

Let me take you back almost nine months, to a basketball arena in New Orleans. It's the first full night of the Gathering, and our youth have had *a day*. After a disastrous accompaniment morning that was just all kinds of shades of not good, we had then experienced penguins and stingrays and butterflies at the aquarium, hauled all the way across the city for a several hours long rehearsal for our mass cast performance, and then found some of the best barbeque I've ever had, courtesy of Garrett, but to get there, we had to walk through the pouring rain. Like I said, it had been a day.

We sat there that night, jamming out to music, getting slightly nervous about our mass cast performance, and then...Jacqueline came on the stage. Jacqueline is the author of the book "Love Without Limits," she's a religion professor at Concordia College, she came onto the stage and for all intents and purposes looked like someone who had it all together. Her long, flowing blonde curls were perfectly coiffed to style with a hip blue dress and I was like, ok well, let's see where this goes. Where this went was the story of the love of Jacqueline's life. We heard the full story of her and her husband, and it was immaculate, the kind of Disney, pie-in-the-sky romance that makes some people roll their eyes, and it was at that point that you could feel it happening in the audience...we knew...something was coming

because there was no way this woman had been brought on stage to simply tell the story of a love gone perfect.

She and her husband went to Iceland, a dream vacation. Life was beautiful and incredible and they went on a hike through the wilderness, and, he had a heart attack. Instantly, her life was over. She was in a foreign country that would not let her leave, because until an autopsy could be performed, she was considered a suspect in her husband's death. He was cremated before she could even return home to have a service with her family. Everything that was perfect had fallen apart. But then...Jacqueline started talking about how she was living her life now, and I was like *how* are you even *functioning*? She was functioning by declaring that she was determined to be an “anyways” person.

Life was hard and life was awful sometimes and her heart was broken and she was going to live anyways. She was going to go back to work anyways. She was going to keep loving anyways. She was going to dance when there was music on anyways. She was going to figure it out anyways because the alternative was unfathomable. When the world turns on a dime and you aren't sure what is going to happen next, when you aren't even sure what your life looks like anymore, you commit to living anyways. It wasn't something that happened instantaneously. It took time and effort and heart

healing to get to a point of saying...in the face of everything that tells me I should do the opposite, I am going to do it anyways. I am going to live anyways. I am going to risk my heart anyways, because in the end, living life that way has to be worth it.

I've been thinking about Jacqueline a lot this week as I've thought about the crowds we hear about this morning, the crowds we're used to, the crowds that we hear about and imitate being a part of every year. The crowds that could do nothing but grab palm branches off of trees and throw their cloaks into the road because Jesus was coming and that was they just *had* to do. In the face of the impossible, they were going to praise Jesus anyways. In the face of an empire, they were going to welcome their king anyways. In the face of fear, they were going to have faith anyways.

I mean let's think about this. Beyond putting ourselves in the shoes of these folks by simply waving some palm branches, let's actually try and put ourselves into the world they're living in. It is Passover. Thousands, *thousands* of people are flooding into Jerusalem and so things are cramped, crowded, and chaotic. Faithful Jews from all over Galilee are coming into the hub of Roman occupation to celebrate and commemorate the time when God rescued their ancestors from the hands of an vicious king, proclaiming that God is always going to be on the side of the oppressed, declaring that

freedom and liberation are what will win the day. And let's be real, Rome knows what's up, they know why the people are coming to the city, they know the story, they have to in order to be prepared, and you know there is someone within the Roman leadership who is like...umm...does anyone else see some parallels here? Should we be concerned? So there would be heightened security, hyper-awareness, and vigilance in the streets in case these people dare to think of getting out of control.

So those are the conversations that are going on within the halls of power, but you know there are similar ones happening in the streets. Did you hear Jesus is coming? Do you really think he is the Messiah? Well, you know Rome says the Emperor is the Messiah? People saying Jesus is could be arrested for treason then. I wish God would deliver us the way God delivered the Egyptians. But that's treasonous to say too. How can we celebrate freedom when we're under the thumb of this regime? What are we supposed to do now? Jacqueline would say, you do it anyways.

We tend to get so caught up in the Jesus of Palm Sunday that we sometimes miss the fact that Jesus wasn't the only one taking a risk, if anything, the crowds are the ones putting themselves in danger a bit more in this moment, because Jesus doesn't say, yes, please welcome me with palm branches, lay your cloaks before me. Jesus just asks for a donkey. The

crowds are who treat him like a king, and they do it for all the Empire to see. They looked at all the risks, all the potential pitfalls, the treason of it all and say, we're going to welcome *our* king anyways. We're going to sing hosanna anyways. We are going to believe in *our* Messiah anyways.

I'll be honest, y'all, I'm not sure I would have had the daring to be this kind of anyways person. I am not a risk taker, my fight or flight instinct errs strongly on the side of flight, I don't like to ruffle feathers, or put myself in danger, and so I look at these crowds and I wonder...would I have done it anyways? In the face of Jesus, in the moment of remembering God's liberating power, would I have done it anyways? And then I realize...we're in the midst of our own Palm Sunday, every single day. Every single day begs us to ask the question are we going to proclaim Jesus anyways?

We live in a world that is *strongly*, adamantly, obsessed with empire. We want to be the biggest, the baddest, the strongest, the most powerful, and the world says that's what we need to be, from individuals all the way up to countries. If you aren't first, you're last, and then we have Jesus, the Messiah, our king, shattering the weapons of war and riding in a donkey. And we have to ask ourselves, are we still waiting for warhorse Jesus or are we going to sing hosanna to the donkey Messiah anyways because that is

who Jesus calls us to be in this world? People of humility, gentleness, and putting others ahead of ourselves.

Our world would tell us that in the face of zero evidence, doing this faith thing is foolish. Don't you have better things to do with your time? Aren't you just giving your heart over to a fantasy? Isn't religion just the opiate of the masses? And yet...we dare to believe anyways, because we have seen God working in our lives and we know there is nothing better to do with our time or our lives than strive for the gospel.

Everywhere we turn right now there is someone distorting and twisting the message of the gospel up into knots filled with hatred, prejudice, and discrimination. There are people proclaiming that Christianity, that Jesus is about caring for yourself first and then your family and then maybe you get to others. There are people proclaiming that the radical love of Jesus, the wild inclusion of God is limited to those who are straight, those who are white, those who are cis-gendered, those who are wealthy, and to say that God loves anyone different is to be wrong. Someone has to be the person to remember that Jesus gave the greatest commandment to love one another as he has loved us, and there were no caveats attached to it. Someone has to be willing to love anyways, despite the loud, raucous hatred of the world, and if someone has to do it, then why not us? Why can't we be

the ones who stand up and say the message of the gospel is love and inclusion and radical welcome and even if you say we're wrong, we're going to do it anyways, because it's who Jesus calls us to be?

Nowhere does it say that being a person of faith, a person who would lay your cloak before Jesus and sing hosanna is an easy road. It doesn't say it won't ask you to be daring, to put your reputation on the line, to risk disagreement with others who will try to speak louder than you, and yet...we do it anyways. We dare to be the people Jesus has called us to be, walking the road of faith, strewing our cloaks before our donkey riding king and saying this is who we are throwing our lot in with, an itinerant preaching from Galilee with barely a dime to his name who was willing to touch the untouchable, forgive the sinner, eat with unclean, and love the whole world, all of us messy people included.

There are days when being the opposite sounds easier, sounds more relaxing, sound simpler, but do we want simple or do we want good? Do we want easy or do we want justice? Do we want relaxed or do we want radical love? The parade route lies before us, our Messiah is upon his donkey, and it is up to each of us to wonder, the world would have us put our palm branches down, but instead, will we dare to wave them anyways? **AMEN!!!**