

The Good News Inspires Us to Act

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March 29, 2026

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts."

I have been thinking about this line from William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It* a lot this week. It came to me this week as I was reading the Palm Sunday story because what Jesus does when he rides into Jerusalem isn't just a fulfillment of prophecy, though it is that. It isn't just a triumphal entry, though the crowds certainly treated it that way. What Jesus does is street theater. It is a performance — deliberate, carefully staged, and completely unmistakable to everyone watching.

Jesus is telling us something important by acting something out. You know the phrase "don't tell me, show me?" That's what he is doing. Many of you know that Jesus was entering one side of Jerusalem while on the other side of town, Pilate, was riding in on war horses with gleaming armor and a good portion of the Roman army. They were all arriving along with the thousands of Jewish people who were making their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Remember the Passover is the holiday that retells the story of the Jews escaping from their Egyptian enslavers. So, Pilate and the army were there to make sure no one got any ideas about revolution or rebellion. Which means the people who gathered to see Jesus' parade instead of going to Pilate's parade were likely people who were tired of Roman rule, tired of political and religious oppression, tired of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, tired of having no power and living in fear. These were people ready for a bit of revolution. And what better to kick it off than with a bit of street theater? This was Jesus' opportunity to show people a leader who was truly offering a different way.

Think about what Jesus actually arranges here. He sends disciples ahead to find a specific animal — not a warhorse, not something grand and impressive. A donkey. An ordinary, humble, borrowed donkey. He rides it down the Mount of Olives while people spread their cloaks in the road and wave palm branches and shout "Hosanna!" — which means, Save us!

Every single person in that crowd knew what they were seeing. This image came directly from the prophet Zechariah: "Your king comes to you, humble and mounted on a donkey." They had grown up with that passage. They knew it. Jesus didn't have to explain a thing. He just showed up on the donkey, and the whole scene spoke for itself.

He chose an act over more teaching. And it worked in the way that only embodied things can work — it lodged itself in people's memories in a way that no speech, however brilliant, ever quite manages.

I've told you about the book I read last year "There is No Place for us: Working and Homeless in America." It is an excellent book and when I preached about it a few weeks ago I framed it as what kicked off the path to the creation of the rental assistance fund we are starting with Racine Kenosha Community Action Agency and are raising funds for this Lent. Which is true. But, I don't know that this book would have touched me as deeply if I hadn't had several conversations with people around the same time at the food pantry about how difficult their housing situations were. One woman told me about leaving an abusive relationship with her daughter and going from a lovely house in the suburbs to the couch of a friend unable to gather together enough money for the two months security deposit and first month's rent. Another person we had to work hard to find food for because he was living in his car and there is only so much food that works without refrigeration or the ability to cook it. We asked if we could help him get in touch with a shelter and he said that he was trying to stay sober and knew that since HALO doesn't require sobriety from their guests that he wouldn't be able to stay sober there. Another woman said she was working full time at a big box warehouse but she'd had a car problem and to pay to fix her car she didn't have rent and was evicted, but without her car she wouldn't be able to get to work. Those faces of real people were in my mind as I read the book — embodied experiences who made the issue more real to me. Jesus knew how one carefully chosen embodied action can communicate more than a thousand words ever could. The Good News was made visible. Made real. You could see it, standing right there on the road.

But, while he wasn't always doing street theater, the Palm Sunday procession wasn't a one-time stunt. It was characteristic of everything he did. His whole ministry was this — words and actions so woven together you couldn't pull them apart. He told stories about feeding the hungry and then fed five thousand people from a few loaves and fish. He talked about the dignity of outsiders and then stopped and bent down to really see a woman being used as a prop by others. He preached about the kingdom of God being near and then made it near — in healings, in meals, in the way he looked at people.

We have a phrase for this kind of integrity. We say someone "walks the talk." Jesus always walked the talk, and that is what made people trust him. Not just his words, which were extraordinary. Not just his miracles, which were astonishing. But the fact that what he said and what he did pointed in exactly the same direction, every time.

That kind of consistency is magnetic. We all know the difference, in our own lives, between the person who says one thing and does another, and the person whose words and life line up. The latter is rare. And when you find one, you want to follow them. You

trust them in a way that is hard to explain. That is what the crowds felt when they saw Jesus coming down that road on his borrowed donkey. They had watched him long enough to know: this man means what he says. And so when he showed up proclaiming a kingdom of peace, they believed it.

But, today, we live in a time when the phrase “gaslighting” is a commonly used phrase: a time when it feels like our leaders' words and actions rarely match up. It's exhausting. Just this week, the revelation of United Farm worker co-founder and civil rights icon, Caesar Chavez, being accused of abusing women and girls around him added yet another leader to the long list of those whose actions have been heartbreaking and disappointing to those who have looked to them for inspiration.

We have been burned again and again discovering leaders we've trusted have done things that go deeply against their words. We've been burned so many times that we are skeptical and reluctant to trust anyone ever. And it is true that people will let us down. If we're being really honest, we know there have been times we've let others down ourselves. It turns out that it is really hard to live a life where our actions consistently line up with our words.

Of course, there are gradations of difference – different levels of harm and often the higher people have to fall, the bigger the harm, and some people cause harm intentionally. But, it is very human to struggle with living an integrated life of words and actions.

I loved the show *The Good Place* and one of its best episodes is about how no one has been admitted to the “good place” (what they call heaven) in over 500 years because of all the challenges in the interconnectedness of modern ethical issues. They give the example of someone who bought roses for his grandmother, a lovely gesture, but the roses he bought were through a cell phone made in a sweatshop, the roses filled with toxic pesticides, picked by exploited migrant workers, transported in a way that left a massive carbon imprint, and his money went to a “racist, billionaire CEO.” Every action we take can be filled with complex side effects only some of which we can see. We make choices - sometimes trying our best to make them line up with our values, sometimes not.

It turns out, we are not Jesus. Our words and actions do not always line up. But, does that mean we give up? Do we throw up our hands and say bad actions are inevitable and so we just won't even try? Evil is just part of the world and we can't escape it so why bother? Or makes my life easier so I will just turn a blind eye to any harm?

No, not as people of faith. This day and the week that follows are the heart of our faith – the climax of our play. This is the week when we hear stories of the very best and the very worst of humanity colliding.

And perhaps this dramatic week begins with a bit of street theater to remind us that we have a role to play in this ongoing story of the Good News. Because the story didn't end on that dusty road. It continues.

And the question Jesus' street theater puts to each of us is a simple reminder to ask ourselves again: do our words match our actions? Sometimes they do, which is great. If we say we believe in this story and the good news it offers the world and we act like it too, wonderful!

But, it's worth interrogating ourselves sometimes to see. Like, if we say the good news is that all are invited, have we actually invited them? If we say the good news is so good it catches us by surprise, are we open to being surprised? If we say the good news is great love for God and neighbor, do we have relationships with God and our neighbors? If we say the good news is that together, the impossible is possible, do we step out on faith and not give up when things get hard? If we say the good news is protection and care for the vulnerable, what vulnerable people are we protecting? If we say the good news is rooted in justice, mercy and faithfulness, how are we balancing those things? Or are we not?

These questions aren't meant to produce guilt or shame in us. None of us will manage to do it all. None of us will manage to seamlessly connect our words and actions all the time. Instead, it is a question meant to energize and encourage us. It is meant to wake us up and inspire us to act. It is meant get us to ask, what is my part?

Think about it in Shakespeare's terms: some of us are on stage right now. Visible, active, in a season of speaking and doing and showing up in very public ways. Some of us are directing — behind the scenes, seeing the bigger picture, guiding things in ways that may not get noticed but make everything else possible. Some of us are backstage — in a season of preparation or rest or quiet service, getting ready for a scene that hasn't come yet. None of those roles is lesser. My years as a stage manager remind me all the time that the person who sets the stage makes the performance possible just as surely as the person in the spotlight.

The question isn't whether your role is big enough. The question is whether you are playing it.

Jesus didn't begin his ministry with the grand entry into Jerusalem. He started small — with a baptism, a season in the wilderness, some fishermen he called by name beside a lake. The moments that looked spectacular came after years of faithful, ordinary, unspectacular love.

So I want to invite you, this Palm Sunday, to sit with a simple question: what action is the Good News inspiring in you right now? Where do your actions need to meet your words, your beliefs, your calling, at this stage of your life?

Every year we have our children act out the palm parade. They march around the sanctuary waving their palm fronds and it is all kinds of cute. But, we don't do it for the cuteness. We do it to remind ourselves: we are the ones who carry the Good News forward. All of us. Not because we are extraordinary, not because we are the strongest or wisest or most prepared, but because we have been given something extraordinary, and we are asked to act like it.

The Good News is so good it deserves to be walked, not just talked.

The stage is set. It's your turn. How will you be inspired to act?