

“Will you devote yourself to the church’s fellowship?”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
April 2, 2023 – Palm and Passion Sunday

*Matthew 21:1-11 and Matthew 26:36-46*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Today, for one last time, we explore one of the questions our Confirmation students will be asked if they decide to join the church: “Will you devote yourself to the church’s fellowship?”

When I say the word *fellowship*, what do you think of? Coffee hour after worship, church potlucks, being with your friends? Because I’m a nerd (no surprise there), I think: *The Fellowship of the Ring*. We are pledging our swords, bows, and axes to accompany Frodo to destroy the ring of power in Mount Doom. I, of course, am an elf. [Point to my flowing golden locks.] I know: every sermon, all my cultural references are limited either to what happened like 20 years ago or to what a four-year-old watches. There is no in between for me!

Ask Susan Sides about the word *fellowship*, and she thinks of *shalom*, a Hebrew word for peace and wholeness. Susan is part of a worshiping community and garden that feeds the hungry. Susan describes the shalom of fellowship this way: “If you throw thousands of pieces of thread onto a table, no fabric results. The threads must be rightly and intimately related to one another in literally a million ways. Each thread must go over, under, around, and through the others at thousands of points. Only then do you get a fabric... that covers, fits, holds, shelters, and delights.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s a lovely image, especially for our knitters. Fellowship isn’t just being shoved together; it’s carefully and intimately relating to each other, every thread. The problem is that many of us are not so good at sewing. We give up too easily.

We too stand on the side of the road waving palms at Jesus, shouting Hosanna and singing his praises. Oh, we have no problem being in fellowship with Jesus and each other when things are good. And this—Palm Sunday—is a good day. Jesus arrives as a king. When he instructs his disciples to get a donkey from the village, he says, “If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’” *That* is a confident man. That is a man at the top of his game. Who doesn’t want to be around a guy like that? It feels good to be with him.

The problem is this is where some people stop. They never make it to Gethsemane.

A few days later, most of those crowds have abandoned Jesus. It’s the night before his arrest and death. He singles out Peter, James, and John, the same disciples who went up the mountain with him and witnessed his transfiguration. John, the beloved. Peter, the rock. His best friends. Jesus isn’t feeling so confident right now. He’s scared. He confides in his friends, saying, “My soul is deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” He doesn’t ask them to fix

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<sup>1</sup> *Way of Love*, Norman Wirzba

it. He doesn't ask them to make him feel better. He just asks them to stay with him. Because the hardest part of life isn't the suffering; it's having to face it alone.

Jesus steps to the side, throws himself on the ground, and prays, asking God to spare him if it be God's will. He looks up, his face covered in dirt except where the tears have made channels along his skin, and he sees those best friends of his—the only ones he's got at this point—and they're asleep. And it's not because they don't care. It's not because they're bad people. They love Jesus. They really do. They're just tired. And it's hard, it's uncomfortable, to see someone, especially the one you call Messiah, grieving like that. They're used to the strong, confident Jesus of Palm Sunday. They don't know how to handle this trembling Jesus.

Three times Jesus finds them like this.

It happens all the time, right? People walk away from friendships, relationships, churches, the moment it gets hard. Or churches walk away from people, the moment they get divorced, depressed, start struggling with addiction or anything that doesn't fit the happy pretend norm.

I've had people tell me they don't want to come to church if a certain someone else is here, someone who frustrates or challenges them. I had someone tell me they didn't want to hear about school shootings or racism or even personal grief at church; they just wanted to come to church and feel good. And, you know, I get it. I like to feel good too. But this isn't a social club. This is a church. We don't come here to *feel* good. We come here to *be* good. And there is an immense difference in that little verb.

We come here to worship God, to love our diverse (and yes, sometimes challenging, frustrating) neighbors, to grow in our faith, and to put that faith into action in a way that serves the righteousness of God and the shalom of our community. We come here to love. Love is hard. Fellowship is hard. Because life isn't just palms; it's Gethsemane too.

To be in fellowship is to keep awake with someone—be aware, attentive, stand at their side, witness their pain (and joy!), not judge, not fix, not explain, just be there, listen, hold the space.

Paul says that we are all connected in one fellowship, one body, and when one grieves, we should all grieve with it, and when one rejoices, we should all rejoice with it (1 Cor. 12). The New Testament calls it *koinonia*, a Greek word for fellowship, a living bond that unites Christians in community, holding all things in common, so that no one is in need (Acts 2). The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called it “the beloved community,” in which (in the words of Charles Marsh) “people divided by centuries of oppression and hatred might come to live together peaceably.”

Jesus just called it love.

And because I'm a nerd, I can't help but think of that scene toward the end of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Frodo and Sam have made it to the banks of Mount Doom. But the weight of the ring is too great. Frodo collapses. Sam cradles him in his arms, reminding him of the Shire in spring, the orchards in blossom, the first strawberries in cream. Frodo can't remember though.

He can't recall the taste of food or the sound of water or the touch of grass. He says, "I'm naked in the dark." And then, in the ultimate act of fellowship, Sam says, "Come on, Mr. Frodo, I can't carry it for you, but I can carry you." He lifts Frodo on his back and, step by step, carries him up the mountain.

We should all have a friend like Sam. The church is meant to be that friend. We are meant to be that friend.

We do this, says Scripture, because we have fellowship with Christ (1 Cor. 1:9, 1 John 1:3). *He* is that friend who carries us. That's what this Holy Week is about: Jesus carrying us.

Fellowship is people standing together with Nashville, saying we will do everything we can to protect each other, to protect our children, and put an end to gun violence. Because those aren't just somebody else's children; they're our children. They're God's children.

Fellowship is André Trocmé, the pastor of a French Reformed Church in France, saving the lives of 2,500 refugees during World War II, hiding and sheltering their Jewish neighbors and those fleeing the Nazis.

Fellowship is a Presbyterian church founded on the cause of the abolition of slavery. It's taking a knee for George Floyd and saying as one community, "I can't breathe." It's teaching English to Ukrainian refugees and partnering with our local farm workers and immigrants. It's people with disabilities, and people going through chemo, and people sitting with their pastor, crying. It's coming to a funeral. It's celebrating a baptism or new members. It's taking vows to support and nurture each other. It's volunteering in the Children's Worship Center and Pride House. It's hospital visits, and Longest Night services, and standing outside the Commons during a COVID outbreak to pray. It's people providing transportation, deacons making meals, women knitting prayer shawls. It's cookies and cake and coffee and soup for Lent. It's the patience you show each other, and the ways you learn from each other. It's you, Daniel, waving. It's you, Daniel, up there singing. It's all of us coming together every Sunday, online and in person, as one congregation.

It's walking into the conference room the other day and seeing a man who frequently comes to the church for assistance, slumped over the table where he had been eating; he was fast asleep. It's not easy being a downtown church; we've had theft, vandalism, people wandering the church, and sometimes, I'll admit, I get annoyed. But you know, that's what church is supposed to be. A place someone feels safe enough to come and close their eyes. Because they know *we'll* be awake, for as long as they need.

Because we aren't just a Palm Sunday people. We are a Gethsemane people.

We are devoted to the fellowship of the church. **Amen.**