. Sally Howard has described Jesus entering into Jerusalem as “a protest march, filled with God’s love and calling out an empire made rich by violence and weapons of war.” Jesus lived in the time of Roman Peace. The Roman Empire had their own vision of peaceful and prosperous community. Ironically, to build their dream community, the Romans engaged in a series of military campaigns and wars. To build Roman Peace and prosperity, the empire used violence and killed thousands of people. Did people live happily under this Roman Peace? Not really.

As we all know, the Israelites lived under the heavy burden of Roman taxation and the brutal oppression of the Roman empire. They yearned for liberation from their oppressor. Just as we get a bit more excited and become a bit more patriotic than usual when Gaspee Days or the 4th of July approaches, Jews also became more patriotic during the season of the Passover. Because of the revolutionary characteristic of the Passover, the Roman imperial army moved military units to Jerusalem when the Passover approached, and stayed there until the season ended. They marched into the city with their military banner. This military parade was an imperial procession led by Pontius Pilate, riding a war horse with his glittering armor and fully armed legion following him, displaying the military power of the empire. It reminded people that any attempts or signs of rebellion would be brutally quashed. How do you think the Israelites reacted to this parade? I am pretty sure that no one would shout for joy.

In this context, Jesus orchestrated another parade into a city. It was a low-budget parade so there was no splendid banner, no horses or men with spears and shields. The only thing Jesus needed was a colt to fulfill the prophesy from Zechariah. Compared to the Roman military parade, Jesus’ parade looked nothing like the other in magnitude and splendor. But there was one thing that was powerfully present in Jesus’s parade into the city. That was love. God’s love was in Jesus and that love was enough to draw people. He had embodied the abundant and inexhaustible love of God for everyone. Jesus had shown that no matter what, all people are the children of God and God’s grace is still available for them. He had shown that only love can heal what is broken and only love can bridge broken relationships and build peaceful community. People had experienced God’s love through Jesus and seen the possibilities of new life. Their hearts and lungs were filled with love. As Jesus entered, people were so excited they gave him a grand welcome, throwing their coats and palm branches on the street, which was a symbol of victory. Out of their excitement and love, they burst into enthusiastic praise, “Blessed is he who comes, the king in God’s name! All is well in heaven! Glory in the high places!” They kept shouting out this praise of joy. You get the picture. Right?

We Are a Group Project

When you think of this procession of Jesus entering Jerusalem, who is at the center of the image? Of course, Jesus. But, the Jesus march of love was a group project. There were disciples who prepared for this

march. There was a person who let Jesus use his donkey. Of course, there was a donkey! There were people who welcomed and followed Jesus on Palm Sunday. As Jesus moved through the streets, more people joined this march and Jesus's march of love grew in numbers. God's love was flowing from Jesus and flowing through the people binding them together as a community at that moment. Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem was a group project, which was initiated by Jesus Christ and completed by the people who responded to God's love. God's kingdom is a group project. In fact, we are a group project.

In her devotional book, "Good Enough," Dr. Kate reminds us that "we are built on a foundation not our own." Our DNA comes from our parents. Our mind and thoughts are shaped by parents, teachers, mentors, friends, and people around us. We learned things at schools and workplaces. "We pray and worship with spiritual ideas refined by centuries of tradition. Almost nothing about us is original." (52) We are a group project but we often forget it.

Our self-help culture imbues the idea that we should be the master of our lives and articulate our lives as a solitary story of self realization and progress. We are responsible for our lives and our choices. That's what we have learned from our society. What are the most important American values? Can you name them? Freedom, equality, independence... According to the Department of State website, "Americans value independence and self-determination, placing importance on the role of the individual in shaping his or her own identity and destiny through one's choices, abilities, and efforts." We are expected to be independent, to be responsible for our lives and to be the master of our own lives. So we try our best. But the emphasis on independence also has a downside to it.

According to a recent article, certain values that helped define the national character for generations are receding in importance to Americans. These values are patriotism, religion, and community involvement. The importance of these values in American life has decreased while the only priority that has grown is money, rising from 31% to 43%. Patriotism, religion, and community involvement are essentially communal values, but their importance has decreased. The emphasis on independence, combined with American individualism has led to confusion over who is our creator, God or ourselves and on whom does our well-being depend? But we need to remember that we don't exist alone. We are built on a foundation that is not our own. God set the cornerstone of our lives and helps parents and others to nurture us. We are a group project. We are not independent but interdependent beings by nature.

To flourish, we need to tend our lives as well as others around us. We are responsible for our lives. But we are also responsible for one another. There are lonely, scared, hungry, ill and despairing people. We are responsible for them. Of course, that doesn't mean that we can heal someone or fix their problems. No. There are times when words fail. As a pastor, I visit those who are ill or even in critical condition. All I can say is "I will keep you in my prayers." But at those moments, our human words fail. To be responsible for one another simply means being there with them in the face of human suffering, pain, violence or grief. Being responsible for one another means not abandoning them to pain, isolation and despair. In dark times, we need to stand with and by each other. To be responsible to one another, we need a community led by God's love.

I am confident saying that Asbury is a community filled with God's love. If you have been sick, you know what I mean. You have a circle of people holding you in their prayers and caring for you. We also try to find ways to serve the poor and feed the hungry. With Asbury Bags of Care we share with those in need. We share with our neighbors through Food for Soul, food collections and shoe collections and by erecting a memorial for those who lost their lives to gun violence. Asbury has been a community filled with God's love. We have joined Jesus' parade of love and we have known what it means to be a loving-community. But let us not stop there. We must continue to draw our circle wider until parades of protest for justice will one day turn to parades of joy. God will guide our journey. Amen.