

Palm Sunday
Philippians 2:5-11, Mark 11:1-11 and Mark 14:26 - 15:47
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We know this story pretty well. A week before Jesus is crucified; he enters Jerusalem on a colt to adoring crowds and great fanfare. Garments are thrown down before him to give him the first century red carpet treatment. Branches, probably palm fronds, are waved jubilantly, and cries of Hosanna to this Son of David fill the airwaves. On this day, Jesus is clearly hailed as the long awaited messiah of Israel.

During the following week, Jesus will spend much of his time in the Temple as huge crowds are gathering from all over in anticipation of the Passover Festival. He will teach and sometimes contend with all the various leaders of Israel. His vast popularity among the people threatens these authorities. When he angrily drives the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals out of the Temple, however, Jesus will finally raise the ire of the leadership to the point that they will plot to have him eliminated. Judas, one of the twelve, will unfortunately play the spoiler.

During the last supper, Jesus will take bread and wine, give it to the disciples and call it his body and his blood. He mentions a betrayer among them, and they all promise never to desert him. Peter says he will even die with Jesus if necessary. Such bravado will prove fleeting when the armed gang come to arrest Jesus in the garden, after he has prayed three times that the cup of suffering might pass him by.

So Jesus accepts the inevitable suffering and cross. Totally alone then, with no one in his corner, he goes before the Jewish council, Pontus Pilate and the Roman soldiers. He is denied his rights with false claims. A real bad guy is let go as other crowds call for Jesus to die. He is publicly humiliated with a crown of thorns and purple robe and then cruelly has his life force completely drained from him, first with a violent whipping and lastly from the excruciating cross of execution. At least, the women were looking on from a distance and saw where he was buried.

We know this story pretty well with its various differing details in each gospel. The larger question is, "What does it all mean?" Paul's letter to the Philippians gives us a clue when he writes so eloquently that Jesus emptied himself. In life and certainly in death, Jesus gave up everything he had for us in love. He held nothing back for himself, neither his humanity nor his divinity.

Walter Wangerin, a Christian writer, tells this true story from his own life in one of his books. Apparently, when his own son Matthew was 7 or 8, he stole comic books. Walter tried

everything to get him to stop but nothing seemed to work. Finally, he resorted to giving Matthew a spanking, which he rarely did. After the spanking, Walter, the father, was so upset he immediately left the room and wept. After he got himself together, he went back into Matthew's room and hugged him.

Years later Matthew and his mother were talking about his childhood days, and they happened to bring up that period of time when Matthew stole comic books. Matthew said to his mother, "Do you know why I finally stopped?" She said, "Sure, because your father finally spanked you." Matthew said, "No! That wasn't it. I stopped because Dad cried."

Wangerin concluded that suffering love succeeded where the law and punishment failed. Jesus lived and died a life of suffering love. The cross wasn't punishment for our sins, but rather an exhibition of how far our God would go to assure us that we are loved beyond measure.

Another of my favorite Bible verses is from Romans 2, verse 4: "Do you not know that God's goodness is meant to lead you to repentance?" There has never been and there will never be a time when God doesn't love us. The great challenge for us is to live lives worthy of such faithful devotion forsaking our sins in response to God's constant goodness towards us.

The last few lines of the last verse of hymn 474 sum it all up. We will sing it as the kneeling hymn today "...love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." AMEN.