

“Love is not a Victory March”

I have a confession – I like winning, a lot. I’m a competitive person whether I’m playing tennis with someone or a board game with my family or you name it. Now, over the years, I’ve worked hard to tame this part of me, but when I was in high school, I was crazy competitive. You see, back then, my number one love in life was basketball. Now, there’s just one problem – my physique is not exactly conducive to being a great basketball player. I’m 5’7” when I stand on my tip toes. I’m not terribly fast and can’t jump very high. So I thought that the way I could become a stellar basketball player was to outwork everyone else. So that’s what I tried to do. I never missed a work out. I spent hours in my driveway shooting.

And it was about to be my senior year. I was going to be the starting point guard for our team. All that hard work was about to pay off. And then one day before the season began, my brother and I played one on one in the driveway.

My brother is 3 years younger than me. He was 14 at the time. About to be a freshmen in high school. I was 17. A senior. The starting point guard. And for the first time ever, he beat me.

And I was furious. I dropped kicked the basketball over our neighbor’s house, marched into my house, slammed the door, and went to my room and cried. I mean, it was a tantrum fit for a four year old.

Now there was a lot behind that tantrum. First and foremost, nobody likes to lose to their little brother, right.

But more than that, I think that moment, more than anything else, was a harsh dose of reality for my basketball dreams. No matter how hard I worked, I was never going to be more than a mediocre basketball player. No matter how much I wanted to win, there were going to be a lot of times when I (and my team) were going to lose.

Now, my guess is that while you may not have pitched a temper tantrum because you lost to your little sibling at something – or maybe you have, most of us can relate to wanting to win and being really upset when we don’t. And while in the big scheme of things, winning a basketball game doesn’t matter a whole lot, there are things where winning feels like it really matters.

This desire to win, I think, is at the heart of the Palm Sunday story. The crowds who were waving Palm branches and shouting “Hosanna” were celebrating who Jesus was, it was a festive, joyous atmosphere, but, more than anything, behind their celebration was the desire to win.

The people of Jerusalem had experienced a lot of defeat throughout their history. In the year 586 BC, Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonian empire. The temple was burnt to the ground and the people were carried off to Babylon to live in exile. The Persians then conquered

the Babylonians and the people were allowed to return home and rebuild the temple but Jerusalem was still ruled over by a foreign power. The Greek empire then conquered the Persians and now Jerusalem and the people were ruled over by the Greeks. And then finally, the Romans conquered the Greeks. So, for several hundred years, the people of Jerusalem had been ruled over by a foreign power. And they were sick of it. Sick of being conquered. Sick of being oppressed. They wanted a king who could lead them to victory over the Romans. They wanted to win.

And while the people had experienced defeat after defeat at the hands of their enemies, their ancestors had experienced one time when they didn't lose – one time, they won. When the Greeks ruled over them, the priest Judas Maccabee led a rebellion to try to drive them out. And guess what, they won. Maccabee drove out the Greeks and Judas came into Jerusalem riding victoriously on his war horse and guess what the crowds were doing – they were shouting and waving palm branches, just like in our Scripture, just like what they were doing when Jesus came into the city 200 years later.

When Jesus came riding into the city, the expectation was clear. The people thought he's riding into the city just like Judas Maccabees did. They thought he will drive out our enemies. They thought he will purify the temple. They thought he's coming to win. And with that hope and expectation, the people responded just like their ancestors did when Judas Maccabee came riding into Jerusalem victoriously – they waved palm branches. They shouted "Hosanna."

But Jesus didn't come into the city riding in on a war horse, he came on a humble colt, a young donkey, a symbol of peace. This was not the king coming ready to do battle. This was a king coming in humility, coming in peace, coming in love.

When Maccabee 200 hundred years earlier entered Jerusalem, he went straight to the temple and drove out all the foreigners. As Jesus came into the city, with the crowds waving their palm branches, he also went straight to the temple. But instead of driving out foreigners, Jesus came with a different rallying cry. "My house is to be a house of prayer for ALL people." And if Jesus came for ALL people, then that meant his method could never be the same as that of Judas Maccabee. He could never come in war, he could never come in violence against his enemies because those that the crowd considered to be their enemies, those that the crowds wanted driven out, are included as Jesus' people too. A house of prayer for ALL people means that it's a house of prayer even for the Romans, even for the Greeks. And so the only weapon Jesus had at his disposal, the only weapon he could ever take up is that of love.

Friends, this week we are invited to remember Jesus' last week on Earth, and what we will see is that over and over again, Jesus refused to win if by winning we mean defeating another. Every time he had the choice between defeating someone and love, he chose love.

When he entered Jerusalem, he proclaimed that God's house was for everyone.

When the soldiers came to arrest him, he ordered his followers to put away their weapons.

When the Romans crucified him, he cried out, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

When the thief on the cross asked for mercy, he assured him that they would be in paradise together.

Every single time, Jesus chose the way of love, no matter how much it cost him.

The title of this sermon, "Love is not a Victory March," is borrowed from the Leonard Cohen song, "Hallelujah." It took Cohen 3 years to write it, and there were times when he was so overwhelmed with the words that were coming to him that he was literally driven to his knees weeping. Perhaps that is the very embodiment of the message of his song, and maybe the very embodiment of what it means to love without any expectation of winning.

On Holy Week, love drove Jesus to his knees, love drove him to the cross, and more than anything, love compelled Jesus to say, "Yes" to all of us. With God, there are no losers, With God, there is no one who is cast out. With God, there is no victory march. With God, there is only love.