

Everyone loves a parade. Or so the saying goes. I have come to realize that not all parades are created equal and that there are some parades I like better than others. My favorite parade takes place in Fremont, Washington, a Seattle neighborhood situated between Lake Union and the Woodland Park Zoo. The Fremont Faire and Solstice parade celebrate the summer solstice and do so with immense creativity. All motorized vehicles are prohibited, and no printed words are allowed. That means everything is people-powered including floats, and there are no advertisements for businesses or politicians. There is nothing to gain by participating in the parade except to have fun and bring joy to those watching.

My least favorite parades are ones where the focus is on commercialism and political exposure. Floats that are sponsored by big corporations or car after car featuring a politician running for election. In those parades, the goal seems to be less about bringing joy and creating community and more about profit and personal gain. So far, those big corporate sponsored parades have been my least favorite. That is, until I learned of the big military parade that is scheduled to take place on Veteran's Day this year. Don't get me wrong, I think it is extremely important to support our Veterans. My Grandfather was a WWII Army veteran. But there is a difference between being grateful for the service of our veterans and spending millions of dollars to put on a show of force. Yep, I'm getting right into it this morning. No beating around the bush today!

When I first learned about the possibility of this parade taking place, I was one of many preachers whose thoughts immediately went to Palm Sunday. That might seem strange at first. What do with thousands of marching soldiers flanked by armored military vehicles and F/A-18 Hornet Fighter Jets flying overhead have to do with Jesus riding on a young donkey? Not much to be honest. But they have a lot in common with another procession was also taking place in Jerusalem at the time. A procession meant to be a show of force, to intimidate, and to inspire fear.

You see, every year just before Passover the current Governor would come to Jerusalem to remind the Jewish people that Rome was in control. Since hundreds of thousands of Jews travelled to Jerusalem for Passover, the Empire made sure its presence and power was palpable in case the masses decided to cause trouble, especially during Passover since the festival celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire. The procession was an impressive display of power. A great cavalry rode in on horses followed by a mass of foot soldiers clad in leather armor carrying weapons and banners. The sun gleamed the golden eagles mounted high atop wooden poles. The beating of drums would be so loud you could

feel it in your chest. The dust kicked up by the horses and the hundreds of soldiers made it difficult to breathe. Not only did this procession display the power of the Roman Empire, it also flaunted Roman Imperial theology. A theology that believed the Emperor was not only a political ruler, but the son of God.

Jesus mocked this show of force with what Charles Campbell calls “one of the wildest and most politically explosive acts of Jesus’ ministry.”¹ Jesus has carefully planned a carnivalesque procession into Jerusalem that serves as street theater political satire.

As Jesus approaches, the crowd lays down palm branches on the path. Many people in the crowd are hopeful that Jesus will put an end to the Roman domination of Israel. They remember that when King Jehu was anointed King of Israel in defiance of the current King close to 1000 years earlier, Jehu’s followers laid their cloaks at his feet as a sign of loyalty. As an act of defiance against Rome and a show of loyalty to Jesus, people began removing their only cloaks, and placing them on the dirt path. The palm branches and the cloaks create a makeshift royal carpet. The crowd begins to shout Hosanna! Hosanna! A few Roman soldiers gather at the gate to see what the commotion is all about. They didn’t know that the Aramaic word “Hosanna” meant “save us” or possibly “we are saved!” and write it off as gibberish.

This procession was more protest than parade – a statement in defiance of Roman rule and an acknowledgement by the crowd that their loyalty was not to the empire but to Jesus as the true king of Israel and the savior of the world.

Jesus’ procession wasn’t a first-century version of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. It was a statement. David Lose reminds us that “The hosannas the people cry have both religious and political overtones. They greet him as the Lord’s Messiah and expect him to overthrow the Romans. And the Romans take note.” This may help us understand why Jesus was crucified. It wasn’t just because he upset the religious leaders. It was the fact that he called people to give their allegiance to a different kingdom – the kingdom of God. This proclamation, and the growing number of people who agreed with it, made him a threat.

The irony is that Jesus is the complete opposite of imperial power. His procession acts out an alternative to domination and force. Sitting on a colt, possibly dragging his feet as they walk, Jesus presents himself not as one whose authority

¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, vol. Year B, Vol. 2 (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 153.

comes from instilling fear or exerting force on those who follow him, but as someone who rejects the idea of dominating power. His procession was not sponsored by Nike or Boeing but celebrated a man who walked with the poor. Jesus did not amass an army carrying M-16s and riding in Humvees to threaten violence to anyone who got in his way but led the people on a path of peace as someone who refused to engage in violent acts even if it meant dying at the hands of the very power he was mocking.

About 300 of us marched in a procession in Brainerd yesterday that also called for an end to fear and violence. We joined more than 1 million people around the world including hundreds of thousands in our nation's capitol. This march, was not led by people in positions of traditional or imperial power, but instead by a group of teenagers. Young people aren't yet old enough to vote or to drink or to serve in the military, inspired millions of people around the world to challenge the normalcy of gun violence in this country. Regardless of your opinion on gun control, everyone seems to agree that something has to change. Everyone seems to agree that children being shot in their schools is not ok. Everyone seems to agree that what we are currently doing, is not working and we can not ignore the problem any longer. The youth leading this movement have been mocked and ridiculed and even bullied by people who are threatened by the cries for change that these unlikely prophets are inspiring. Some of those marching in Brainerd were hit with eggs as cars drove by and multiple middle fingers and f-bombs were thrown at us as well. But those challenges are nothing compared to the loss and pain experienced those who are victims of gun violence.

As we navigate our future as a people of faith who seek to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God while living under the power of the most heavily armed military and a country that has more guns than humans, we have a choice to make about which types of literal and metaphorical processions we are going to follow with our hearts and our feet. Procession of domination and strength, of power and might? Will we be swept up by the might and power of empire? Will we allow our need to feel safe as a country or as individuals overpower our desire to follow a savior who proclaimed peace? Are we courageous enough to bear witness to Jesus' life and love that was so great, not even death could destroy it? May we refuse to let violence and intimidation dictate our actions. May we be peacemakers who wave palms in the face of power, marching in the light and love of God.