

"TWO PARADES"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
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New York, New York 10028  
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### INTRODUCTION

Let me work my way into this Palm Sunday sermon by asking a number of questions. Be honest with your answers. Have you ever failed...really failed...at something across the years of your life? Perhaps in your work...or in your marriage...or on the athletic field....or some contest, some endeavor? Have you ever found yourself unable to sleep at night, thinking about some of those things which you wish you hadn't said or done? I think you can take some comfort in the fact that you're not alone in this... if..

Within a few days they'll be celebrating Paul Revere Day up in Boston. I use to enjoy that April Day when I was in school up there...warm weather, the Marathon, a game at Fenway Park. Did you know that Paul Revere, that great American patriot, was once court-martialed for cowardice? In 1778 Paul Revere commanded a garrison of soldiers who attempted to take over a British stronghold in Maine. The invasion was a complete failure, lives and ships were lost. And Paul "one if by land and two if by sea" Revere was accused of insubordination and cowardice. And although he was cleared of all charges, Revere was dismissed from the military with his reputation soiled. He never fully cleared his name. They don't like to talk about that up in Boston...

Failure is a part of life. Everyone of us messes up at some time or other. We all come up short. We all have those embarrassing moments when we hang our heads and feel terrible about ourselves.

### PALM SUNDAY CELEBRATION

You may be wondering, well what has this got to do with Palm Sunday? At first glance it might seem like they're not at all related. After all, we know that Palm Sunday is a celebration day....the celebration of the victorious entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem. Once again we're reminded of children spreading garments at the feet of the donkey on which He was seated. Once again, we hear those joyous voices calling out,

"Hosanna....blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!"

And once again, we feel the surging hopes of the crowd...something great is about to happen. Palm Sunday is one of my favorite Sundays of the year!

It was just about this time fifty years ago...April of 1945...as World War II was coming to an end that an American glider pilot by the name of Marion Case was captured during the invasion of Holland...taken to a Prisoner of War camp in Germany....hustled into the barbed-wire enclosure by SS guards with their snarling German shepherds.

Case tells us that he noticed the emaciated inmates, mostly Frenchman, devouring chocolate bars provided by the Red Cross. They noticed the American flag on Case's sleeve and with that a riotous shout went up and swept through the camp. At long last here was the living proof of the rumored arrival of American troops in Europe that would set them free. The starving prisoners showered Case and his companions with their candy bars. The guards called "Halt!"...but like ticker tape in a parade those candy bars continued to rain down on the American pilots being brought in as prisoners. The German guards went so far as to open fire and killed two of the French prisoners at point-blank range. Still the candy bars

kept coming. Case and his comrades screamed, "stop...stop" and finally those jubilant prisoners did stop, but Marion Case....50 years later...still flinches when he recalls this suicidal act of defiance on the part of those prisoners that day in April of 1945.

My guess would be that the people of Jerusalem that day long ago greeted Jesus with something of the same kind of desperate enthusiasm. Instead of throwing chocolate bars, however, they waved palm branches for they were greeting Jesus as something of a "deliverer", too....not from the power of sin, but from the power of Rome. The resentment against Rome was very deep in the city of Jerusalem. And here came their new King, the "one" who would lead them to victory over their despised enemy. Yes, it was a day of victory, but that is only one of two parades that the people of Jerusalem witnessed that week.

#### THE OTHER PARADE

A few days later...at the week's end...there was another parade, less joyful....somber and sad, as Jesus makes that long trek through the city out to the hill called Golgotha, referred to as "the place of the skull".

Parade number one smacked of victory. The second parade spoke of defeat. No hosannas the second time around. And the women who followed after their condemned Master are weeping and wailing. The faces of His followers are grim. Remember that the people were given a choice between releasing a well-known terrorist whose name was Barabbas and releasing their "King Jesus". And they chose Barabbas. How much lower can you sink in public esteem than that. I've often found myself wondering if we were given the choice how we might vote. If there was any redeeming quality in parade number two...no one could possibly see it. Quite a contrast to parade number one.

However, this needs to be said here on the "positive side" of the ledger. Most of us can identify more easily with the second parade than the first. Few of us will ever have crowds throwing garments at our feet and waving palm branches and singing our praises. Our picture won't be on the cover of magazines as Michael Jordan's was a few days back. Peter Jennings won't be announcing our name as the Person of the Week as he did last week when Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers, was honored. Few of us will ever be invited to dine at the White House or win two Oscars....as did Tom Hanks.

But all of us know what it is to fall short, to fail...to miss the winning basket or to strike out with the bases loaded. And sometimes we just don't appreciate how important failure is.

#### ACCOMPLISHMENT OFTEN ACCOMPANIES FAILURE

Anyone who accomplishes anything significant in life is going to experience failure along the way. Maybe we should say it's "a given".

So let's put that down as something to carry along with us.

Are you familiar with the Zeke Bonura Theory of Government? Or perhaps I should ask if you're familiar with the name of Zeke Bonura. Raise a hand if you are. Those over 50 will remember him....the clumsy, slow-footed first baseman of the old Washington Senators. Each year Zeke Bonura contrived to end the baseball season with the best fielding average in the major leagues. And he did so by recognizing the old rule that said you cannot be charged with an error unless you touched the ball. Hence, Bonura avoided touching anything that looked the least

bit difficult to get to. This, pointed our Attorney Edward Williams, is a rule that has been respected by most politicians of our century. The Zeke Bonura Theory of Government. They leave untouched anything that appears to be the least bit difficult to deal with. They don't want to be charged with an error, but..

Anyone who attempts to do something significant in life is going to mess up occasionally. Successful people know that and thus do not let setbacks deter them.

There's a professor by the name of Jack Matson, at the University of Houston, who has developed a course that his students have dubbed "Failure 101". The professor deliberately has had his class build ice-creamsticks "mock-ups" of products that no one will ever buy. Matson says that,

"They have designed hamster hot tubs and kites to fly in hurricanes...."

The ideas are borderline ridiculous, but once the students equated failure with innovation instead of with defeat, they have felt free to try anything. Since most students would have at least "five failures" before finding their business niche, they have learned not to take failure as the last word. Says Matson,

"They have learned to reload and get ready to shoot again...."

And over here at Rutgers University, a professor by the name of Benjamin Barber shares a similar approach and similar philosophy. He teaches political science and also writes novels and composes music and choreographs and lectures all over the world and thinks deeply about things that interest him. And when recently asked about the difference between success and failure, he answered that he doesn't divide the world into,

"The weak and the strong....or the successes and failures...or those who make it and those who don't." He divides the world "into learners and non-learners".

In other words, there are people who "learn", people who are "open" to what happens around them, who listen....who hear the lessons. And when they do something stupid, they learn from it and don't do it again. And when they do something that works a little bit, they do it even better and harder the next time around. And so perhaps the question we need to be asking ourselves is not whether,

"I'm a success or a failure...but whether I'm a learner or a non-learner". "Do I listen..."

#### THE LINE BETWEEN THESE TWO PARADES

Two parades. One had all the earmarks of a success. The other, all the earmarks of total failure. All of this goes to prove that the line between success and failure is very difficult to draw. Sometimes when we think we have succeeded gloriously, our victory turns out to be a setback. And seeming defeats, on the other hand, can sometimes be successes. Many there are who have learned more from their failures than from their successes and are successful!

When President Lincoln finished his famous Gettysburg address and went over to sit down, a reporter leaned in his direction and asked, "Is that all?" Edward Everett, the main speaker, expressed his disappointment, as did a number of other men on the platform with Lincoln that day. And later on Lincoln himself asked not to discuss his speech. Said he,

"I failed....and that is about all that can be said about it...." And he rejected the efforts of others to encourage him about the speech as they returned by train that day to Washington.

It wasn't until the press and the public had loudly praised his address that his own doubts and the doubts of his early critics would fade from memory.

SUCCESS AND FAILURE: WHAT ARE THEY

What is success? What is failure?  
What is weakness? What is strength?

Paul in writing to the Corinthians offers a hint, a clue. There in First Corinthians, chapter two, instead of boasting about his strengths, he boasts about his weaknesses. How does it go?

"A thorn was given me in the flesh...to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'"

God's power is made perfect in weakness. What is he driving at? Perhaps an experience that Tony Campolo had can help us get a handle on this biblical assertion. Tony was once asked to be a counselor in a Junior High Camp. He says it's an experience he would recommend for everyone. A Junior High kid's concept of a good time, Tony says, is picking on people. He shares...

"And in this particular case, at this particular camp, there was a little boy who was suffering from cerebral palsy. His name was Billy and they picked on him...they picked on him".

As Billy walked across the camp with his un-coordinated body the other kids would line up and try to imitate his awkward and grotesque movements. Tony watched him one day as he was asking for direction.

"Which....way...is...the....craft...shop?" he would stammer, his mouth contorting. And the boys mimicked in that same awful manner...and stammer, "It's...over...there...Billy" And then they would all laugh at him. Tony was irate.

Tony's furor reached its highest pitch one Thursday morning. It was Billy's cabin's turn to give devotions. Tony was wondering what would happen, because they had appointed Billy to be the speaker. Tony knew that they just wanted to get Billy up there in order to make fun of him. Oh, kids can be so cruel. As Billy dragged his way to the front, you could hear the giggles rolling over the crowd of assembled campers.... it took almost five minutes for Billy to say seven words and these were the words:

"JESUS....LOVES....ME....AND....I...LOVE....JESUS."

When Billy finished, there was dead silence. Tony Campolo remembers looking over his shoulder and seeing tears in the eyes of the other boys...some of them were bawling...all over the place. He said that something of a revival broke out in that camp shortly after Billy's brief but moving testimony. And even today, Tony says, as he travels around the country he'll occasionally run into someone who says,

"Remember me? I was converted at that Junior High Camp back there in the summer of....remember Billy? He was really something!"

The camp counselors had tried different things to get those unruly junior high boys interested in Jesus. Why they even imported baseball players who had reported seeing their batting averages go up ever since they had started praying and believing in Jesus. But God chose not to use those superstars. He chose a kid with cerebral palsy.

CLOSING      What is strength and what is weakness? Or, what is success and what is failure. Sometimes you don't know for a long time. In the story of Jesus, success came on the third day...but that's getting us into next Sunday's message. But that Good Friday parade that had failure written all over it was a prelude to God's victory parade over sin and death. And that horrendous trek up Golgotha's hill which we'll be thinking about later this week marched right on through the "rolled away stone door" of Joseph's empty tomb. For many others vindication takes much longer...sometimes even a lifetime.

If there is an area in your life where you feel you've messed up...where you feel failure has touched...some secret shame, some embarrassment, something you find difficult to carry....try to remember as you go on from here that God's power is made perfect in weakness, as Paul put it. And rather than letting that failure defeat you, why not make the choice to be a part of His parade...His victory parade this day. It still continues even down to this hour. But remember, the choice is yours. "Once to every man and nation...comes the moment to decide..."

As Lowell puts it in our closing hymn:

"Once to every man and nation,  
Comes the moment to decide..."

PRAYER      Confirm within each of us the feelings and intentions, the decisions of these moments this Palm Sunday. Draw us into the Jesus parade. Help us to show forth in our lives something of His incomparable spirit that others may be drawn to Him in whom we see life's highest hope as well as its deepest meaning. Amen.