

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday
April 17, 2011
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Loyalty is one of the prevalent themes of Holy Week, which begins with the questionable loyalty of the Palm Sunday parade crowd and hits rock bottom with the betrayal by Judas Iscariot. Samuel Johnson once said this about loyalty: “Loyalties sustain society by making social life possible.” Theologian George Rupp said it this way, “There is no life without community and there is no community without commitment.” In the Church, we are conscious that loyalty is an essential element of covenant living. We are a covenant community, living out our role in the covenant into which God has invited us. We are reminded of our covenant life each time we renew the vows of our Baptism. The level of our loyalty says so much about us and about the life we seek to live together in covenant community.

Let’s look at some of the examples of loyalty we find recorded in today’s gospel – the Passion According to St. Matthew.

At the lowest level, of course, is Judas’ act of betrayal. An out-and-out double cross.

Betrayal is a distressing event. It involves delivering or exposing someone to an enemy, revealing or disclosing something given in confidence, being untrustworthy, and deceiving someone. Judas had promised to deliver Jesus to his enemies by offering to disclose where he could be found. What terrible words Jesus had to speak on that Thursday evening while gathered with the Twelve in the Upper Room: “One of you will betray me.” He said that he would be betrayed by one of his closest followers, one who was at that very moment eating with him. The ultimate act of betrayal – taking a bribe to betray a trust, thirty pieces of silver for a life – was accomplished by a kiss, an act that professed affection and friendship, making his betrayal all the more deceitful.

Then, there is the loyalty of the other disciples.

Peter denied any association with Jesus in the “Cock Crowing Incident.” And, the other disciples “forsook him and fled.” The disciples’ loyalty was on the level of letting Jesus down. They just couldn’t take the heat. They couldn’t cope with the conflict. They didn’t have enough strength of spirit and loyalty to make a positive contribution to the situation, even if it meant only standing with Jesus during the last few painful hours of his life. Their acts were not overtly disloyal. They did not plot to betray Jesus as did Judas. But they did desert him, nevertheless.

And, there is the loyalty of the crowds lining the parade route into Jerusalem.

They shouted with great enthusiasm, “Hosanna! (Save us!) Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! (Save us now!)” The same crowd would be shouting outside the court of Pontius Pilate on the next Friday, but their tune would change, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” They acclaim him a king on Sunday and crucify him on Friday. The disloyalty of the crowd is much like the disloyalty of most crowds throughout history. Everybody wants to be on the winning side. When our favorite candidate or team or leader seems to be in danger of losing, it is always very tempting to switch sides rather than have to face the embarrassment of being associated with the loser.

We call this level of loyalty “fickleness.” Loyalty like that never accomplished anything worth mentioning.

Finally, there is the loyalty of Jesus Christ.

Just a few days before his entry into Jerusalem, he spoke to a crowd of people out in the countryside. When they became hungry, he fed them in an unusual way. He took loaves and fishes from a little boy, blessed them, and fed the entire crowd. There was more than enough for everyone to be fed. When the crowd saw this, they asked him to be their king.

Had Jesus accepted the kingship the crowd offered him, he would have been the wrong kind of king. Instead he made the courageous decision to be the servant king who reigns in love and compassion over an invisible kingdom that no power in the universe can ever overthrow. His loyalty to that which God wanted him to do led him to a throne, which was a cross, and placed in his hand a reed which became his scepter, and upon his head a crown made of thorns.

He could have quit at any time. But he didn't. Disciples betrayed, denied, and forsook him. Crowds that one day called for his coronation called for his crucifixion on another day. Yet Jesus remained loyal to the royal that was in him.

How we could learn from this kind of loyalty! That is, of course, exactly what we are supposed to do if we follow him. What we see in him will transform who we are and raise us to new levels of loyalty. It is easy sometimes to identify with Judas and the others because our loyalty is so like theirs. And, we say, “Yes” because we too are human. But remember that Jesus made his decisions and remained loyal not only as the Son of God but also as a human being at the same time. And let us remember that being human is not an excuse, it is a privilege. Human beings are the crowning glory of God's creation. There we can find a point of reference for the loyalties of our lives. He taught us that we, his sisters and brothers, were made for a great devotion and a tremendous loyalty. We were created for commitment.

When we refuse to remain loyal to anyone to whom we have committed ourselves, we have to expect things to go sour. The God with the human face who hung on the cross, died, and was raised again has demonstrated the victorious results of a life of loyalty to that which is greater than ourselves and we can experience that kind of victory of life ourselves when we learn that kind of loyalty.

How is your loyalty today? Are you more loyal to those attitudes and prejudices and passions and patterns of behavior that promote injustice, prejudice, disappointment, and alienation? Are you loyal to Christ and his Church in a way that will let that kind of loyalty permeate the rest of your commitments?

What a great time it is to turn to the One who has always been and will always be loyal to us and ask him to let Paul's wish for us become a reality, “Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus...”

God will exalt you too. And you will know the joy of the new and unending life God – life eternal. When we know that life, we know we are participating with God in the ongoing redemption and perfection of all creation. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.