

Luke 19:28-40 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

²⁸ After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹ When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸ saying,

"Blessed is the king
 who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
 and glory in the highest heaven!"

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

March 20, 2016 – Palm Sunday
Luke 19:28-40
Shouts and Silence
Kerra Becker English

Ann Weems died this week on St. Patrick's Day. If you are unfamiliar with her work, she was once named a Presbyterian Poet Laureate and she has received a lifetime achievement award from the Presbyterian Writers Guild. She was a lay-person, a ruling elder like many of you, and her writing is widely respected, especially in Presbyterian circles. This week, I had hoped to imitate her style of poetry – talking about the contrasts between shouts and silence present in this particular text. I didn't get there. I didn't get there because I kept turning her work over in my mind. One story in particular kept popping up for me, a story I'd like to share with you this morning. It's called "Happy Birthday Church!" and thought it's more frequently read for Pentecost Sunday, I find the characters match what's going on between Jesus and the Pharisees in this Palm Sunday reading as well. So let's honor Ann today as I read this story from her collection "Reaching for Rainbows."

There once was a church that had only party rooms: the Session's Party Room, the Music Party Room, the Feasting Party Room, the Do Justice Party Room, the Love Mercy Party Room, the Touch Lepers Party Room. In the center of the building was a large round room with an altar and a cross: God's Party Room.

There was in the church an air of festivity and brightness that could not be denied. The people outside the church pointed their fingers and shook their heads: "Something should be done about that church." They were especially upset when they saw that the members wore party hats and smiles both inside and outside the church.

Other congregations came to take a look and were shocked when they saw this church having so much fun during a worship service, snapping their fingers and dancing.

"Sacriligious," screamed the crowd. But the people in the church just smiled at them and went right on doing things like taking people in wheelchairs to the park and playing ball with them.

When everybody else was collecting canned goods for the poor, this church bought pizza and marched right into dingy, dirty, paint-peeling apartments and sat down to eat with the tenants.

They held picnics for the old folks home, and old men ran races while the

congregation stamped their feet in applause. It was at one of these picnics that some of the members climbed up on the roof and shouted: “Good news!”

“Now we can get them for disturbing the peace,” said one of the outsiders. The police arrived with sirens, ready for the arrest, and came out two hours later wearing party hats and smiles.

One Sunday afternoon, the entire congregation met at the jail and passed out flowers to the prisoners. The following week after bread and wine and much laughter at the Lord’s table, the people went to the hospital and asked to see the dying patients. They held their hands and mopped their brows and spoke to them of life.

“Disgraceful!” shouted the crowd. “They must be stopped.” So the crowd appealed to the governing body of the denomination, and this committee of respected church people went to see for themselves.

“Do you deny the charges of heresy?” asked the committee. “do you deny that you’ve mocked the church and the Lord?” The people of the church

looked into the stern red faces and smiled at them. They held out their hands to the committee and led them to the Birthday Cake Party Room. There on a table sat a large cake decorated beautifully in doves descending and red flames and words that read: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CHURCH! The people began cutting cake and blowing up balloons and handing out party hats to the committee members.

“Wait! Wait!” cried the chairperson. “Can’t you take anything seriously?”

“Yes,” said the people. “We take our commitment to the Lord very seriously indeed.”

“You don’t take it seriously at all,” interrupted the chairperson in loud voice and red face. “You have parties and wear silly hats and blow up balloons and sing and dance and have fun. Do you call that commitment?”

The people smiled at the chairperson and asked him if he’d like a glass of wine. The chairperson hit his fist on the table. “I don’t want wine, and I don’t want birthday cake. We’re here to reprimand you. We’re here to show you that you’re wrong. Can’t you be serious?”

“We are,” said the people. “We’re asking you to take communion with us.”

“With birthday cake?” screamed the chairperson. “Outrageous!”

“Outrageous?” [asked the people] “We ask you to sit at our table and sup with us. God gave the Holy Spirit to believers, and that is something to celebrate! It’s an occasion for a party. We are celebrants of the gift of Life. We are community. We are God’s church. Why are your faces red when we are trying to do justice and love mercy? Why do you shake your fists at us when we are trying to discover the hurting and begin the healing? We are overjoyed that we can be the church, a community of people, who are many, yet one—who are different, but who walk together and welcome any who would walk with us. When we weep there is someone to weep with us and to affirm us and to take us to a party. When we see injustices, we must be about God’s business of freeing the oppressed. When we are faithless, we have God’s promise of forgiveness. Isn’t it remarkable that we can be God’s good news? Is it any wonder we have a church full of party rooms? There is so much love to celebrate!”

The committee stared at the people, and the people moved closer to them and put their arms around them. The committee chairperson stepped up to the table and sliced a piece of birthday cake, took a bite, and laughed out loud. He began slicing and passing it out.

When the wine was poured and the hands were held, the chairperson raised his glass and said, “There is so much Love to celebrate! Happy Birthday, Church!” (Ann Weems, Reaching for Rainbows, “Happy Birthday Church!”)

I think Ann’s story captures in a more contemporary setting what’s going on in Luke’s telling of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. The disciples and the gathered crowd are celebrating who Jesus is, and *who Jesus is* happens to be upsetting to the religious status quo. He’s not riding in on his white horse with a political agenda. He’s riding in on a colt that’s never been ridden. The crowds are celebrating his arrival with shouts of blessing and praise. They are celebrating in ways that are disruptive, weird, and maybe even heretical. He’s honoring the old. He’s caring for the prisoners. He’s forgiving sinners. He’s living a different kind of faith, and it’s attractive to the crowds, so the Pharisees, as usual, get grumpy about it.

They are dismissive of this display – just like the Presbytery committee is in this story. Shouting and celebrating in joy becomes something to shut up and disapprove. Jesus won't have it. He tells them, if the crowd were to stifle their joy and suppress their shouting, the silent stones would do it for them.

There is a contrast here – one worthy of our exploration and meditation. Some situations call for shouting and praise. Others demand silence. Some shouting is a sign of anger and frustration, other shouting is pure holiness. And the same is true with silence, sometimes it's long overdue, sometimes it's a sign that we haven't been listening. Again, my thoughts on this didn't coalesce this week into a story, or poem, or sermon quite as I had hoped it would. Instead, it simply reminded me of other words, other times, other situations when I was called to use my voice for change or summoned to listen deeply.

But the good news for you is that I am inviting you to do your own consideration. When have your words leapt with praise and adoration? When have they been less than what you'd hoped? When has silence spoken great volumes? When has it been a sign of lingering agitation of things not said? Explore your own loudest voice and your own deepest quiet, and let those stories be part of God's larger story, because they are. Maybe that's better than a sermon full of my ideas anyway. With the story of Palm Sunday and Ann Weems birthday story, this may

be just what we need to get us wondering and imagining the church where our speaking and our listening help us to become all God hopes that we can be. Amen.