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A Contradictory Day

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This is the most contradictory of all days in the life of the Church. For centuries we've recognized this; we call it Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday, though I was clueless of this while I was growing up. The church of my childhood pretty much ignored the Passion part and hyped the Hallelujahs of Jesus' ride into Jerusalem. But the world-wide Church has always known that though the day begins with singing praises and rejoicing in the presence of Jesus whose new life we anticipate next Sunday on Easter, the movement always leads to what comes before the resurrection, his Passion, and how the affirmations turned to either denial, betrayal or a refusal to stand up for him in his hour of need. A day of contradictions, indeed.

I want to suggest to you that this day of contradictions is not something that's confined to once upon a time, an isolated snapshot of first century people in Palestine; rather, Palm Sunday is a picture of us – you and me, the whole of the human race. And one of the characters that helps us understand this is Peter, one of Jesus' closest followers.

We love him, of course, and we do so, perhaps because he's so much like us. One day, he gets an A+ when he answers correctly the quiz as to who Jesus is: "Who do people say that I am? Who do YOU say that I am?" Jesus asks. And Peter answers from the heart: "You are the Christ." But as soon as he finishes with that, his bubble is burst and he's right back down with the rest of us when he tries to tell Jesus HOW he's supposed to be the Christ and Jesus tells him, "Get behind me, Satan!" And, of course, at the end of this week, late Thursday night, Peter blows it big time: "I don't know this man. I've never seen him. Leave me alone!"

He's so much like us; a living, breathing contradiction. On the one hand, faithful, loyal, full of integrity, an authentic human being; on the other, living the LIE because it's hard to stand by what you believe, hard to live a life of healing and reconciliation when that runs counter to the status quo. He was just an ordinary human being. Can you blame him for being like us? Can you blame yourself? . . . No, but . . .

In the movie, "Schindler's List," one of the most horrifying scenes of the many in the movie, occurred near the beginning when they were bringing Polish Jews into the concentration camp. They lined up people and made them stand in rows before clerical accountants who, with typewriters before them, registered the prisoners.

It was such an ordinary thing. They were just doing their jobs, just typing information on government forms, just registering people for their certain deaths in the camp.

It was one thing to see the evil perpetrated by the soldiers and officers in the camps, but quite another to see it done by ordinary people, doing ordinary things, sitting by their typewriters.

O, isn't that in all of us!? We ordinary people can be creatures of incredible virtue and compassion, willing to give our lives so that justice and wholeness may abound. But at the same time, we choose the LIE of security and the safety of the status quo, of selfishness and deep forgetfulness of who we are and Whose we are. And the whole Earth is weeping, just as it did on a Friday morning 2,000 years ago.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer paid the ultimate price for his opposition to the Nazis and we rightly celebrate his witness to the Light in the midst of deep darkness. But Bonhoeffer never considered himself as somehow apart from what he called the sin of Nazism. He wrote this poem, "Night Thoughts in Tegel," in his prison cell in 1944.

"We saw the lie raise its head,
And we did not honor the truth.
We saw the brethren in direst need
And feared only our own death
We come before thee as men,
As confessors of our sins."

That's who we are on this Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday – ordinary people with so much good in us and so much that lives the LIE. Few of us will rise to the level of Judas' betrayal of Jesus; we won't conspire with government authorities. We won't do it for money; we're much more ordinary. Maybe it's staying silent when we should be speaking up. Maybe it's keeping our head down when we should be standing up and being counted. Maybe it's going along with the status quo because it's easier or will cost us a lot us.

And yet, to us - to you and me, to everyone - this contradictory day brings hope: through the cross, that awful instrument meant to destroy us, there comes life. It is the One who calls us to take up the cross and follow him who comes to us and forgives us and loves us. He did it to Peter and he does it to us, and brings new life.

As I was considering today early this week, I was wondering how to communicate the nature of this day and how the story draws us in and speaks to our soul. And it came to me that what is most helpful to me, are two things: music and visual images. Prose is good, the spoken word, and it is so often helpful, but to open up the soul, we need the artists – the poets, musicians, play writes – to touch something in us to draw out truth that is in us all. So, Amy Hollis, Bill Castagno, Sarah Carr and I, put together the following to try and capture what I've been trying to get at the last few minutes. The song is one written and recorded almost 20 years ago by the hard rock group, Metallica. This version has no lyrics and is offered by the group, Apocalyptica. It's called, "The Unforgiven." May it open us something in your heart as you ponder the meaning of this day.