

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ – April 5,  
2009 – Palm Sunday  
Rev. T. Michael Rock

Scripture Readings:  
Mark 11:1-11

Sermon Title: "Taking It All In"

(open with prayer)

It's probably no surprise to folks who have heard my sermons for the past couple of years, that the obvious lesson in this week's reading centers around love. The problem, however, lies in the kind of love that is displayed in the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. What happens in the center of the capital city on that march was the taking of the stage. It was the kind of love that propels us to buy tickets to see Springsteen, Madonna, or the famous guest conductor at Orchestra Hall. It may be the same kind of love and awe that moves us to buy a seat for two hours to watch a baseball game from hundreds of feet away and wear the team colors. The entrance into the city is one of the most uncharacteristic moments in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus is receiving "rock star" love. He is being the object of love and fascination. The Greek word for this kind of love is "pornea". It's the "idea" of a Messiah who will come and make all the difference. Jesus excites the crowd and they sing his praises. Do you notice the connection between this kind of objectified love and the "pornea" that is expressed by the crowd?

Throughout his ministry, Jesus talks about love for neighbor and self and love for God as the greatest of all commandments. Jesus heals out of love and feeds out of love. The love that is described in those instances is not "pornea", but "philia." Philia is not just brotherly love, but its root lies in mutuality. It's the giving and receiving of love. It is the love that adds to itself. It grows and spreads and inspires. It holds and challenges and comforts. It's the kind

of love that is born deep in our souls. Philia is reciprocity and the understanding that we are in this together. Hopefully, as you made promises last week during our building of the Covenant, it came out of the place of mutual love. It's the kind of love that I hope people feel when they come into this sanctuary for the first time of the five hundredth time. We are in this together kind of love.

The sadness and reality of the procession that Jesus makes is that he doesn't feel this kind of love. Jesus was, among many other things, an amazing strategist. He is entering the territory of those that are threatening to kill him. This is enemy territory. He needs passage and safety in order to fulfill his ministry and soften people's hearts. The parade was an awesome way to observe the people. Jesus was riding in on the donkey, not basking in the praise and shouts of the people, but examining their hearts. Jesus is taking it all in. Because of the parade, Jesus gets to go all the way to the temple and observe the situation.

You see, Jesus has already told the disciples three times that he was going to be killed. This is no relaxed journey. This was preparation. What happened during the next week was gruesome, and tragic, and unjust, but it had to happen. Jesus knew this was coming and was getting people ready to receive, not grief or sadness, but a new kind of love.

The theological plan that was fulfilled a week later just after the Passover celebration, was planned and designed by God. This is hard for me, because I don't believe that God plans or designs suffering. In fact, I went back and forth this week about whether or not this was coming into this sermon. Then I remembered the Christian mystics, specifically the poems of St. John of the Cross. The suffering of Jesus was designed precisely because of the advent of this new kind of love. This was sacrificial, unconditional, everlasting love. Jesus could have stayed hidden or not come at all. Jesus could have fought back and used the power of the people and his "rock star" status. Jesus could have asked the angels to come and wait on him.

Instead, Jesus takes it all in, observes the people, watches where the power is held, and creates a place for his new message of sacrificial love. It is called "agape", and it is the kind of love that casts out fear and transforms our souls. St. John of the Cross writes poem after poem about meeting God and asking, "Why?" Why did Jesus have to suffer? Why did Jesus have to die? Why do we have to enter this story every year and die along with him? God answers St. John with the simple words, "You know". And it is true. The soul searching takes us to dark place sometimes. The depth of our faith lies at suffering and sacrificial love. Our faith often grows out of our suffering and often times in the face of death. Objectifying love can be transformed through suffering into unconditional love, once we realize we are in this together.

I still believe that God does not plan or design our suffering, but that God does use our suffering to soften our hearts and make a connection. This week God will have to take on her own suffering like a mother who loses her only child. Willingly, God walks down that very human path and connects in a way that almost everyone could relate to. God creates out of pain and suffering a connection that is real and lasting. The cries and tears of this week are etched on our hearts forever.

This is the journey of the soul, and it is the pathway to revealing a love that knows no boundaries or conditions. The desire of God is for you to take this soulful journey, even if it involves some tears along the way, for the love that comes from that journey knows no bounds.

Imagine today that Jesus has entered into our lives, set this table, and is inviting us to take this journey. Imagine today that Jesus is observing us, taking it all in, and guiding us on a journey, not down a new road, but one that is well worn but all the saints who have gone before. Let us enter in, the pathway to perfect love. AMEN.