

John 12:12-19

Luke 23:50-56

March 20, 2016

Passion/Palm Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?
SOMETIMES ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN NO WORDS**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Billy Sunday was a popular outfielder in the National League in the late 1880's. He left professional baseball and became one of the country's most famous evangelists. He used to tell a story about a professing Christian who got a job in a lumber camp. The camp had a bad reputation of being filled with very ungodly workers. One of the Christian's friends heard he had gotten the job and warned him, "If those lumberjacks ever find out you're a Christian, you're going to be in for a hard time." The Christian man said, "I know that, but I need the job!"

A year later, the professing Christian came home for a visit. He met up with his friend who asked him, "How did it go in the lumber camp? Did they give you a hard time because you're a Christian?" The man said, "Oh no, not at all. They didn't give me a bit of trouble." "Really," said his friend, somewhat surprised. "Why not?" The man replied, "They didn't give me a bit of trouble — they never even found out I'm a Christian!"¹

Mark and Luke tell us that Joseph of Arimathea was "waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God." Luke tells us Joseph had not agreed to [the council's] plan and action to kill Jesus. Matthew tells us Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but John calls Joseph "a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews." Up until Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of the crucified Jesus, his fellow Jewish religious leaders might not have given him a bit of trouble — they might never have even found out he was a disciple of Jesus. Then, Joseph took a risk . . .

* Joseph took a risk by approaching Pontius Pilate and asking for Jesus' body. According to the customs of the day, the Romans didn't typically release the bodies of crucified criminals. Instead, they left them hanging on the crosses to rot and be scavenged by birds and dogs. We don't know why Pilate agreed to Joseph's request. But, at the very least, Joseph ran the risk of being identified with a convicted and crucified rebel against the Roman Empire. Joseph couldn't have been sure Pilate would say yes when he asked for Jesus' body.

* Joseph took a risk by tending to Jesus' crucified body because his fellow Jewish religious leaders had condemned Jesus to death for blasphemy. Luke tells us Joseph "though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action." We don't know if Joseph got up in the council meeting and spoke against the plan or if he voted no or if he abstained from voting to condemn Jesus. Nonetheless, by caring for Jesus'

crucified body — a convicted and crucified blasphemer, cursed by God according to the Jewish law — Joseph risked his reputation and his authority among his own people.

* Joseph took a risk by handling a dead body just a few short hours before the Sabbath and the beginning of the Passover Festival. According to the Jewish law (Numbers 19:11-13), “Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days.” Luke tells us Joseph “took [the body] down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid.” There was no way Joseph could have handled Jesus’ tortured, bloody, dead body without becoming physically AND ritually unclean. So, Joseph forfeited his chance to participate in the great celebration of the Passover. For Joseph, his humanity took priority over his religion.

So, why did Joseph take all of these risks? Luke tells us Joseph was “a good and righteous man” who “was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.” Joseph reminds us of two other characters in Luke’s gospel who appear on the scene at a crucial time in Jesus’ life. On the first Sunday of this year, we heard the stories of Simeon and Anna who met the baby Jesus and his parents in the temple in Jerusalem. Simeon is described as “righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” (Luke 2:25-26) Anna is described as a prophet who “never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.” When she saw the baby Jesus, “she began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the restoration of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:36-38)

We might be prone to criticize Joseph of Arimathea for being a “secret disciple” and think that taking care of Jesus’ dead body was too little, too late. Why didn’t he use his influence as a rich member of the Jewish council to keep Jesus from being crucified? Luke doesn’t give us enough information to make a judgment about that, one way or another.

Joseph of Arimathea appears only in this place in the entire gospel story. Luke’s story about Joseph is the longest of the four gospels, but it is still only seven verses. Joseph never speaks in the story. Obviously he must have said something when he went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. But we never hear any words from Joseph’s mouth. We never hear **his** reasons for taking the body down off the cross, wrapping it in an linen cloth, and laying it in his own new, rock-hewn tomb.

Our handbell choir has been practicing the song called “And He Never Said a Word.” It is Hymn #219 in our *Glory to God* hymnbook: “They crucified my Lord, and he never said a mumbalin’ word . . . Not a word, not a word, not a word.” The last verse is, “He bowed his head and died, and he never said a mumbalin’ word . . . Not a word, not a word, not a word.”

What if we added another verse? “Joseph buried that body himself, and Joseph never said a mumbalin’ word . . . Not a word, not a word, not a word.” Joseph never says a mumbalin’ word in today’s story, but his actions speak louder than no words at all. Where are the rest of Jesus’ disciples — including

the ones who swore they would stand with him to the end, even if it meant dying with him — when Joseph takes the body down, wraps it in a line cloth, and lays it in a tomb? They've scattered. They've run for their lives. In their case, their actions spoke louder than their words of just a few hours or a few days earlier.

That's all we know about Joseph of Arimathea, at least from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We're left to draw our own conclusions about what Joseph thought of Jesus. How would Joseph have answered Jesus if Jesus had asked him, "Joseph, who do you say that I am?" We have no record of any such conversation. But we do have this story about the rich, good, righteous, secret disciple of Jesus taking a risk and taking care of his crucified body. Maybe Joseph's actions speak volumes about him . . .

However, there's more to Joseph's story . . . at least according to legends that quickly grew up around Joseph. The great English poet, William Blake, wrote the poem "Jerusalem," which asks:

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?*

*And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic Mills?*

*Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!*

*I will not cease from mental flight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.*

Almost one hundred eighty years later, the Irish rock singer and balladeer, Van Morrison, would sing in his song, "Summertime in England," "Won't you meet me down by Avalon, In the summertime in England, in the Church of St. John . . . Did you ever hear about Jesus walkin' — Jesus walkin' down by Avalon?"

William Blake and Van Morrison were inspired by the legend of Joseph of Arimathea being one of England's greatest evangelists. The gospel of Matthew tells us Joseph was a rich man. Legend tells us he made his fortune in the metals trade. In the course of doing business, Joseph is said to have traveled to the mining areas of the Ro-

man Empire's Island of Britain. Identified as the uncle of Mary and the great-uncle of Jesus, Joseph supposedly took a teen-aged Jesus along on one or more of his metals-buying trips. Thus, Blake's and Morrison's questions, "*Did those feet in ancient time Walk upon England's mountains green?*" and "*Did you ever hear about Jesus walkin' — Jesus walkin' down by Avalon?*"

There is a picture of Joseph of Arimathea in the margin of today's bulletin, from the stained glass window at the Church of St. John the Baptist in Glastonbury (Avalon). You will notice Joseph is holding two chalices. Legend has it Joseph took with him to England two cups, one containing the blood and, the other, the sweat of Jesus Christ. These are known as "The Holy Grail," for which Arthur's Knights of the Round Table hunted so eagerly.

The legend of Joseph goes on and on . . . how he carried a staff made of wood from Christ's thorn of crowns; how he stuck the staff in a hill overlooking Glastonbury and a thorn bush immediately sprang up; how he converted local kings to Christianity and once converted 18,000 people in a single day; how six kings served as his pallbearers when he died at the age of eighty-six.²

Of course, what we know about Joseph comes from the short stories in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There we find out Joseph was rich, good, righteous, from Arimathea, expected the kingdom of God, asked Pilate for Jesus' body, wrapped the body in a linen cloth, and laid it in his own new, rock-hewn tomb. Whether the legends about Joseph have any historical validity, I can't say one way or the other. But the legends grew and grew because of what Joseph **did** for Jesus at a crucial point in Jesus' life and death.

If the legends about Joseph of Arimathea are true, if he did become a great evangelist in Britain, if he did preach the gospel so that thousands of people came to faith in Jesus Christ, at some point before all of that happened, he must have said the words, "I believe you are the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Messiah." Since we don't have any record of Joseph's public profession of faith — his answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" — we can look at what he **did** for Jesus, at great cost and at great risk.

And we can ask ourselves, "What do **we** do for Jesus that lets people know who we think Jesus is?"

Let us pray: God most high, gracious and glorious, blessed is the one who comes in your name. Lead us now on the road to the cross. May we follow with faithfulness and joy, with our service and love, until the very stones cry out at the coming of your new creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Congregational Response

*Lifted high upon a cross,
perfect love hangs pierced with nails.
All creation grieves its loss,
as the very sunlight fails.
Shadows lengthen into night.*

NOTES

¹Billy Sunday story found at “Lesson 112: Taking a Stand for Christ (Luke 23:50-56)” at www.bible.org.

²Information about the legends surrounding Joseph of Arimathea was found at “Joseph of Arimathea” at www.britannia.com and “Joseph of Arimathea” at www.bbc.co.uk/passion.