

Fred Craddock passed away a few weeks ago. You may have heard his name--his style of preaching took us all blessedly away from the classic 3 booming points and a conclusion. Instead he told stories, with the intention that as we hear stories, we might overhear the Gospel. Anyway, at some point later in his life, Craddock wrote these words: "When I was in my late teens, I wanted to be a preacher. When I was in my late twenties, I wanted to be a good preacher. Now that I am older, I want more than anything else to be a Christian. To live simply, to love generously, to speak truthfully, to serve faithfully, and to leave everything else to God."

This is applicable to more than just preachers. It has gotten me wondering about just what question he was answering. Perhaps it was, "What do you want most in life?" or "What do you hope to be remembered for?" I wonder how you would answer that question--what do you want to be, what did you spend your life on?

Jesus is nearing the end. He rides into Jerusalem with palms waved high, a procession fit for royalty. He knows that he is, indeed, the king, but the parade is laden with irony. What kind of king will he be? The crowd in this gospel has heard the news--the miracle worker from Nazareth is coming to town. They tried to make him king back by the lake, when he fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, but he sneaked away. Now, the word has spread that he has raised Lazarus from the dead, and he's coming to Jerusalem. Surely, he is coming to take his place on the throne... Surely he has come for revolution, to overturn the status quo the way he overturned the money changers tables. Even in the garden, even his own disciples are itching for him to take out his own sword against the establishment; the palm branches they waved were signals of revolution.

We wave our own palm branches, too. What kind of king do you want Jesus to be? A miracle-worker? A revolutionary? Perhaps a king who guarantees your success, and a life with less suffering. Perhaps a king that will swiftly produce the change you wish to see in the world.

Few, if any, on the parade route that day and here, today, have in mind a king whose throne is a cross. Few, if any, have in mind a kingdom whose greatest offer is an invitation to self-sacrifice. Even Jesus himself seems unsure when he prays in the garden: "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." Father, if there is any other way...It's a beautifully human moment

for this divine savior. He has preached greatness found in weakness, and he has shown them signs of a new kingdom, where God is in charge, not us, not the emperor, but God, but even still, he prays "Father, if it is possible..."

In this moment, he offers us such a clear picture. A picture of what it is to be human--to want what we want, to be inclined toward self-preservation, to have our own ideas about who we want to be, what we want to be remembered for, how we want our life to go...and then, to yield: "Not what I want, Father, but what you want."

What do you want most in life? What do you hope to be remembered for? Jesus, in the garden, shows us where his path will lead us day after day. He leads us to the place where we turn over our desires--our own plans, our own wants and wishes, our own way--and we surrender to the Father. He leads us to the cross. We cannot be authentic followers of Jesus Christ without engaging in the practice of submission.

Submission. Surrender. Obedience. While these are not exactly the same, they all walk the same path. It is a path of acknowledging what I want, acknowledging my own will, and then letting go of it. Letting go of the need to control others and control God, the need to manipulate our circumstances and manipulate God, the need to disregard what others want and disregard what God wants. Submission is to bow low, not for the sake of groveling, but for the sake of love, in order to come under someone else, the way you would come under a table, to lift them up. It is to follow in the direction of their desires, their plans, their way.

This act goes against some of the earliest instincts we develop. We learn early on how to get what we want in the way that we want it. I know you have seen it in children, just as well as I have, that impulse to get what we want, to do things the way we want, it starts early, and it doesn't go away. My son is the master of this. Holden has learned that some ideas or plans will get a better hearing if they are suggested by his little sister. So I hear him, on the other side of the room, or in the back of the car, mapping out the plan: "So, I'll say we should go to the zoo, and YOU say we should watch a movie. And then we'll get to do both!" We love to control; we find peace in planning; we live for the moments when God seems to have agreed with the plans and ideas that we made, and everything works out just as we had planned. The

practice of submission sets all of those impulses aside, relinquishing what I want, for what God wants.

The author Kathleen Norris observes that most people see obedience as something that is "desirable in dogs, but suspect in people." To be sure, obedience and submission, all of these things can be abused and misused, and have been commanded at times in order to control others. But still, even setting that aside, of all of the practices that we have discuss in this season of Lent--worship, prayer, giving, fasting, service--of all of these, submission is the most likely one that we will excuse ourselves of. This is just too serious. I'd much rather go through life hoping that what I want is what God wants, what I will is what God wills. I'd much rather pray, "Lord, please bless these plans I've made," than to pray "Not my will but yours." When it comes to practices of the Christian faith, this submission business is pretty serious.

And how are we supposed to do it, anyway? I want to submit to God's will for my life, but I have a hard enough time figuring out what it is!

Well, this, I think is where we arrive at the importance of practice. Daily practice. Submission, you see, is not the work of relinquishing my overall plan for my life; it's about trusting God with the day to day, and learning to "live in the passive voice."

Those are the words of Thomas Kelly, the quaker author and teacher. He says that instead of saying, "I will," we are to let life be willed through us, and we begin that by simply starting where we are. "Use what little obedience you are capable of," he says, "even if it be like a grain of mustard seed. Begin where you are. Live this present moment, this present hour as you now sit in your seats, in utter, utter submission and openness toward Him...Keep up a silent prayer, "Open thou my life." Find a prayer that you can repeat over and over again as you go through your day, "Be thou my will." or "I open myself to you, Lord."

Then, when things are not going the way you thought, or planned, or preferred, when life's turns are making you less comfortable, rather than more comfortable, that is the time to really dig in. Nathan Foster compares this to riding a bicycle into the wind. We have a choice, either to ride harder and curse the wind for slowing us down, or receive the wind as a gift, and

find joy in the fact that the ride will last a little longer, and it will strengthen us more than we thought it would.

But there is something else about submission that is, perhaps, even harder. Submission is not simply about opening our lives so that God's purpose, God's will is done in us. Submission goes another step--submission says, "Lord, not only will I do what you want, but I am willing to do it your way."

From the earliest moments of the Civil Rights movement, there were ample opportunities to respond with violence. The heat of injustice had lit a fire within so many; God's purpose was clear, that all were meant to live in freedom and equality--they knew what God's will was. But how could the system be changed without spilling blood? How could such a forceful system of racism and oppression fall, unless we use force?

Martin Luther King was clear: This movement is a spiritual movement. God's work would be accomplished God's way. "Love is our great instrument and our great weapon, and that alone," he proclaimed. He told the story of returning home in January 1956 after his home had been bombed with his wife and daughter inside. When he arrived there were already over 500 people there, and hundreds more were gathering. He could tell that the community was heating up, and that they might soon turn violent in retaliation, and so he went to his porch, and he spoke the very words we heard from Jesus today: "All who take the sword will perish by the sword." He knew what needed to happen, he knew this country needed a revolution, but again and again King laid down the sword--he laid down the expedient method for change--and he chose the way of Jesus. Not only God's will, but God's way.

Charles Marsh says "Whether it is struggling with the cross, struggling with addiction, or struggling with being genuine disciples in this world, surrender to the God who gave us our purpose is a primary move we must make."

And I tell you today, Jesus gives us the power to do it. Jesus gives us the power to go with him from the parade, perched up high on a donkey's colt, to down low, on the ground of Gethsemane, praying "Not what I want, but what you want." We follow the one whose very life was an act of submission, of obedience to God's will. His very life was a gift, as he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross. It is because

of this, friends, because of the very reality that we will relive this week in this holiest week of the Christian year, because Jesus was obedient for our sake, and he submitted himself to God's will on our behalf, because of that, he has opened the way for our own lives to be vessels of God's will. By his gift, the very gift of himself, he has invited us to submit our lives, day by day, to what God will do with us, trusting that though our path may lead to a cross, his will for us lays beyond that. And he will carry us through.

Let us pray.

Oh Lord,

we confess that many times, we would rather get our own way. Day by day, we wish that things would work out easier for us, that we might be able to plan and control our future. Today, Lord, we step back from that desire, and in humility we offer ourselves to you, to do your will, to do it your way. Help us, Lord, to submit to one another, lifting one another high, so that together, we might learn to submit to you, each day. Give us the courage we need to follow you, even though the parade may fade, and we, too, will have to pick up a cross. Shape our lives, too, into a gift that can be received by others, so that you may be glorified. In the name of our crucified and risen savior, Jesus, Amen.