

## A 'Footloose' Palm Sunday Sermon

April 13, 2014

Luke 19:28-40

Okay, I want you to cast your minds back to the summer of 1984. I realize that is going to be exceedingly difficult for anyone under 30 here, but that's okay, as long as you know the name Kevin Bacon you're going to be all right. Summer of '84, a movie comes out, a musical, called *Footloose*. It does not win any Oscars. But it's cute as heck and a whole lot of fun, and poor Kevin Bacon, 30 years later, is still 'that guy from Footloose.' In fact, if you caught the Tonight Show a couple weeks ago when Jimmy Fallon was interviewing Kevin Bacon, they had him dance his way onstage, singing the title song from *Footloose*. Us old ladies loved it.

If you don't happen to remember the plot of *Footloose*, if you managed to avoid this cultural highlight of the mid-80's, let me fill you in. It's a classic struggle of good versus evil. More specifically, it's a classic struggle of teenagers versus .... *clergy*. Yes, the pastor is the bad guy here. In a small town in the middle of an unnamed state, the local clergyman has persuaded the town council to ban all dancing and rock music. *As a side note here – just once could somebody please make a movie where the pastor is fun? Just sayin'* But anyway. So the small town of Bomont has banned all dancing and music, and then, and then, Kevin Bacon comes to town. He's a big city boy named Ren who's moved to this small town with his mother, and he can't help himself, he's gotta dance. Gotta sing, gotta dance.

Which sets up all kinds of run-ins, of course, between this exuberantly dancing and singing teenager and the very grumpy Reverend Moore, played by John Lithgow. Who waves a bible around and says things like "dancing is the tool of the devil" and "you are corrupting the souls of our people" and all that.

Okay, so here's where I'm going with this 80's flashback, here's what I'm thinking. I'm thinking that Jesus coming into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday a lot of years ago was – *work with me here* – a lot like Kevin Bacon coming into that small town, in *Footloose*. I am fairly certain that this is not an interpretation that a lot of other preachers are offering this morning. But look at what happens on that morning in Jerusalem. Jesus comes into town bringing joy, and the response of the people who come to see him is also joy; it's exuberance, laughter, singing. They dance down the street in front of him,

waving palms; they sing Hosannas to him. The scripture says: they were praising God with a loud voice. Gotta sing, gotta dance.

And what happens? Well, grumpy clergy again. The Pharisees come out to see what's going on. And they don't like it. They don't like anything about it. They don't like the joy, they don't like the celebration, they don't like the hope and the hosannas. They don't much like the dancing. And they say to Jesus: "order your followers to stop." And Jesus says to them, this great, great line – he says, "if these folks stopped singing, the stones would shout out." *The rocks and stones themselves would start to sing.*

In other words, he's saying, "You can't contain this. You can't use your rules to shut down joy." What Jesus was bringing to town that day was hope. What he was bringing to town was love. And that couldn't be held back by the enemies of love; that couldn't be contained. That Love was unstoppable, and it came dancing down the street that day.

But wasn't that always the way with Jesus?

Wasn't the Love he brought always unstoppable, always unchecked by rules?

When he placed his hands on a leper to heal him, he was touching the "unclean" and supposedly making himself unclean and he couldn't have cared less. When he sat with a Samaritan woman and talked for hours about God, ignoring every prejudice of race and gender and faith, wasn't he showing that Love knew no boundaries? And when he healed people on the Sabbath, violating every rule of Sabbath observance, wasn't he showing that nothing should get in the way of Love?

Jesus *embodied* a love that didn't know lines in the sand, didn't know dogma and rules, couldn't be contained by old hatreds and enmities.

So when the Pharisees said to him "rein it in," of course he said "That can't be done." The Love Jesus brought could not be contained. The Love he taught us is unstoppable.

Friday mornings on NPR, on morning edition, there's a segment that I love, from StoryCorps, which collects stories from all over this country, stories of our American lives. People come and sit in a recording booth with a microphone and just tell their stories. It's an amazing verbal tapestry of life in these United States. And I was listening to one story, listening to a couple sitting with their adult daughter, talking about what it was like to fall in love in 1970 as an African-American girl and a white boy. "For our parents, it was like a death in the family," they explained to their daughter. They were

chuckling about it now – “I knew just two African Americans before I knew you,” said the dad to his wife, “Willie Mays and Hank Aaron.” They were chuckling. But the truth is that their families disowned them over it– at least for a while – and it was a frightening and painful time for them.

But their love, their love was unstoppable. Their love would not be contained. And how many, how very many *other* stories are there, just like that one.

That’s **God’s** kind of love. Love that is uncontained by what we humans construct in our minds, in our world. Love that Jesus embodied. Love that comes dancing down the street, ignoring those who would rein it in.

Last Sunday, in the New York Times magazine, there was a photo essay that was beyond extraordinary. I would have said it was impossible, but there it was. And it was as powerful a tribute to the unstoppable nature of God’s love as I have ever seen.

A photographer named Pieter Hugo went to southern Rwanda, to the very place where almost a million people died in the genocide of twenty years ago. For many of us, the most vivid depiction of those unspeakable horrors was brought to us in the movie ‘Hotel Rwanda’, a movie which gave us nightmares. In Rwanda, those nightmares are not dreams but real memories, memories still fresh, memories of the cruelty perpetrated by neighbor on neighbor, Hutu on Tutsi. But Pieter Hugo’s pictures from Rwanda are not pictures of violence, or its aftermath. They are portraits – stunning portraits – of Hutus and Tutsis. Hutus and Tutsis sitting together, That’s not all. Each portrait is a portrait of a victim with the perpetrator they have chosen to forgive. And beneath each photograph are words spoken by each person.

Beneath one portrait, a man and a woman, there are these words: Francois Ntambara says: “I participated in the killing of the son of this woman here with me. We are now members of the same group of unity and reconciliation. We share in everything; if she needs some water to drink, I fetch some for her. There is no suspicion between us, whether under sunlight or during the night. ... when we are together, we are like brother and sister.”

And Epiphanie, the woman, says: “He killed my child. He came one day to ask me pardon. I immediately granted it to him . Before, when I had not yet granted him pardon, he could not come close to me. I treated him like my enemy. But now, I would rather treat him like my own child.”

I sat there last week, reading those words over and over, staring at the portrait of these two people, at ease in each other’s presence. And I thought, I don’t begin to understand how someone manages forgiveness like that. It is incomprehensible. Incomprehensible.

Or is it?

If the Love of God is not containable, then there is no limit to it, is there? .... and so nothing having to do with love is truly incomprehensible. Because this Love, this holy Love, this Love that Jesus taught and lived and *was*. it is unstoppable. It cannot be held back, even by the worst of what we do to one another, the *worst*. It is Love that even in the darkest of places still somehow – however incredibly – still comes dancing down the street.

Eight days from now, in Boston, the streets will be filled, as they were on Palm Sunday long ago. The streets will be filled with runners, and along the side will be more people, crowds of people shouting their support, waving not palms but banners, cheering with full hearts. So many of us have been there, to watch, or even to run, and we know, we know what it feels like in Boston on Marathon Day, the sheer exuberance of the day, the Palm Sunday feel of the day.

And as this hard anniversary approaches, we have been remembering what it was like a year ago to hear the news, to be rocked back on our heels again, overwhelmed with sorrow again.

But look at what Love did in that place. Look at how unstoppable, uncontainable, Love was. Last year, after the marathon, I preached to you words from Mr. Rogers, Fred Rogers. Maybe you remember. Years before, he had said *“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.”* Look for the helpers. Which is another way of saying – look for where Love is. And we saw it that day, we all saw it, we saw all the people running *toward* the hurt, holding, healing, loving.

We saw Carlos Arredondo, the man in the cowboy hat, who, when the blast happened, ran *toward* the smoke, pulled away the barricades, and found Jeffrey Bauman, his clothes on fire, his legs shattered. Carlos Arrendondo put out the fire with his hands, tied the tourniquets around Jeff’s legs, put him in a wheelchair, and when the wheelchair seemed too slow, picked him up and carried him to the ambulance. *“Look for the helpers.”*

I did -- we all did -- and there was our comfort. There was our hope. Because there, before us, was Love – unstoppable, uncontainable. There was Love, running down the street. I saw Jeff Bauman on TV just a few days ago, a double amputee. He’s written a book called ‘Stronger’, he’s going to be a dad And he talked about the picture, the

picture we all saw of Carlos rushing him out in the wheelchair. And Jeff Bauman said this: “It’s a hard picture to see. But when I look at the picture, I look at those people around me, I look at Carlos, and they’re there with me, saving my life. I love that about it.”

In the midst of great evil, evil that we still wrestle to understand, **Love** was unstoppable.

The week that lies ahead of us is Holy Week. And if there is any one message to the days between now and Easter, it is that Love, God’s love, is unstoppable. Love, God’s love, *cannot* be contained.

The Love that Christ embodied on earth was a love that knew no limits,  
no boundaries,  
honored no prejudices,  
followed no rules,  
was withheld from no one.

And what the week that lies ahead of us will show is that  
the greatest of human wrong  
cannot stop Love;  
the deepest of human betrayal  
cannot stop Love;  
the worst of humanity’s cruelty  
cannot stop Love;  
and death, death itself  
cannot stop Love.

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I began this sermon with a pretty frivolous movie comparison: I said that Jesus’ joyful, rule-busting entry into Jerusalem was like the rule-busting dancing in the plot of an ‘80’s musical. And I’ve taken you from *that* to Rwanda, and to the memory of a hard and heartbreaking April day. Some very different images.

To me, it doesn’t matter which image you remember from this sermon, as long as it helps you to remember this: God’s love cannot be contained.

Love seeks us out,  
Love lifts us up,  
Love leads us forward,  
Love never ends.

Love wins.  
Amen.