



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**
Presbyterian (USA)

The Practice of Welcoming

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 21:
1-11

March 24, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

The people of Jerusalem hated parades. Let me tell you why. The Romans had taken control of Jerusalem and all Judea in 63 BCE so by the time Jesus comes to Jerusalem in the year 33 CE, the Romans have been in power for almost 100 years.

The people of Jerusalem knew the routine. Whenever a new Roman ruler came to Jerusalem, a parade would happen. Everyone had to attend. It was compulsory. You would stand there along the parade route—all day if needed. If you were a shopkeeper, you had to close your shop and lose any profit for the day. If you were a day laborer, you could not work. Since you could not work, you would not be paid. Since you were not paid, you could not buy food that day. Since you could not buy food that day, your family did not eat. If you tried to work or open your shop, there were informants who would report you. Within a week or so, some soldiers would show up at your home. They would ransack the house or the shop. Then they would drag the family out into the street and beat them as a display of power.

During the parade, when the ruler or general or governor or king passed you by—always with soldiers before them, with them, and after them—you had to bow. You were never to make eye contact. That would be insulting. The people of Jerusalem hated these parades. It was a Roman show of power. It was humiliating. That's what makes this day so special. This was so far from the routine parade.

Jesus and his disciples—the women and men who have been journeying with him for three and a half years—reach the Mount of Olives across the Kidron valley from the city. It's a magnificent view. I've stayed in a hotel there.

Jesus tells two of his disciples to go into the village in the valley where they will find a donkey and a colt. They do that and bring them both to Jesus.

Matthew quotes from the prophet Zechariah who says that the king who is coming will be humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. So, a colt is a young (four years old and younger) male horse or pony, or in this case, donkey. All colts are foals but foals can be either male or female. Zechariah says the king will be riding on a young, male, donkey. Matthew seems to think Zechariah is talking about a donkey and a colt. Only Matthew does this. He wants us to view Jesus as riding on both animals into Jerusalem which maybe seems a little odd like Jesus is some circus performer standing on the backs of a donkey and a colt.

What is significant is that if you want to impress a people, riding on a young donkey is not the way to do it. The Roman rulers who came to Jerusalem would be riding stallions, war horses, to show off their power. Jesus rides a donkey to show the opposite: his humility.

But as he enters through the East gate, the oldest gate in Jerusalem and the one with a direct path to the temple, people do not laugh at him. Instead, they spread their cloaks on the ground—a sign of respect for royalty. This is what they did when King Solomon, son of King David, came to Jerusalem as the new king. They put their garments on the ground before him and took palm branches from the trees and they waved them and sang, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Hosanna is translated from the Hebrew as "save us" but most scholars say this had become a shout of praise among the people. Get this. No one is forcing them to do this. No one is forcing them to take off their garments and lay them in the street.

In verse 10 it says, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil." The Greek word for turmoil is "eseisthe" whose root word is "seismon" from which we get the word "seismic."

Jerusalem was quaking on this day when Jesus was being welcomed into the city.

That's why people were asking, "Who is this?" Some of them didn't even know who he was but they joined together welcoming him. He was a stranger and they welcomed him anyway. The practice of welcoming. Time and again, Jesus talked about three groups that we should welcome: the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

When I was teaching at Columbia Seminary, I worshiped at the Central Presbyterian Church in downtown Atlanta. Central Church sits across the street from the Georgia State Capitol building. One of the reasons I worshiped there is that Central Church has a vibrant ministry with persons experiencing homelessness—many of whom live on the streets around the church and the Capitol. I would park near the Capitol building and walk by and greet these persons. During the winter, Central turns the church's gym into an overnight shelter for 80 persons. A number of times I volunteered at the foot clinic. When you're on the street, your feet take a beating. We would wash and treat the feet of these gentlemen, put lotion on them and help trim their nails.

On Sunday mornings, we had several from this community who would regularly come to worship. Our ushers knew them by name. But on one Sunday, a young man appeared that none of the ushers knew. He was clearly living on the street. He was welcomed. Most of the homeless persons who worshiped with us would sit toward the back of the Sanctuary on the side but this young man walked straight down the center aisle and sat in the front pew. Clearly, he was not a Presbyterian.

He was given a worship bulletin but did not use it. He did not pick up a hymnal or stand when we stood to sing. He did not fall asleep during the sermon. He didn't make any loud noises. After the sermon, the ushers passed the offering plates and then the choir stood up to sing the anthem and that's when it started. When the choir director got up and stood on the podium and invited the choir to stand, he did, too. On the floor. All by himself. Everyone could see him. The choir could see him. But the director could

not because his back was to the young man. Then just as the anthem started and the director gestured to the choir, in perfect synchronization, the young man copied the director. Every move he made, the young man mimicked the director perfectly. The whole congregation and choir was watching this and smiling. The choir director noted that people were not looking at him and it made him gesture even more emphatically which made the young man gesture more emphatically. This got the altos giggling which did not help the choir director. He had no idea what was going on. When the song was finally finished, the young man turned around to all of us and bowed and the whole congregation stood up and the choir broke out into applause. The young man thanked everyone then strode down the center aisle and out the door of Central Church shaking hands and high-fiving and fist-bumping as he went.

Rev. Dr. P. C. Buddy Ennis, the senior pastor, was away that Sunday but he was back the following Sunday. Dr. Ennis got up to give the welcome and announcements and he looked out over the congregation and said, "I heard what happened last Sunday." And people began to smile and giggle. The senior pastor continued, "You know I love you. You know I am proud to be your pastor. But I have never been more proud than when I heard what happened here last Sunday. You see, the Lord Jesus Christ came to worship at the Central Presbyterian Church of Atlanta. And you not only welcomed him, you gave him a standing ovation!"

Friends, just as they welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem, the Lord Jesus Christ is in our midst. He is the houseless one living on the street. He is the widow with no one to care for her. He is the teenager whose family has disowned her because she came out to them. He is the one struggling with addiction, and he is the immigrant at our border who just wants to find a place to raise his family in peace.

When the stranger came to the city, they shouted "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." So how can we do anything less?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.