

What Would We Die For?
Matthew 21: 1-11

A sermon by Meighan Pritchard
Prospect United Church of Christ
Seattle, WA April 9, 2017

Well now, there's a cheery sermon title: "What Would We Die For?" Here's Jesus, riding into town in glory, and I'm skipping ahead to all the death and dying business. And we've got this bizarre image, you may have noticed, of Jesus riding into town on the back of not one but two donkeys—did you catch that? "Mounted on a donkey, *and* on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The writer of the gospel of Matthew took a literary parallelism in Zechariah to mean there were two donkeys. Let's just be clear: there's only one donkey. We don't have to make this more complicated than it needs to be!

So Jesus is riding into Jerusalem on *one* donkey, praised and hosannahed, welcomed with great fanfare and high hopes. But he's about to be crucified because of the choices he has made, the ways in which he has spent his great gift of a human life. He has devoted his life to preaching God's radical welcome, to healing the sick, welcoming the outcast, giving hope and power to the poor and oppressed. In the process he has made enough enemies in high places that they are now plotting to kill him. That means he has done something significant, that his life has made a difference, upset the status quo in favor of the realm of God.

Like Jesus, we are given the gift of a life: so many years in this body, in this time, in this place. What we do with that gift depends in part on the circumstances of race, class, opportunities, etc. It also depends on choices that we make.

Maybe another way to title this sermon would be "What Would You Give Your Life To?" We all give our lives to something. We all spend our days somehow or other. Are we making good choices? I sometimes

think I will look back on my life and say, “Well, I did a great job on a whole lot of Sudoku puzzles.” But I hope that’s not the lead sentence in my obituary. I hope that I am giving my life to work that matters, that makes a difference. And that there’s time, once in a while, for a good Sudoku puzzle. And some fabulous chocolate.

The other day I stumbled upon a webpage that showed photos of people moments before their deaths. A number of these photos showed people doing crazy dangerous things, like choosing to hang over the side of a tall building or to do a backflip on a high ledge. And in these instances, something went wrong. What was meant to be a stunt, an adrenaline rush of derring-do, became an incredibly stupid way to die. These people were willing to die for a trick. Others are willing to die for that one last drink before they get behind the wheel—and they’re willing to take others down with them.

There are plenty of stupid, senseless ways to die. But there are also plenty of noble, intentional choices that could result in death for a higher cause. Jesus knew this and gave his life to these kinds of choices. Firefighters likewise know the risks, but they choose to devote their lives to putting out fires and saving people trapped in burning buildings. On September 11, they were the ones running into the World Trade Center as everyone else was running out, and they lost their lives for this heroic act. It is, of course, impossible to interview them from beyond the grave, but I suspect if we could, many would say that they knew the risks, they loved their jobs, and they were willing to give their lives for their work for the greater good of everyone. As much as their families still miss them, their lives meant something.

Cesar Chavez organized farm workers in this country so that they could receive fair wages and be allowed decent work conditions. He went on severe hunger strikes on several occasions. These had long-term impacts on his health and almost certainly shortened his life span, but his life was devoted to the betterment of those around him, and he made his

choices intentionally, well aware of the risks and potential consequences.

Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., were both assassinated because their work for justice so disturbed the status quo that people wanted them dead. At times King wrestled hard with his calling to lead the Civil Rights Movement because the threats were real: his house was bombed, he was stabbed, he and his family were threatened repeatedly. But that meant that the work he and others were doing was having an impact. He knew that this work was a calling to something bigger than himself, and he was ultimately willing to die for the cause of civil rights for people of color.

Many of us would be willing to die for family members. Some of you parents and grandparents would put yourselves in harm's way intentionally in order to save your child or grandchild—to push them out of the path of the oncoming truck, or to rush into the burning house to carry them out. Or to spend every last penny so they can get the health care they need. You would do anything to make sure they were safe and well.

Jesus was willing to die for the work of justice, for the work of spreading God's good news to all people, for the work of speaking truth to power in a time of oppression. How about us? Are we willing to die for our faith? And how is our faith calling us to love beyond boundaries and work for justice for all in these times?

We read stories of people during World War II who dared to hide Jews, and we want to believe that we would make those same choices if we were in that situation. Nowadays we hear of people seeking sanctuary from our own government immigration officials, who want to send undocumented immigrants back to countries that may be trying to kill them. Some churches are stepping forward with great courage and at great risk to themselves in order to offer sanctuary to these immigrants.

We get to think and talk about whether we want to assist churches who are taking these steps.

When Jesus rode into town, the crowds greeted him with hosannas. “Hosanna” is a word of praise, but it also carries the meaning “Help us” or “Save us.” So maybe the full meaning of “hosanna” is something like “Praise to the one who will save us.” Save them from what? From poverty for the many while the few were rich and comfortable. From oppression. From exclusion and injustice. Save us, Jesus, save us! The people greeting him with tree branches and coats on the ground are actually not only welcoming him but also projecting onto him their desire for the world to be a better place.

We do that today. We can be just like that crowd in wanting our leader to fix it all for us. A few years ago, a candidate ran on the words “Hope” and “Change” and “Yes we can.” The genius of using those words is that anyone can read into them their own hopes, their own desire for change. And really what they hear is not “Yes *we* can” but “Yes *the candidate* can.” He will fix it. We don’t have to do anything, just wait for him to do it all.

Then this past year we heard another campaign slogan: “Make America great again.” This, too, is brilliant in its ability to let people define for themselves what “great” means and project that promise of greatness onto that candidate. We don’t have to do anything, just wait for him to make everything great.

It doesn’t work that way. It didn’t work that way in Jesus’ day, and it doesn’t now. We may wonder how it could be that the crowds that welcomed Jesus at the beginning of his final week turned on him so thoroughly only days later and shouted for his crucifixion. Maybe it was different people in these two crowds. Maybe the authorities were fomenting the crowds with infiltrators to whip them up against Jesus.

Well, maybe. Or maybe after Jesus turned the tables in the Temple and it became clear that the authorities were after him, people realized they were not willing to die alongside him. The price was too high. They wanted him to fix everything, and they saw that he was not going to be able to do it. Maybe they felt cheated. Sure, Jesus talked a good game, and he healed a few people, but he didn't heal *me*, he didn't take away *my* debt, he didn't fix all *my* problems.

Of course, that was never what he had promised. He never said, "Follow me and you will have an easy life." In fact, he said the opposite: You will have a life of struggles against powerful foes, of great danger when you dare to tell truth to power, of great poverty when you throw your lot in with the oppressed and outcast. But if you have to die for the choices you make, for the way in which you follow God's call, you will be willing to do it because you spend this gift of a life not for yourself but for the greater good of all God's people. You will be living into God's love, love of neighbor, love of justice and peace in a time of oppression and war. It is only in risking everything that life means anything. Dare to risk greatly in the name of God's love and justice.

I once came across an exercise in a self-help book that suggested you look back at your life from the end and write your obituary. What in your life has had great meaning? Have you done the big things you have felt called to do, or have you stood on the sidelines and hoped that others would do them for you? Is there still time to do them now? How has your life mattered to those in your family, your community, the world? What are you willing to die for? Because whatever it is, if you commit to it fully, you will find what you are willing to *live* for.

Jesus never said, "Follow me, and I'll fix everything for you." Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will show you how to live in the light of God's deep love and to work for God's regime-changing justice. I will show you how it's done so that you can do it, too. Yes, *we* can."

A clergy colleague said recently, “Standing on the sidelines will not save you.” Jesus devoted his life to preaching God’s radical welcome, to healing the sick, welcoming the outcast, giving hope and power to the poor and oppressed. If we are to get off the sidelines and follow behind Jesus on that donkey, we can do those things, too.

Our God is a powerful God. Our God bids us follow Jesus, to come and die. And in that dying, to find a life worth living.

What would we die for? Would we die for God, as Jesus did? Do we live for God, as Jesus did? If we don’t live for God, what might it look like to do so? Our obituaries aren’t written yet. There is still time.

Hosanna, Jesus, Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God. May that be all of us. Amen.