

Palm Sunday **Transformed – By Love** April 9, 2017
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

It is April- and what comes to mind after April showers and May flowers? Yes- you've got it: taxes. Starting a sermon with tax filings may not be the most conventional way to begin on Palm Sunday, but it works for today. This is how...

In 1996 the great state of Minnesota decided to run a little experiment with their tax system. (from *Ken Evers-Hood- a classmate of Jenn DiFrancesco- Princeton Seminary, 2001*) They were trying to figure out how to increase the number of people paying their taxes. They selected thousands of people at random and sent out four different messages. One message recounted all the good things taxes paid for— education, police, roads, etc. You wouldn't want to deprive people of all those good things, right? The second letter threatened people, enumerating the risks of noncompliance. The third letter told all about a new office dedicated to helping people with their tax questions, with the phone number included. A fourth letter simply told people how many other Minnesotans were paying their taxes. (Believe it or not, just over 90 percent of Minnesotans were paying their taxes at that time.) So, one letter talked about the positive benefits of taxes, another talked about the ramifications of not paying taxes, a third letter gave them access to help with tax questions, and a fourth told them how many other people were already doing their tax duty. Of all of these letters, only one had any measurable effect. But the effect was considerable.

While you ponder which one of the letters was helpful — and how annoying it is for me not to give you the answer right now— I'll give you another puzzle, one that hits us every year about this time. Why on earth are the crowds so excited about Jesus on Palm Sunday only to cry out for his crucifixion just five days later? How is it that we go from "Hosanna!" today to "Crucify him!" by Good Friday? Because that's what happens this week.

On Palm Sunday Jesus enters Jerusalem in the manner of a Roman general— with people shouting ‘Save us!’ –Hosanna- throwing palms down before him. But by the end of the week, this crowd completely turns. They cry out for Barabbas to be released. And Jesus of Nazareth— the one whom they cheered on Palm Sunday, the one who healed their wounds, the one who fed them, and the one who opened Scripture to them? For this Jesus of Nazareth they cry, “Crucify!”



How does this happen? And what does it mean for us? Some of it is wrapped up in the science of psychology. Over the last number of years there has been a ton of thinking about thinking about how our minds experience and process the world. What most researchers think is that there are two levels of processing going on in our brains all the time. Psychologists call these two levels of thinking automatic thinking and reflective thinking. Automatic thinking is going on all the time, without us really knowing it. Every face you see— when you look at it, you instantly know whether this person is having a normal day or if they’re upset. You don’t really think about this, you just know it. When you drive your car, you process thousands of pieces of information, but you do it so seamlessly that when things are going OK, you can also listen to music or have a conversation. As long as things are going as you expect, your automatic brain can handle it.

Now, our reflective thinking is different. It is what you are aware of when you realize you are thinking. Reflective thinking happens when automatic thinking runs into something too complicated or unusual to handle. For instance, suppose someone gives you a difficult math problem, three digits times two digits. You can do this. It’s not a hard problem.

But, especially if you were going to do it in your head, most people would have to really think about it. You couldn’t be having other conversations. You probably couldn’t listen to music with lyrics or maybe any music at all. It would take some real focus and concentration.

This is reflective thinking. Most of the things we're really proud of in the world— our organizations, medicine, architecture, law, literature — are the fruits of reflective thinking.

Now, here's the interesting thing: when we think about ourselves, we tend to identify ourselves with this reflective thinking part of us. This is the part we have control over. This is the part of us we're aware of. But you know what? According to all the people who study all this, this reflective thinking is only about 1 percent of who we are. One percent. Most of us, they say— 99 percent of us— is this automatic thinker, meaning we go through our day reacting and responding to the world at a level well below our level of awareness. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt (NYU) says we're like a rider sitting atop an animal; we're like a tiny reflective rider sitting atop an enormous elephant running around on automatic. Yes, we feel like we're in control; we feel like we're moving the animal in the direction we want it to go. But in reality?

When we're busy or tired, or when we're in an emotionally overwhelming situation, the reality is our automatic system is the one making decisions for us. And this would be fine, except our automatic system is particularly prone to making very predictable mistakes, called biases. One of the most powerful biases we have is the desire to follow the herd, the crowd; the 'herd instinct.

I can remember learning about some of the early psychological studies along these lines, back in 'psych 101' in college (with Dr. Gallup- of the Gallup poll org.) These were first conducted by Solomon Asch in the 1950's. He was trying to figure out what happened in Nazi Germany— how so many good, moral people could go along with the Holocaust.

So he invited groups of people into a room to look at a row of lines, all of which were the same length. What people didn't know was that only one person in the room was actually the subject of the experiment.

Everyone else in the room was in on the experiment. So, everyone in the room was asked which of the lines was the longest.

All but one had been trained to point to one of the lines and say definitively this line was obviously longer than the rest. The question is, what would the real person, the study subject, say? Over and over again, normal people— people whose eyes were working

perfectly well— went along with the group. The more they looked at the line, the more they convinced themselves that the group was right.

After all, how could all these people around them be wrong? So, given these results, maybe you've figured out which of the four experimental letters worked in Minnesota. Remember, the first group was told about all the good things their taxes would do, the second group was warned about what would happen if they didn't file, the third group was offered help, and the fourth group was told how many of their friends were filing. And in the case of Minnesota a huge majority of people were already filing. Now, personally, I would have thought hearing about all the good things taxes were doing would have helped. But it didn't. Nothing increased compliance except for the last letter— the one telling people that all their friends were doing it. The herd nudged them.

Now, nudging people to pay their taxes? This is a good thing. But we aren't always nudged in good ways. It just took a few people at first, shouting out for Barabbas— a few of his friends, no doubt. But Jesus' disciples, who led the crowd on Palm Sunday, were scared; they were nowhere to be seen. Even Peter, even the best of them.

After Jesus' arrest, that girl says to Peter, "I can hear by your accent you're a Galilean. You're one of his disciples, aren't you?"

"What, me? That's crazy," says Peter. She insists, "You were with him, weren't you?" "You're mistaken," says Peter. "Come on," she presses. "Admit it."

"I tell you— I don't know the man!" he shouts in frustration. And that's all it takes. It takes just a few people to turn a blind eye, a few people to keep silent. And then the avalanche begins.

Jesus' friends don't show, but Barabbas' friends do. And the few friends shouting turn into a group. And the group soon turns into a crowd. Pretty soon people who really don't care much about either of these guys know whom to shout for— because everyone else was shouting for Barabbas. There were so many of them. And they sounded so sure.

Surely so many people couldn't be wrong? The memory of Jesus on his donkey had apparently faded. The elephants of the crowd were all stampeding in one direction. This is how we get from Palm Sunday to Good Friday.

Now maybe this sounds like bad news. Ninety-nine percent of us is on automatic pilot— easily swayed by events and pushed around by life? But listen to this. New researchers have redone the Asch experiment. Only they've added to it. They've redone it

so that some of the participants in the room don't always go along with the group. They wondered: maybe if it wasn't the whole group in total agreement, the real subject might trust themselves a little more. And they were right. They started with 10 of the 20 participants who disagreed with the group and saw a huge change. Then they bumped it down to five dissenting voices and still saw a huge change. Then they went all the way down to one. What if just one person in a crowd of twenty had the courage to say, "Yeah, . . . I see it a little bit differently."

Even when just one participant went against the rest of the group, the real study subjects were far more likely to go against the crowd. And that's a very important part of what this entire week is about.

We follow Jesus into Holy Week— and one of the most remarkable things about him is no matter what is happening, he remains true.

As the crowds diminish, the message stays the same. Because Jesus stays true.

When he's at table with the disciples, he bids farewell and tells them that whenever they break the bread and drink from the cup to remember him. He serves everyone at the table. Even Judas.

And later that night, when Judas betrays him and leads the Romans into the garden?

Jesus kisses him and tells his friends to put their swords away— to live by the sword is to die by the sword. Even at his lowest point— when he's tempted to run and when he begs God to take this cup— Jesus says, "And yet thy will be done, not mine." When they strip him and beat him, he does not waver. When they tell him to come down off his cross— to jump down off that cross and save himself— he stays. He remains true.

Jesus always remains true. No matter what happens, no matter how great or small the crowd— Jesus stands his ground and remains true.

And that's why more than two thousand years later we're still here, gathered around the memories of this ancient story, telling it and retelling it and retelling it again, until we live it, until he lives through us.

Sometimes it only takes one person to have the courage to stay true and sure, unflinching in the face of the crowd. One person. And it can make all the difference. Will it be you? Amen.