

“Motivated by Love”

Based on Philippians 2:5-11 and Luke 19:28-40

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The newest installment of American Idol is on right now. If you haven't been following, this is a singing competition where young people all across America try out for an opportunity to become the title of the show. A panel of judges whittles down the number of contestants all the way down to fourteen. From then on out, viewers of the show get to vote on their favorite contestants.

The contestants have a number of motivations for competing. Some want to win because they see it as an opportunity to become famous. Or at least to get national attention. Others do this because it has been their dream to perform on the big stage. One contestant has said his desire is to be able to take care of his mom who has sacrificed so much and worked so hard to care for him. He doesn't want her to have to work anymore. Others want to win because they believe they have something they need to say through their art. They want to be an inspiration for others. And others try because they know they have an amazing gift that needs to be shared.

Each contestant does the best performances they can. But they don't decide who gets to win. Starting tonight, viewers of the show will watch them perform and then vote for their favorites. It's up to us to decide who wins. Players are slowly eliminated until the final program when only a few are left. Whoever wins the most votes that night becomes the next American Idol. The most popular contestant wins.

Today we remember the story of Jesus riding triumphantly into Jerusalem. At this point he was at the height of his popularity. He rode in to town on the back of a borrowed donkey as people lay cloaks down in his path to keep the dust from flying up into his face. They sang to the heavens about how wonderful Jesus was. And it wasn't just his disciples that were a part of this procession. Luke says it was a multitude of disciples. We are talking thousands of people. Can you envision it? Maybe you have seen images of when the Beatles were in a car leaving

some venue where they had played and they are at the center of a swarm of people as they slowly move down the road without running anyone over. Well in this case you have Jesus on his donkey, surrounded by thousands of people singing his praises. What an entrance! Maybe you see why, when some Pharisees told Jesus to quiet down the crowd, he said that the rocks would cry out. This multitude of disciples would not be quieted. This was a time of great triumph. Jesus was a superstar.

How did this happen? Did Jesus and the disciples arrange this big entrance or did it happen organically? We don't know how this came about but we do know why the people had gathered around Jesus with song. It was because of the works of power they had seen him perform. Jesus had performed so many amazing miracles that the word about him had spread far and wide. But it wasn't just his miracles. He had taught with such clarity, facing down the religious authorities who tried to trap him. He had taken the side of the downcast and the left out. Because of what Jesus had said and done he was a folk hero. People knew that he was special. Many even felt in their gut that this could be the Messiah. And if that was true, the world was really about to get turned upside down. Jesus did what he did and the people loved it. He got their vote in a big way. I wouldn't go so far as to say the multitude idolized him. That would be taking it too far. But his actions caused the people to respond with great excitement and favor.

What motivated Jesus to perform these works of power? Did he do all these things for fame, so that he could ride into Jerusalem in triumph? I can't imagine Jesus was motivated by vain glory. I would suspect that Jesus would have done what he did without any thought of how popular it may make him or if it would result in him getting surrounded by thousands of fans as he made his way into Jerusalem. So what did motivate Jesus to do these works of power?

Paul gives us insight on Jesus' mindset when he lived his life among us. Paul said that Jesus did not see his equality with God as something to be exploited. He knew that he was in the form of God. Jesus knew how powerful he was. But he would not use that power to manipulate people or to insist on his own way. Instead, Paul tell us, Jesus emptied himself of his status, without giving up his power, and

became like a humble servant. He would use his power not to serve his own interests but to serve others. He would not even use his power to take a pass on experiencing death. Paul said that Jesus was obedient even to death. He surrendered to mortality. So what motivated Jesus? All the works of power that Jesus performed came from a mindset of humble service. He put the interests of others before his own.

Now we already know what the multitude of disciples did in response to all that Jesus did. But what about God? How did God respond to the faithful and humble service that Jesus performed in his life among us? Paul tells us that God exalted Jesus' name above every name. At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The glorious triumph of Jesus entering Jerusalem is a shadow of how God responds to what Jesus has done. Jesus could not have been more exalted than how God exalted him.

Here's the key takeaway: Jesus did what he did not in pursuit of fame or to be exalted above every name in heaven and earth. Jesus was motivated purely by love. Jesus did his works of power because he loved those he helped. He taught as he did because he loved those he taught. He submitted to pain, suffering, rejection and death because he loved being human and wanted to experience all that it means to be human. It was love, love for creation, that motivated Jesus and nothing else.

There's an old saying that goes "when you do what you love, that is a reward in itself." That's probably true. But it's also nice to get compensated. And it's nice to occasionally get recognized for doing a good job. Moms and dads love their kids just because they are their kids, not because they need to be validated as good parents. But you better not forget your mom on Mother's Day. I don't make a big deal of it, but I don't mind Father's Day. It's nice to get recognition. And everyone needs to make a living. There may be more that motivates us than just doing it for love.

Let me ask you this: do we try to reach out and minister to people in the community so that the church will grow? We know our church needs to grow. Over the past year or so we have tried a lot of things to get out into the community, to build some relationships, and hope that

people who used to come here would come back and new folks would come and stay. Most churches want to grow at least a little bit.

So is that our motive for doing ministry or is there more to it for us? I would hope that we are trying to reach out to the people that live around us and respond to the needs of others because that's what love requires. Whether the church grows from our efforts or not, wouldn't we do ministry anyway? What else would you do if you live a life of love?

A few weeks ago I told you all about two saints I have had the privilege of knowing: Don and Ruby Gruver of Edgerton, Ohio. They were such a delightful couple. Never had a bad word for anyone. They would do anything for you if they could help. Don was in charge of the food pantry. There were no operating hours. If you needed help, you call Don and he would come over and meet you. So gentle, kind and supportive. For me they are a model of Christian love. Everyone in Edgerton knew and loved Don and Ruby. And, of course, they knew where Don and Ruby went to church. That doesn't mean everyone in Edgerton went to Edgerton United Methodist Church. In my time there, the church didn't grow or shrink. We stayed pretty much the same. There were no parades to honor Don and Ruby. To be honest, if someone tried to organize that you may have heard the first bad words come out of Don's mouth. Never did Don and Ruby seek to be lifted up as an example or be recognized for all the selfless service they did. And although they may have been discouraged from time to time, their ministry did not depend on whether our church ended up with more people in the pews or money in the plate. They did what they did because of love. That was their only motivation. And it was because of that constant humble service that so many lifted them up as examples of Christian discipleship.

I am convinced that what should drive us, what should motivate us to get out of our beds every morning and face another day, is the simple desire to respond to the needs of those around us without thinking about what benefit we might get. As Paul said in his letter to the Philippians, "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain deceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but to the interests of others." Of course, it would be nice if our efforts brought

growth in the church. It's nice to be recognized for the good things you do and the impact you make in people's lives. But if Jesus is going to be our example, then those considerations shouldn't be on our minds at all. It should be enough for us just to be in ministry, responding to the needs of others, because of love.

We can be encouraged though. No matter if we are recognized or not for all we do in this life, we can be assured of this. When we finish our life and cross the veil and stand in the presence of God, we can anticipate hearing God say to us, "Well done, my children." And we will take our place with Jesus Christ our Lord. He will greet us as his brother or sister. And he will recognize and give gratitude for the lives we have lived. And all our pain, disappointment, suffering and struggle will melt away.

So now we move into Holy Week. We will follow the steps of Jesus as he made his way to Jerusalem, to the upper room, the Mount of Olives, the trial, the mocking and beating, the crown of thorns, the crucifixion and the grave. We will remember that Jesus suffered all of this because of his love for us. He did not use his power to skip out on any of it but emptied himself completely, taking the form of a humble servant. As we remember and express gratitude for Jesus' love for us, may we also be inspired to follow his example, to live lives of humble service. It is the best tribute that we can offer Jesus for the love he demonstrated for us.