**WHEN WE FEEL UNWANTED**

March 29, 2015

Palm/Passion Sunday

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

*When We Feel Unwanted*

CrossRoads Lenten Series

**Liturgy of the Palms**

Psalm 118:1-2; 19-29

Mark 11:1-11 or

John 12:12-16

**Liturgy of the Passion**

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark 14:1-15:47 or

Mark 15:1-39, 40-47

**Luke 19:28-40**

Is there any pain that stays with us longer than that of not being wanted, of being rejected? This rejection may come from our family, our friends, colleagues or even the greater society.

An older man was recounting his teenage years. He said, “Back when I was a boy, we played spin-the-bottle. We played it this way, we spun the bottle and if it landed on you, the girls were supposed to kiss you, or if they chose to, they could give you, instead of a kiss, a quarter.” He said, by the time I was 18 I had accumulated enough quarters to pay my way through college.

Well, a quarter’s all right, but it is poor compensation for a girl who chooses to avoid kissing you. It’s hard to be rejected, to be unwanted.

You already know about China, where the government has (with the exception of a loophole or two) enforced a one child policy. Every family is supposed to have only one child to keep the population under control. But, there was a heartbreaking story in the Associated Press a couple of years ago about the plight of unwanted girls in India.

If you could have only one child, which would you prefer? You and I say, well, it wouldn’t matter. We would love a little girl or a little boy just the same. That’s easy for us to say in a modern technological society. However, in a poor, agricultural society where help on the farm is crucial, it is believed that a typical male baby will, over a lifetime, contribute more to the household than a typical girl baby.

This idea has led to perhaps millions of girl fetuses being aborted in China. This has produced a wildly skewed gender gap between the number of little boys born in that society and little girls. As young people move into cities, this skewing of genders may very well lead to some other dire issues. Time will tell.

Well, a similar phenomenon takes place in India, though the reasons are slightly different. Part of the reason Indians favor sons is the enormous expense of marrying off their daughters. Families often go into debt arranging marriages and paying for elaborate dowries to marry off their girls. A boy, on the other hand, will one day bring home a bride and a dowry as well. The problem is so serious in India that hospitals are legally banned from revealing the gender of an unborn fetus in order to prevent sex-selective abortions, though evidence suggests the information somehow gets out.

Some female infants who are not aborted are treated with such neglect that they do not survive. Many of those who do survive are given a name, “Nakusa” or “Nakushi,” which, in Hindi, means “unwanted.” Can you imagine naming a child unwanted? Activists say the name “unwanted,” which is widely given to girls across India, gives them the feeling they are worthless and a burden. That is why one district in India has started conducting ceremonies in which Indian girls are able to officially erase their names. Those who are named “Nakusa” or “Nakushi” are allowed to replace that name with a name of their own choosing, a name that tells them they are worthy and accepted.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Is there any emotion more devastating than feeling unwanted, rejected especially by those who are supposed to love you? Jesus knew what that was like. His own people rejected him. One who was closest to him betrayed him, another denied him, and, when he needed them most, almost all of his friends turned their back on him. He knew what it was to have those who once showered him with praise reject him and even shout, “Crucify him, crucify him, crucify him . . .” All this, of course, was foretold in the Old Testament. Poetry of the psalmist seemed prophetic when the poet wrote: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone . . .”

Welcome on this Palm Sunday 2015. Palm Sunday is intended to be a day of celebration. On this day we remember how the people of Jerusalem welcomed Jesus into their city. You know the story.

Jesus has been making a slow steady journey accompanied by his disciples and some other supporters to Jerusalem. As he approached Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ahead to a village where, he said, they would find a colt of a donkey which no one had ever ridden. He told them to untie it and bring it.

If anyone asked, “Why are you untying it?” They were to say, “The Lord needs it.”

In this period of history donkeys were valuable. Many were poor and sometimes donkeys were owned cooperatively by several families. Though imperfect it was a workable approach. Property laws were not absolute. There was an ancient law that required citizens to render to any king or one of the king’s emissaries any item or service needed by the king. If the king needed a donkey, they were obligated to give it to him. That is why in our story Jesus tells his disciples to procure the animal and if the owner asked what they were doing, they were simply to respond, “The Lord needs it.”

The disciples brought the donkey to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt’s back and put Jesus on the animal. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. This again was based on an ancient custom. Spreading clothing to carpet the pathway was a way to honor royalty. In 2 Kings 9 people became aware that Jehu had been anointed king of Israel and the text reads, “They hurried and took their cloaks and spread them under him on the bare steps. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, ‘Jehu is king!’”

Synoptic gospels tell us that the people spread their cloaks down before Jesus as well as branches from trees. It is in John’s Gospel that the branches are identified as having been taken from palms.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The procession broke out in joyful praise about the point where the road heads down the Mount of Olives. They shouted, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” and “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

This did not set well with some of the Pharisees scattered throughout the crowd. They said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” To which he said, “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

This would have been a great place to end a Gospel story. . . Jesus receiving the welcome he deserved. He had taught the kingdom of God faithfully, he had healed those who were sick or otherwise infirmed, he had set an example of living at its very best. Now he was being welcomed into Jerusalem like a king.

It could have ended that way, but of course there was more.

In the book *The Last Week*, theologian Marcus Borg tells about another parade that was occurring on the opposite side of the city even as Jesus entered Jerusalem. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor was entering the city at the head of a column of imperial cavalry. Jesus’ procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate’s proclaimed the power of empire. Pilate was there with his soldiers in case there was trouble. That was a common occurrence in Jerusalem, especially at Passover, a festival that celebrated the Jewish people’s liberation from an earlier empire.

“Imagine the imperial procession’s arrival in the city,” writes Borg. “A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.”

Pilate’s procession displayed not only Roman power, but also Roman theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God. This pagan heresy began with the Augustus, who ruled Rome a couple of decades before Christ. His father was said to be the son of the god Apollo. Inscriptions referred to Augustus as “son of God,” “lord,” “savior,” one who had brought “peace on earth.” After his death, he was seen ascending into heaven to take his permanent place among the gods. Underscore this: Pilate’s procession into Jerusalem embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Pilate on one side of the city; Jesus and his disciples on the other. The stage was being set for an inevitable clash between the mightiest kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. And when that clash reached its climax, crushed in between the might of Rome and the will of God, was the rejected, unwanted broken body of the crucified Jesus.

In the words of Isaiah, “*Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.*” (Isaiah 53:3-10)

So Palm Sunday was a celebration, but it was short lived. And very soon the innocent Galilean was being tried before this same Pontius Pilate and he was being turned over to the people to be crucified. Unwanted. Rejected by his own people.

**But that is not the end of the story, as you well know**. Next Sunday we will be celebrating Christ’s resurrection. Jesus Christ who was dead was made alive by the power of Almighty God. The stone was rolled away. The tomb was empty. The risen Christ began making appearances to those who believed in him. We’ll talk more about that next week. For now let’s be content with the words of the Psalmist: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone . . .”

Author Wayne Brouwer once wrote about Irish poet, Sir Thomas Moore. Moore had a beautiful, radiant wife. She had flaming red hair, and warm green eyes, and people in that part of the world said they’d never seen a lovelier bride. Moore and his wife loved each other madly. They loved each other fully. They were the best of friends: Two hearts, beating in just one mind! as a popular song puts it.

But one year, when Sir Thomas was called away for a long time, his wife came down with smallpox. There were no medicines for it. Most who got it, died. Those who survived became ugly with scars and sores. Mrs. Moore hung onto life. But when the fevers subsided, and she looked in her mirror, she wished she wouldn’t have made it. The most beautiful bride in the world had become deformed and grotesque.

She couldn’t stand to see herself anymore. She hid in her bedroom, and ordered the servants to hang heavy curtain over the windows. She refused to let anyone see her.

And then Sir Thomas returned. The servants warned him at the door: Your wife had smallpox! Her face is a horrible mess! She’s locked herself in her room! He went up to see her. But when he opened the door, the room was gloomy and dark. And from the bed came the voice of his wife: “No, Thomas! Come no nearer! I have resolved that you will never again see me by the light of day!”

He hesitated, and then turned slowly from the room. That night he wrote one of his most memorable poems. As the sun began to light the eastern sky the next morning, he went back upstairs. From the hallway outside her room, he read these words to his wife: “Believe me, if all those endearing young charms, which I look on so fondly today, were to pass in a moment, and flee from my arms like fairy dreams fading away, thou would’st still be adored, as this moment thou art. Let thy loveliness fade as it will; and around the dear ruin, each wish of my heart would entwine itself verdantly still.”

Having finished reading his poem to her, Sir Thomas Moore strode across the room to the window, and threw back those heavy curtains. And as the first rays of the morning sun flooded the room, he turned to his wife, kissed her disfigured face, and drew her into his arms. And from that moment she began to live again![[4]](#footnote-4)

That is what happened on Easter Sunday. Jesus who had been unwanted, rejected by his own people, lay in a lonely tomb, but as the first rays of the morning sun flooded the sky, God strode into that tomb and brought forth his beloved son raised from the dead. And now Christ reigns at the right hand of his Father. “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this,” writes the Psalmist, “and it is marvelous in our eyes. The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad . . .”

Even as we recall this time of our Lord’s rejection, we begin to anticipate the glorious celebration that comes in a week. Let us walk with our Christ over the next few days to see the praise fade, to have dinner with him in an upper room, to walk with him to the garden for prayer, to go with him to trial and crucifixion, and to recline in the tomb with him until the glorious sunrise where “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes.”

1. Chaya Babu, The Associated Press, 10/22/2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dr. Ralph F. Wilson, http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/19\_28-40.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kindle edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wayne Brouwer, *Wedding Homilies* (Seven Worlds). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)