

Luke 19:28-40
April 10, 2022 Palm Sunday
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, “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. ³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As 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, ³⁸saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” ³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” ⁴⁰He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Don't you think that one of the greatest experiences we have is falling in love? Remember falling in love when you were young? Remember how great it is? Remember how your heart beats faster when you see that person—remember the shortness of breath—remember how you can't get to sleep because you are thinking about the next time you will see them—waking up thinking about them—wondering what you should wear to impress them, wondering how your hair always looked this stupid—and then when you do see them, remember how you want everything you say to seem cool and smart and how it comes out seemingly like the dumbest thing ever? Or maybe that's just me. But remember what it is like to fall in love? And one of the great things is that you don't fall in love just once in your life. Often you fall in love over and over again. I remember falling in love about 7 years ago. She was young, and although she was playful and carefree, when I first saw her she walked up to me quietly and just waited for me to pick her up and hold her. Yes, I'm speaking of one of our dogs, our boxers, Persephone. I've loved all of our dogs, but there was something special about Persephone, if one could have a soul-dog, Persephone was mine. We got in the habit most days that when I would come home from work, that she would follow me around with an expectant look in her eyes, until I was ready to settle down in the big rocking chair in the bedroom. Then she would climb into my lap, all 55 pounds

of her, put her head on my chest and go to sleep. And often so would I. It was time for our afternoon nap and we both looked forward to it.

But then when she was about 4 years old all of a sudden, she had some blood in her stool. We took her to the vet who told us, well, it could be this, it could be that, but we eventually had all the tests done and found that she had a tumor in her intestines. She needed surgery. And of course, we had that done, because after all, she's part of our family, right? They took out the tumor but the long-term prognosis was not good. They told us that if we opted for chemotherapy for Persephone that she might last for a year. If we didn't do chemo, she might last 3-6 months. We didn't do it. We brought her home and kept her comfortable and loved her. That was one of the times that it was very clear that falling in love is not the same thing as loving. We fell in love with that cute little puppy who just wanted to be held. But love meant far more than that. Love meant having her by our side all those years, feeding her, caring for her, letting her care for us. But it also meant being with her at the end, that week when the blood returned, and that early morning when she looked at us and whined and we knew that she was in pain. And it meant being with her at the end, holding her head, speaking softly to her as she died. That's not falling in love, that's not the warm, fuzzy emotions, that's the sometimes-hard reality of loving someone.

The psychologist Robert Johnson writes that "Romantic love, or falling in love, is different from loving, which is always a quieter and more humanly proportioned experience. There is always something overblown and bigger-than-life about falling in love." There were a lot of people in Jerusalem that spring Sunday who had fallen in love with Jesus. When we fall in love, we often project ourselves and the things we want upon the object of our love. That's what was happening on that Palm Sunday. People lined the streets to see this Jesus about whom they had heard so much. They heard some of his teaching and how he didn't demand near as much as their teachers of the law. They had also heard that he healed people of their diseases and made the lame walk and the deaf hear and the

blind see. And more than that it had even begun to be whispered that the crowds that followed him were so big that the Romans were beginning to get nervous, that maybe this Jesus was the one who could command enough attention to lead them to freedom against the foreign oppressors. Those were all the things the people wanted, those were the things that they projected on Jesus, they were in love with the idea of what Jesus could do for them and so they were happy to be there waving their palms, spreading their cloaks in the road and shouting, “Blessed is the King!” They were in love with the idea of Jesus who could save them from their problems. Jesus would come to fix everything and make their lives much happier. They loved this idea.

But did they really love Jesus? Were they ready for what loving really meant? Were they ready to endure the fear of Thursday night when the soldiers came to arrest him? Would they still be there when he had to face the Roman governor and be whipped to satisfy those who wanted him punished? Would any of them be there on Friday when they nailed him to a cross? Would any of them be there to speak some kind, comforting words to him as he died? Would any of them still be around when his broken body was taken down off the cross, to at least give him the kindness of a decent burial? A few of them would. Not many, you could probably count them on one hand, and almost all of them were women. The men who were his friends were hiding, afraid that the same thing might happen to them. Loving Jesus was far different from being in love with him. Being a follower of Jesus was different from being a fan of Jesus.

Isn't it still that way? Jesus has lots of fans. Lots of us are in love with Jesus because of what we hope he will do for us. Our prayers are filled with requests for healing, with desires that we have, with things we think God should do in order to really take care of the world—by which we really mean us and our friends. But falling in love is not the same as loving. Loving Jesus isn't easy and fun like falling in love. Loving Jesus means not just being with him on Palm Sunday and coming back Easter Sunday, but it means walking with him into the Garden of Gethsemane on Thursday night. It means

staying at the foot of the cross and joining in the suffering. Loving someone is hard. Anyone who has ever been married more than a week knows that. Anyone who is a parent knows that. Anyone who has a parent knows that or will know it as your parent ages.

But isn't this what God calls us to do? The two great commands are for us to love God and love one another. Not fall in love and have warm fuzzy feelings toward each other when we come to church or when we pray, but to love. What does it mean to love God and love each other? To not just be a fan of Jesus but to be a follower? It might mean to join someone in their suffering—to sit with someone as she dies or as he is in pain. It might mean to give or to write a check when you had planned on spending that money on yourself. It might mean to give up a grudge or to let go of intolerance, to learn how to have compassion when there is no reason to be compassionate, only that the other is a child of God, just as you are. It may be to take the time to recycle, not because it's trendy or because you feel guilty when you don't, but because God loves the world, all of it, and you do too.

But are we ready to do the loving things? When one of those kids we've baptized and promised to be there for is really annoying, do we pray for them, do we offer to help, or do we grumble about kids in church or kids not being in church? When one of those senior members in church seems so stuck in his ways and is always talking about the way things used to be and how much better things were back then, do we roll our eyes? Or do we listen? Do we hear his fears of change, of losing what he has and what he values? Do we take seriously his need to feel secure and at home in a world that is changing far too quickly for all of us? And if one of those youth leaves the church because she feels that all this ancient stuff just isn't relevant to her life in the 21st century, do we give up? Do we let them walk away? Or do we still send notes saying we miss them? Do we still pray? Do we do the loving thing even when it's hard?

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life that even death itself cannot destroy. They discovered that falling in love may be fun, but loving, though it may sometimes bring tears, also brings a joy that is eternal.

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