

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, with gratefulness in our hearts, we come to worship. We come to be the church, with all of its goodness and all of its flaws. We come to worship with honesty in our words and in our hearts, leaving behind all pretenses at the door. We come to treat our neighbors with love and respect, while preparing to do the same when we leave these doors. We come to show you our wounds, our joyfulness, all of the burdens and delight we carry within us, and ask you to fill us. Be the energy that guides our steps, the love that moves our hands, the heart that nurtures our loving action in this world. Hear us, O God.

We remember the example of Jesus, Gracious Creator, as we remember who we are. He was the Son of God who went through the darkest week of all but took what came, for it brought forth the joy of what came next. Be with us, Loving Creator, when our situations can do the same due to circumstances beyond our control. Guide us to take hold of whatever situation we are in, all the ups and all the downs, and utilize it for our growth, to grow closer to you, to our neighbors and to ourselves. We know you do not promise us peace and security in this complicated, difficult world, but you are with us every step of the way to love us. We pray all these things in the name of the one who shows us faithfulness this week and every week, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying...

SERMON

Last year, there was an advertisement that showed the most impossible of events coming true: the Cubs won the World Series. Wrigley Field was in an uproar, strangers were kissing, all of Chicago was exploding with unbelievable joy. The so-called curse was finally broken and all Cub fans could now live in satisfaction. The commercial then broke to a guy sitting on the sofa, wearing sad tears, coming out of his daydream. He was playing

the Chicago Cubs in his Major League Baseball video game and won the World Series. To Cubbies like myself, that ad came across as wishful thinking and torture at the same time.

Cub fans, more than anyone else, know what it's like to live through the worst darkness that a sport can offer, but we still live in hope of the days when there will be the days of rebirth in resurrection. In the same way, we have experienced the most significant point of departure for the faith. Today we look back at the week that defines Jesus. It, at first, seemed like the beginning of something great! Then the tables turned rather unexpectedly. Five days later, he was arrested, put on trial, and denounced by the very people that welcomed him. He was put to death, only to welcome the absolutes of joy with his resurrection. Life turned on a dime with the Son of God, and just as easily, maybe in more subtle ways, it happens to us. We can just as easily go from the penthouse to the outhouse, or vice versa. We can be at the heights of joy one moment, and then come crashing down the next. Or, like Cubs fans, we can spend a while in the darkness. It is natural, albeit uncomfortable. That is one point of Holy Week, as we watch the rise and fall of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, only to see him rise to the ultimate heights. But we can't try to force ourselves into happiness or saying how everything is OK when those times are low. They are renewed times to build ourselves up as people of faith. We can't be Easter people unless we know what it means to die to those things that must die. We can't understand light without darkness. We don't become mature without growing pains. Let us grow in discipleship today as we look at this story, how it ties to Holy Week, and see how we undertake the same journeys to arrive at resurrection.

You might be thinking, "Hey, we just went through Holy Week!" Indeed, we have, but now that we've been there, we can look back on it as a whole. It starts on a high. "The

Last Week” by Borg and Crossan say that the triumphant entry of Palm Sunday is not Jesus being celebrated in a vacuum. At the exact same time, on the other side of Jerusalem, Pilate and his entourage were welcomed with their grand horses and royal parade. We come back to Jesus and see he is making light of their grand display with an alternative show of power. The true King is not welcomed on a noble steed but a humble donkey. This is just the beginning of the week where power is turned upside down. Jesus seems to say that he would tear down the Temple, the center of authority for all of Judaism, and build it back up in three days. Easily misinterpreted, but it gets in the bonnets of the people in power. He kicks out the moneychangers. He teaches with authority but doesn’t have the title. He seeks to assert true power in a world that doesn’t understand what the Power of God really is. As a result, he is betrayed; he goes to trial, he is unjustly killed. Jesus has to go down to the deepest darkness of this world to arise once again; in this, he declares true power. It is not all light and happiness for the King of the Universe, nor should it be for us either.

While I was researching this sermon, I came across a website called “The Dictionary of Christianese.” Many of you have heard me use the term “Christianese;” it describes those words that we can readily understand in the church but once we leave these walls, many people won’t understand, like Eucharist, Lent, or Salvation. As I was exploring the site, there was one definition that appealed to me, especially in the time we are in: “Christmas and Easter Christians.” They are also known by the names “C&E Christians,” “Twice-a-year Christians,” or the even cleverer “Poinsettia and Lilly Christians.” I’m sure you have a guess where I’m going with this with a speech about their lack of participation and commitment, but that’s actually not where I’m going. I stand not in judgment but in sorrow; I’m saddened that they may not be getting what this Christianity thing is really all about by

seeing only the peaks of the Christian life with out the valleys. The picture they're getting is that it's all about the bright and sunny, and while that may sound appealing, it's unrealistic. Just as Jesus lived through so many peaks and valleys on Holy Week, we must as well.

I am greatly annoyed by the thoughts of Christians only facing sunny days, and when they are not sunny, we need to force ourselves to look that way while feeling absolutely miserable doing so. You can't force yourself to be happy when it just isn't there. In the same way, Christianity these days lifts up Christmas and Easter without the responsibility behind them. There is no joy of Christmas without the responsibility, watching, and preparation of Advent. Easter makes no sense whatsoever when we go without the absolute hopefulness of Palm Sunday, the sorrow of betrayal on Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday's rock-bottom feeling. There is darkness, and there is light, and it does no good for anyone to try to totally walk in one or the other. There is a faithful middle between being overwhelmed by the darkness and putting on a false happy face. We have to, frankly, ride the wave of what the world brings us. We can't force ourselves out of the reality of a bad situation, but we can grow in the midst of that darkness. The darkness leads back to the light eventually.

I've faced this first hand in many of my experiences toward being a pastor. Sometimes I was filled with the utter brilliance of joyfulness, knowing the Holy Spirit was right there with me. Other times, it really, frankly, stunk. There's the high of going to college in the Christian Ministry Program, and the low of realizing I had no idea what I was getting into. Studying to become isn't just about prayer and fellowship; there's some really hard studying that tests you as a person, but because of that experience, I'm all the more mature and effective. There's the high of June 10, 2012, where I was introduced to the

community of Faith United Methodist with a very productive and enjoyable meeting. I was appointed to my very first church. The very next day, as I was having lunch at Chipotle in downtown Denver, I got a phone call from my beyond distraught mother to say that my Uncle Bill, an uncle whom I had grown extremely close to, had passed suddenly. That led to the further low of leading the funeral service. I remember sitting at my grandmother's table the morning of the funeral still tinkering and playing with that sermon. No matter what I said could accurately portray what he meant to me, and to this day, it remains the hardest act of ministry I've undertaken. I can honestly say, though, that this experience made me stronger and more effective at being a pastor and a person.

This is an undervalued but essential part of discipleship. God promised us nothing about how this life will go, and even Jesus, the Son of God, didn't face great times all the time. "The rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous," he says, meaning that in this life, we will not always get our just rewards. Suffering comes to the faithful, while the unfaithful and uncaring get rich and prosperous. While we can never control our circumstances (nor should we waste our time and energy trying), we can always control how we will respond to the situation. Sometimes it will prompt questions with or without answers, as we spoke about last week. And that can be a very faithful response, directing us toward life-giving growth, for indeed, faith grows in the times when we are pushed, not when life goes according to plan. It works in sports; it works in life. I remember hearing many players in football saying that they experienced a catastrophic defeat, and that was the best lesson they learned. They never ever wanted to feel that way again, so it pushed them to attain greater heights the next season. Perhaps this will be the story of our Denver Broncos this next year...we can only hope. Nevertheless, it's important to recognize that

the greatest successes came from the places of greatest darkness. So many of our innovators had to fail, to experience the dark times, before they could fully attain success. And, most frankly, we had to go to the greatest darkness with the Lord Jesus before we could reach Easter's newness and joy.

We remember the peaks of our lives with fondness and vigor; sometimes, we think of the valleys as a time of personal hell, anger, or with a desire to leave them all behind. I don't want to romanticize anything; the dark times can be especially dark. In my personal experience and with our faith story before us, it shows we need the dark times to bring meaning to the light, and the light can illuminate the dark times. They only work when in tandem, for our lives are narratives of happiness and sadness that create a whole human being. Indeed, they create a whole disciple that knows that resurrection is only possible with death, both metaphorically and literally.

I challenge you to reflect upon not just Easter but on the entirety of Holy Week. We honestly won't get the fullness of it all unless you go through the ups and the downs. Reflect on the celebration of Palm Sunday, welcoming Jesus as the new conquering King over the injustices of Rome. Remember Christ's Last Supper and consider his struggles in the Garden of Gethsemane. Mourn the unfairness of Good Friday as a good man went to trial, conviction, torture, and execution. Sink to the bottom of the story with Jesus, and realize that a dawn may never come. Only then can we fully get to that special Sunday recognizing that dawn has come, death has been trumped by resurrection, and Christ greets us anew with life and love that makes sense in light of the destruction we saw a few days ago. Thanks be to God for this joyfulness of discipleship and the journey we undertake together! Amen and Amen.