

Giving It Up: Popularity Sunday, 4/9/17

1 I'd like your participation in a little social science experiment this morning. Who can tell me which social networking platform is represented by the little blue square with the "t" in it? {Tumblr} How many of you use or have used Tumblr? Wave your palms if you have. How about the little brown camera symbol? {Instagram}? Any Instagram users out there? And the little blue bird? {Twitter} Do we have any Twitter users? How about the yellow ghost? {Snapchat}? Do we have any Snapchat users? And the blue square with the letters "in?" {LinkedIn} I know you're out there- let's see you wave your palms. By the way I am not a LinkedIn user, so please stop sending me contact requests. How about the red circle with the script "p?" {Pinterest}. And finally, the blue square with the letter "f?" {Facebook} Is there anyone here who has not at least tried Facebook? The Pew Research Center determined that in 2016, Facebook remained the most popular social networking site, with about 8 out of every ten adult Americans who access the internet using Facebook. Of those Facebook users, 75% use it daily.

Although these social networking are all different, they have one important thing in common: They exist to make money by attracting more users, and they grow their user base by incentivizing you, the users, to recruit new members. While their corporate motive is profit, the individual incentive is structured around popularity. Facebook users measure their growing fame by the number of their friends and the "likes" that they attract in response to their posts. From time to time, I post a wildlife picture on my Facebook page, and while one of my motives is to share my art with my family and friends, I admit that I get a certain thrill when there are a large number of "likes" in response to a picture. Most artists enjoy being appreciated. In fact, we all enjoy being liked, don't we? Wave your palm if you like being liked!

Twitter users measure their popularity by the number of followers subscribed to their twitter feeds. President Trump has about 27 Million Twitter followers, but he's still lagging considerably behind sports feeds like ESPN and pop figures like Katy Perry, who currently leads the pack with 97 million followers. Today, as we continue with our Lenten worship series, "Giving It Up," we consider the role popularity plays in our lives, how our desire for popularity shapes our choices, and why it's so important for us to be willing to give it up for

the sake of following in the footsteps of Jesus more closely. If there's one temptation that Jesus was especially well-acquainted with, it's the desire for popularity. How is that he endured the shouts of "hosanna" without succumbing to the temptation to please the crowd, to give them more of what they wanted and score thousands of new followers? To better understand what Jesus was thinking as he entered Jerusalem, we're going back to an earlier moment, when Jesus explained to Peter and another crowd what it really means to be his follower. I'm reading from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 9, starting with verse 18. **{Read Luke 9:11-25, NLT}**

2 Let's put ourselves at the parade again and see if we can relate to the crowd.

Imagine that you're standing in a crowded Jerusalem street, all the more crowded because it's the Passover, and Jewish pilgrims from all over the known world have travelled here, the site of the Temple, the residing place of God. You've heard about Jesus, the stories of the miracles, his teachings, and his many challenges to the status quo. Jesus is a man of the people, just the kind of man who could garner enough popular support to raise up a rebellion against the Roman occupiers and even clean house at the Temple. As the shouts of the crowds get louder, you see spot Jesus and you wave your palms as you join the crowds shouting, "Hosanna!" Remember, you're at a loud and crowded parade. How do you expect Jesus to hear you if you don't shout? Let's try that again: "Hosanna!"

The word "Hosanna" has an interesting meaning. In the Psalms, it means something like, "please save us." But as we gather along the parade route and shout this to Jesus, it's meaning is more of a joyful exclamation of thanksgiving, closer to "Praise God, we are saved!" And as Jesus draws closer to you, and as the crowd gets even louder, you become fully convinced yourself. This truly is the Messiah, God's anointed one, the man whom the people will make King by popular acclaim, restoring Israel to her former glory and putting down by force all those who would stand in opposition. How could we fail to praise God on this Day? "Hosanna! Hosanna!" Praise God, we are saved!

3 Wave your palm branch if you've ever taken a "selfie." Here's a self that Jana and I took at the Christmas Program last December. I remember it well because while we were busy crowning ourselves king and queen, the Sunday School teachers were frantically searching for the missing crowns for the wise men!

The kidsmediacentre at Centennial College has published their research into children and youth's use of social media in what they call “#Instafame & the Epidemiology of Youth's Selfie-Curated Culture.” It's not only children and youth who have become obsessed with recording images of themselves and broadcasting them to the world on the internet, is it? More than ever, at least in American culture, self-promotion has become a crucial part of what it means to be happy and successful. Internet tools abound now which in effect allow you to buy more followers and boost the exposure of your page. Fortunately for us, and for the crowd along the parade route, Jesus had a better plan than rising to power through popularity. Unfortunately for us, we often find ourselves succumbing to the temptation to elevate our position in the world by garnering greater popularity.

4 We know that Jesus repeatedly turned his back on the temptation to popularity. He refused to perform miracles on demand, even though the crowds clamored for them. He refused to cozy up to the prevailing religious hierarchy, even though that would have been the easiest way to fit in. He was content to have only a dozen close disciples, even though he could have easily gathered hundreds of thousands. I love that line from Jesus Christ Superstar when Judas wonders why Jesus came at a time before mass communication existed! And Jesus refused armed resistance of the authorities, even when his followers were clamoring to begin a fight.

Jesus knew that the road his Father had appointed for him was the low road of counter culture. And so he warned his disciples: “I will be rejected by the leaders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. I will be killed, but three days later I will be raised from the dead.” (Luke 9:22) That's not exactly the kind of hopeful speech you might expect from your leader, right? Yes, he mentions that he'll be raised from the dead, but what are the words that really stick out in his speech? Rejected and killed. If My MCCI coach had been there with Jesus, she might have said to him, “Now Jesus, remember that to lead people through change you have to help them paint a picture of a compelling future that touches their hearts.”

But Jesus knew of what he spoke, and he delivered one of his best short summaries of the Christian life, not just to the disciples but to the whole crowd gathered with him: “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your

cross daily, and follow me. If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life. And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose or forfeit your own soul in the process? (Luke 9:23). Oh wow, to be a follower of Jesus means not only giving up popularity, but laying down our lives, daily, for the sake of, example of, and agenda of Jesus. NOW who wants to wave their palm branch and shout hosanna? Hosanna? Blessed in the one who comes in the name of the Lord?

5 Let's explore some of the ways you might be tempted to serve popularity instead of Jesus. To do this, I invite you to close your eyes for a moment and imagine you're back in Jerusalem at the parade. Can you here the crowd shouting? Can you taste the dust in the air and feel the excitement of the crowd? Now imagine that somehow, against all expectations, the parade suddenly comes to a standstill as Jesus comes before you and makes eye contact with you. He gets off his donkey, hands the reigns to one of his disciples, and leads you off into a quiet, shady spot off the parade route. Inviting you to sit, he looks deep into your eyes and your heart. Being with him this closely makes you aware of your love for him, but also all that lies within your heart that's not right. What do you say to him? What is it that you've been searching for, working for, hoping for, longing for, instead of Jesus? Is it the acclaim from your neighbors that comes from remodeling or adding on to your house? Is it the praise or promotion at work that comes from your diligence and perseverance? Is it the scholarships and financial rewards that follow from a high grade point average and high standardized test scores? Is it something even simpler, like the thrill of being recognized in a crowd, called by your name, or listened to as you tell your story? Whatever it is that you're searching for, now is the moment to hand it over to Jesus, to leave it behind in the trampled dust of the parade, so that you're free to follow Jesus, past the parade, and into the Upper Room with Jesus and the disciples for the Passover meal this Thursday night. (You can open your eyes again and rejoin me in 2017).

6 In this comic, the man in the red brags to his friend, "I've got hundreds of Facebook friends I've never met." The older man replies, "When I was young we called them imaginary friends." I'm not saying that it's wrong to use social media platforms like Facebook, any more than I'm saying it's wrong to have a successful career or even to want to have friends. Got created us to be social beings, made in the image of our creator, who is

by very nature a social God. The issue for us as Christians always comes down to the motives of our hearts. Are we seeking popularity for the sake of promoting ourselves, reaching for the kind of “instafame” sought by so many aspiring you-tube and reality TV stars? Or are we seeking a healthier way of being social, seeking opportunities to share the gifts God has given us with others for the sake of serving others and ushering in the Kingdom of God? Perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad idea to ask ourselves these questions each time before we posted something online or made some other decision that serves our own self interests.

7 Jesus consistently chose to serve the mission of his Father rather than himself, despite the constant clamoring of the disciples and crowds to do otherwise. Jesus willingly let the crowds give him a palm parade, knowing that very soon the shouts of “hosanna” would turn to “crucify!” As you stand along the parade route, what are you going to do with that palm branch in your hand? Will you wave it this morning and shout “hosanna to the son of David,” only to set it down this afternoon, forgetting all about your duty to continue following Jesus, past the palm parade, all the way to the cross?

I encourage you to take your palm branch with you today and keep it with you wherever you go: to the grocery store, the gas station, a restaurant- wherever you go. It's probably not the kind of thing you'd do if you were concerned about being popular. Let that palm branch remind you that you serve the one who is worthy of being praised, who has in fact come to save you. And if someone happens to ask you why you're carrying a palm branch, go ahead and tell them your pastor made you do it. You'll probably make them laugh. But then use that icebreaker to explain the real reason you're carrying that palm branch: It's a reminder that you want to make choices today that honor the King of Glory instead of honoring yourself. May it be so for each one of us today, and in the days to come. Amen.



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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