

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Church's Voice

Luke 19:28-40

Earlier this week, I came across a book designed to help children understand more about the rituals and routines at church, so they can be prepared to participate in Sunday morning worship. Interestingly, it's titled *Whisper, Whisper: Learning about Church*. The title itself says something about the way that we often approach the atmosphere of congregational worship. Whisper. We value orderliness and proper behavior. We want to cultivate a sense of reverence. We want to encourage an attitude of respect toward traditions. We want to make sure that we stay focused on God and remain attentive to what God is saying to us.

But we have things we want to say too. We need room to express ourselves to God, to vocalize through songs, prayers, and other expressions of faith. On Sunday morning, we fill this sacred space with a whole range of sounds, at different levels of volume. You may recall a story I once told about a six-year-old girl named Angie and her four-year-old brother Joel who were sitting together in church. Joel was giggling, singing, and talking out loud. Finally, his big sister had had enough. "You're not supposed to talk out loud in church." "Why?" said Joel. "Who's going to stop me?" Angie pointed to the back of the church and said, "See those two men standing by the door? They're hushers."¹

In today's text from Luke, some hushers show up in the form of some religious leaders who want Jesus' followers to tone down their royal procession. We don't know exactly what's behind their objection to this noisy parade. They could be worried that such public declarations of Jesus as king could have political repercussions. Or maybe they're concerned for Jesus' safety. Or they could simply be voicing their disagreement with Jesus and his disciples. Maybe their goal is simply to shut down this boisterous display of public worship.

Note that the primary participants in this procession are Jesus' followers. Luke refers to them as "the whole crowd of disciples" (v. 37). Sometimes Jesus' triumphal entry, as we often call it, gets misinterpreted as a classic case of the fickle multitude. In other words, one moment the crowd is shouting "Hosanna!", and a few days later they're crying, "Crucify him!" But that's not really what's going on here. Those who are accompanying Jesus into the city, singing praises and calling him the King who comes in the name of the Lord, aren't the population in general. They're the people who have already attached themselves to Jesus in some form or another. True, they may not fully understand Jesus' messiahship or grasp the entire meaning of what will happen to him once he reaches Jerusalem, but they have responded to him with some measure of faith. And now, they're energetic participants in an event that's of and for believers.

Many of them are with him because of what he has done for them. He healed them, or fed them, or welcomed them, or taught them, or changed them in some way or another. Based on where and how Jesus spent most of his time, we know that most of the folks in his royal procession weren't from the ranks of society's best and brightest. Many were society's outcasts, the least and the left out. So there was nothing flashy or fancy about their parade. They were a ragtag band of worshipers. And the object of their attention and acclamation wasn't a picture-perfect monarch, atop a galloping stallion. Instead, he was a meek figure, ambling along on the back of a borrowed baby donkey.

But those who accompanied him into Jerusalem knew how to worship. They were filled with joy and praise. And they weren't afraid to turn up the volume. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (v. 38). That's part psalms and part angels' Christmas announcement. The message is simple: The reign of Jesus will bring shalom on the earth and glory to God.

That's still the heart of who we are and what we have to announce to the world. The kingdom of God has come upon us in Christ, and what God has started will be brought to completion when Christ comes again. As a community of Christ's people, we're all about the arrival of God in saving power—past, present, and future. Our task is to worship this God who comes to us in Christ, and to announce his reign in word and deed.

We have another word for this God-given assignment. We call it "witnessing." Or we sometimes use the closely related term "testifying." Within the evangelical Christian tradition, "giving a testimony" usually has to do with telling your faith story. In other words, talking about how you came to faith in Christ, as well as how he has been, and is, working in your life. Witnessing is about narrating the difference that Jesus makes, in our lives and in the world.

Keep in mind that witness is a legal term. A witness is someone who appears in a courtroom as part of a trial. The witness is there to help the court get at the truth and to seek justice. So the witness is brought to the stand to testify, to tell the truth. He or she talks about what they've seen and heard. That's because the court, and the larger public, have a vital interest in the truth. They need to know it and to be able to act upon it.

So when we take this legal terminology of "witnessing" or "testifying" and apply to individual Christians, and to the life of the community, the church, we're talking about our vocation in the world, our purpose as a church. In Jesus Christ, God has revealed, most fully and decisively, the truth about himself. This means that when we want to know the essential character, will, and purpose of God, we look to Jesus, who is himself the truth, the one who bears witness about God. And as we're joined to Christ by faith, we use every aspect of our congregation's life to bear witness to the truth about God.

When we stand among the crowds in Jerusalem, watching Jesus ride his donkey, and listening to his lively band of worshipers, we're actually seeing and hearing ourselves. That's us declaring who he is. That's us shouting praises. That's us announcing the arrival of the world's sovereign. That's us bearing witness in and for the world.

Notice that though there's plenty of aliveness and energy in the disciples who accompany Jesus into Jerusalem, the purpose of their parade isn't to show that they can be louder than everyone else. Their witness isn't about communicating truth at a higher decibel level. It's about drawing attention to Jesus. He's the one whom the people need to see. He's the one whom the people need to hear. He's the one whom the people need to know. He's the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

What a telling picture for us as modern day disciples. We have our doctrines and dogmas. We have our teachings and traditions. We have our religious rituals and routines. All these things are meaningful and important. But these are not the things to which we bow down. These are not the things to which we offer praise. These are not the things to which we pledge ultimate allegiance. That kind of love, loyalty, and adoration are to be directed only to Jesus. So our God-given assignment to witness means to draw attention to the person of Jesus Christ, to call forth and promote the worship of Jesus Christ, and to summon others to love for and loyalty to Jesus Christ. He's the one at the center of the parade, the center of our lives, and the center of our congregation's preaching in the world.

And as we lift up our voices, individually and together, to preach Christ in the world, we can do so with both humility and civility. Now don't get me wrong. That doesn't mean lowering our collective voice so as not to disrupt the way things are. There have been too many times in the life of God's church where we've gone silent in the face of unrighteousness or injustice. Our voice needs to be heard. A word from the Lord needs to be spoken. Somebody needs to testify to who God is and what God requires of us.

But that kind of witness needs to be energized and shaped by both conviction and compassion. Remember that our witness in the world is weakened when we take a combative, holier-than-thou posture toward the larger society in which we live. Yes, we need to have convictions. Yes, we need to have commitments that define us as people who confess that Jesus is Lord. But we also need to communicate those convictions and apply those commitments in ways that demonstrate that we're aware of our own sinfulness and our own deep need for God's mercy. As I said, bearing witness to the gospel in our present culture requires humility and civility.

Church historian Martin Marty is known for pointing out that "a lot of people today who have strong convictions are not very civil, and a lot of people who are civil don't have very strong convictions, and what we really need is convicted civility."² I like that phrase, "convicted civility." It captures the importance of acknowledging our differences, while communicating about those differences in ways that are respectful toward others. Nowadays, one of the most common ways of trying to make your case or win others to your viewpoint is to shout down those who differ with you. But when we look at the disciples in today's text, they aren't shouting down others. They're shouting up Jesus.

Our own witness needs to echo theirs. Rather than engaging in name-calling, blanket statements, or gross distortions, we're called to give voice to our faith with words that demonstrate love for others and respect for their opinions. Remember that none of us are saved by our opinions, but by the person of Jesus Christ. So our words need to point to him. Our words need to draw attention to him. Our words need to convey a sense of the joy of following him. Our words need to reflect a life of praising him.

After all, it is right and fitting that the Lord should be praised. In fact, according to today's text, praise toward God is guaranteed. The truth about God and his saving purposes will come out, one way or another. Recall that when the religious leaders try to get Jesus to tone down his disciples' celebration, Jesus responds with a vivid image. "I tell you," says Jesus, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (v. 40). In other words, God is on the move. Jesus is riding on, in triumph. It's not victory as the world defines it. It's the triumph of the cross. And what God has done through the cross and resurrection of Jesus can't be undone. It has to be announced. It must be said. There needs to be a witness. If Jesus' disciples don't shout and testify, then God will make the rocks start preaching.

But that's not God's plan. We are God's plan. We are God's strategy for making known the reality of his reign. We are God's witnesses in the world. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

¹ Gusty Chartrand, Lampman, Saskatchewan. Christian Reader, "Kids of the Kingdom."

² This is Richard Mouw's summary of Marty's assessment, in the *On Being* podcast, "Restoring Political Civility: An Evangelical View." August 18, 2011. Accessed July 2, 2015 <http://www.onbeing.org/program/restoring-political-civility-evangelical-view/transcript/728#main_content>.