

Parade!

Matthew 21:1-11

From the Pulpit of First Presbyterian Church
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Matt Matthews

I am a huge college basketball fan.

I love the Red Socks, the San Antonio Spurs, the Titans, and all the other college basketball teams.

I know, I know.

The teams I mentioned are not college basketball teams. The fact of the matter, I don't keep up with sports the way I should. But I love people who do. I love when people recite facts and figures about the game—any game. I love people who know who the designated hitter is for that night's Cubs game. I love it when people can replay the whole season of the University of Illinois basketball. Some of you know the coaches and the players. You know the stories and statistics. I love your excitement. I'm excited that you are excited.

We all get at least a little excited about the World Series, the pro football play-offs, the U.S. Open, and March Madness college basketball.

This year, I was sorry Arkansas beat Illinois. I wanted Illinois to bring home the title. On the women's side, I was sorry USC didn't take it all the way.

I paid attention to the unusual stories coming out of the men's tournament. Number 13, Furman, beat number 4, Virginia. Number 15, Princeton, beat number 2, Arizona. I wondered if number 1, Perdue, would go the whole way. But, no, Perdue fell in the first round to number 16, Fairleigh Dickenson University.

Who is Fairleigh Dickenson? Where is Fairleigh Dickenson?

Fairleigh Stanton Dickenson, Sr., worked at the Singer Sewing Machine factory while he attended night school in the late 1800's. In 1897, He founded a surgical instrument manufacturing company in New Jersey that became the largest such firm in the United States. He was president of a bank there, and he founded a local Rotary Club. In 1938, he returned to his native North Carolina and founded a church. In 1942, in Madison, New Jersey, he founded Fairleigh Dickenson College.

Given my limited knowledge about college basketball, I had hardly ever heard about New Jersey, much less of Fairleigh Dickenson University in Madison. And prior to the first round, as far as I was concerned, Fairleigh Dickenson was a nobody team from a nowhere place. Fairleigh Dickenson was of little consequence in the basketball world, and could not/should not be taken seriously. Then, they beat Perdue.

To many of the people sitting in places of power in Jerusalem, Jesus was from Fairleigh Dickenson. Jesus was insignificant. This Palm Sunday Parade? It is nothing. Jesus is nobody. And yet—

And yet, Jesus pulled off a stunning victory in the first round of what we might call the March Madness of the First Century.

On the back of a donkey, riding humbly into Jerusalem, Jesus appears on the world stage. In the face of military might, he has put on the face of humility. In the face of armed guards, his followers wave palm

branches and throw their jackets on the ground. In the face of speeches of world-wide conquest, Jesus invites everybody to love everybody.

That's where we are today in the midst of this parade.

We see Jesus riding a donkey into his 15-minutes of international fame.

The scriptures say, "When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Jesus who? From where?

But here he was, at the center of a victory parade.

That crowd may have thought, "He's going to make it to the finals! Today, King Jesus will actually mount the throne. The Romans will be defeated and sent back home to Italy. We will get our homeland back. Jesus will restore our people to a place of dignity. Justice will reign. Heaven and earth will kiss. The trees will clap their hands. Glory will shine. Praise, wonder, and glory, glory, alleluia!"

At this moment, I imagine that's the sort of thing those crowds imagined.

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Let's shift gears.

Let's leave the parade, and rise above it. Let's look beyond these moments to the coming moments. Every day this week will bring us closer to defeat. Jesus will not make it to the third round. Jesus and his 'team' of followers will not win. Jesus, it turns out, will be the Big Loser. His kingdom will not be realized. Brutal Rome will remain firmly cemented in place. Justice will not flower, except for the so-called 'justice' that supports the status quo. The political realm will not be transformed. Heaven will flee from and abandon creation.

Jesus will not only fail, Jesus will be betrayed by a member of his starting line-up. The team will not pull together, they will desert him and each other. Jesus' new order will devolve into madness and chaos. He will be betrayed with Judas' kiss. He will be arrested. He will stand trial, twice. He will be mocked. He will be paraded down the Via Dolorosa from the Old City of Jerusalem to the place of crucifixion. He will carry his own cross on what has become known as *The Sorrowful Way*, or, *The Way of Suffering*.

So much for winning, huh?

The people in this Sunday parade probably can't imagine this Friday outcome. Like all good fans, they are swept up in the moment, they see only visions of glory, of Jesus standing on the ladder cutting down the basketball net, lifting the trophy above his head, confetti streaming down, dancing down, catching the light, covering their past sadnesses like fresh snow, like manna from heaven. Sixty-four teams started out, but we, alone, remain. Team Jesus. With liberty and justice for all.

But no.

We end, after a long, holy week, just outside of the old town, on a hill, beneath a cross, where our friend can only hang his head and breath his last.

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And that's where the story ends, yes?

No, of course not.

Today, we've attempted to stand in the shoes of those in that Sunday parade. We are hopeful that Jesus will change the world order in ways we imagine.

We've taken a preview to Friday.

If we looked only a few hours beyond, to the third day, we'd be gathering at an inexplicably empty tomb, where we will come to realize Jesus has, in fact, lived up to his revolutionary promises. He changes the world in ways we cannot imagine, that we're still making sense of. But that's next week's Easter sermon.

Today, let us pause and thank God for this holy walk through this holy week. Let us give thanks to God for the son who not only faces defeat but withstands its withering billows.

And, if we are able, and if we dare, let us walk with him.

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And what does it mean to walk with Jesus?

That's what the Christian life is: a life-long exploration of this question. That's who disciples are: we are people who strive to put into practice this holy walk with Jesus.

I would be remiss not to mention that this walk is vital for our spiritual life. And it is not always easy. But the walk brings moments of profound joy, even in the face of shocking sadness. The shootings of this past week weary us.

Walking with Jesus in this case means being advocates of mental health issues in our community, country, and world. Walking with Jesus means contemplating how trauma informs and forms us. Walking with Jesus means working towards enforcing the laws we already have and reforming the law to include what we don't have. Walking with Jesus means grieving with those who grieve. Walking with Jesus means listening to and loving our neighbor. Walking with Jesus means relationship-building. Walking with Jesus means getting up off our holy pew and hitting the holy road even though our feet are tired, and our knees are old, and our backs are weak, and our vision is dull.

Jesus does not walk so far ahead that we cannot see, nor does Jesus walk too fast that we cannot keep up. *Thanks be to God.*

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