

April 2, 2023
Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50: 4-9a
Psalm 31: 9-16
Philippians 2: 5-11
Matthew 27: 11-54

I want you to think back to your childhood this morning. Imagine yourself on a playground, you are 8 years old, and the school bully comes up to you with a not-so-nice expression on his face and says some not-so-nice things to you. What's the one phrase that you say back?

Most of us remember chanting the words, "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." Is that true? Do words never hurt?

I think about the words that Jesus heard in the passion story. He heard a lot of words and none of them were comforting, none of them were said compassionately and they certainly weren't said in love. These words were all full of vitriol, hate, anger, and fear. Words like "arrest him" and "crucify him." Words that denied him and ignored him.

These words are such a drastic contrast from the words we read at the beginning of our service today, when Jesus enters Jerusalem. He enters to acclamations of Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest! Words of good intentions. Words of hopefulness and joy. But it doesn't take long before these words soon turn to something else.

Let me read you the accounts that come right before our Gospel reading today:

¹⁴One of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

²⁰When it was evening, Jesus took his place with the twelve; ²¹and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." ²²And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?"

³¹Then Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters because of me this night. ³³Peter said to him, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you." ³⁴Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." ³⁵Peter said to him, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples.

³⁶Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." ³⁹...⁴⁰Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?"

The complete shift in their commitment to Jesus is painful to witness. Not only did Judas betray Jesus, but Peter denied him – 3 times, and then his disciples couldn't even stay awake for him when he needed them the most.

And, if you have ever been on the receiving end of such actions yourself, you know that these individuals can't undo what they have done. They can't take back their words or their actions. The damage was deep. It was a part of themselves that they didn't think was possible as they said, No, not I Lord! No, not I, Rabbi. Not I.

I am struck how often we all start with beautiful intentions, with a heart open to love and to care for those in our life. And, yet, how many of us have seen those wonderful intentions turn cold? How many times have we said words we can't take back? How many times have we been the ones who have betrayed those who trusted us the most?

It's a hard part of ourselves to acknowledge. Rev. Craig Barnes who wrote on this topic calls it the "Judas chromosome" and he says we are all afraid of that part of ourselves that follows in Judas' footsteps.¹ We are all afraid of the moment we will speak words we can't take back, when we deny our loved ones, when we deny our Christian faith through our actions. Maybe we haven't said the exact words of "Surely not I, Lord?" But we have probably said something like, "You know, I try really hard to be a good person and do the right things. Surely, I wouldn't do something that bad."

Barnes goes on to state in his essay that, *"One of the messages of Holy Week is that sooner or later every disciple will betray Jesus. We will betray him in the workplace when it will cost too much to think like a Christian, and in our homes when the anger is so great that we hurt those who trust us, and in the sacred commitments we make that we simply cannot keep. We will betray Jesus by our indifference to the poor, by our refusal to turn the other cheek to our enemies, and by the deaf ears we turn to heaven's call to live for higher purposes."*

Have you been in one of these places? The places where your Judas chromosome surfaces just as you were saying...surely not I, Lord.

We will all walk in Judas' footsteps at some point. But what we learn through the journey of Holy Week is that in our moments of weakness, in the moments we realize what we have done and what we have said we are reminded of Jesus' simple words on the cross. Jesus, in the midst of his own anguish at seeing what his loved ones did to him, said simply, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. Forgive them. Love them. Send your loving mercy down upon them.

During Lent, we have walked a journey of repentance, of acknowledging our weakness and of accepting forgiveness for our sins. Now, as we move toward Easter, let that time of repentance

¹ Craig Barnes is pastor of National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC. This article appeared in *The Christian Century*, February 27-March 6, 2002, p.21.

become a time of reconciliation. Let it be a time when you fully accept the gift of the cross and the unconditional love of Christ for you. Let that love move into your heart and begin to heal those broken places that have damaged you and your relationships. Our words can hurt but they can also be transformed into words that heal.

You are forgiven. It's that simple. And you are now called to reconcile and renew those broken places. Next Sunday we will celebrate Christ's resurrection. It's our ultimate reminder of the power of healing. It's our ultimate reminder that pain does not win and that anger does not have the last word. Let it be your reminder that there are new words to say. Words of love, words of joy, words of encouragement and compassion. Thank goodness for new words. Amen.