

**PALMS AND PASSION**  
By Dean Feldmeyer  
Palm Sunday Meditation 2011

The book of worship and the lectionary tell us that this day can be celebrated as either Palm Sunday, a day of celebration wherein we reenact Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Or we can celebrate it as Passion Sunday wherein we review and rehearse all of the events of Holy Week.

This second option is often chosen by what we refer to as "low" or "no-liturgical" churches that don't have services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, who only meet together for worship on Sundays. Since we will be coming together for Maundy Thursday AND Good Friday this week, we have chosen to celebrate this day as it has traditionally been celebrated – as Palm Sunday.

But we must be careful about this celebration. If we aren't careful, we will end up singing and shouting hosanna so loudly that we miss the real point of this day, of this little parade, this little bit of comedic street theater.

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You've had the experience, no doubt.

You hear a joke or a story. You think it's funny. You laugh again when you recall it a couple of days later. You appreciate the irony or the word play or the bawdiness, or maybe just the way it was told. You want to share the experience with someone else, your spouse or a good friend, maybe a person who has told you a joke and you want to return the favor.

So you practice the joke, rehearse it over and over again in your mind. You improve it – the choice of words, the pace and timing with which it is told, the setting, the setup, maybe even the punch line. Maybe you even tell it out loud while you're alone in the car, just to hear how it sounds.

Then, finally, the opportunity presents itself and you wait for just the right moment and you tell the joke, just the way you've rehearsed it.

You deliver the punch line and maybe you step back just a little so you can see the full effect on the face of your listener, hear the full measure of his laughter. You smile or maybe laugh a little, yourself...

And....

And...

Crickets.

Your listener doesn't get the joke.

For a moment you consider your next move. Do I explain it? No, you can't explain a joke. E. B. White once said that explaining a joke is like dissecting a frog. When you're done, you understand it better but the frog dies in the process.

Do I apologize? Get angry? Take it personally? Pout? Shrug and walk away?

And who do I blame? Is it my fault? Did I tell it wrong? Did I miss something in my rehearsal and retelling?

Well, probably not. Take heart. Chances are it's not your fault. In fact, there's only about a 25 percent chance, when someone doesn't get a joke, that it's the teller's fault. There are, in fact, three other distinct and probable possibilities.

**One** is that the listener did not possess the information or experience necessary to understand the joke. For instance, there is a whole genre of humor called mathematician humor that is understood and actually laughed at by mathematicians but no one else. Here's an example:

*A physicist, a biologist and a mathematician are sitting in a street café watching people entering and leaving the house on the other side of the street. First they see two people entering the house. Time passes. After a while they notice three people leaving the house. The physicist says, "The measurement wasn't accurate." The biologist says, "They must have reproduced." The mathematician says, "If one more person enters the house then it will be empty."*

I'm going to assume from the resounding silence that you don't get that joke any better than I do. But I am told that if you tell that at a convention of mathematicians it never fails to have them rolling in the aisles.

The **second** possibility is that the listener doesn't have a sense of humor. At first we recoil from this explanation because we want to think that everyone has a sense of humor but that is simply not the case. Some people are not intellectually able to appreciate the irony or absurdity that is part of most western humor.

Persons who have been diagnosed with various personality disorders are usually described as having no sense of humor. This is especially true of persons with Paranoid Personality Disorder, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, and Borderline Personality Disorder. They can fake it and laugh or smile at the right time, but they really don't get it. Humor is not part of their makeup.

Persons can experience brain trauma that makes humor difficult if not impossible for them. Persons with autism or Asperger's Syndrome usually have no discernable understanding of humor.

Some people who have lived in fear in abusive homes or other settings sometimes lose their sense of humor. Fear and terror can do that. Or it doesn't have to be that dramatic. Some people are raised by humorless parents and never learn to laugh. They laugh because everyone else laughs, because they want to fit in, but we can hear a difference in their laugh, a false note that rings hollow.

Like the Star Trek character, Data, the cyborg or robot who wants to experience human emotion, their response to humor is learned and robotic or, like, Spock, they don't even try.

The **third** and most common reason someone doesn't get a joke is that they just weren't listening. They didn't hear what it was you said. They were distracted by something else or they were bored and their attention drifted or maybe they were impatient and jumped ahead, trying to get to the punch line early and landed in the wrong place.

This is the most frustrating of the three. This person has the language and the experience and the understanding to comprehend what you are talking about. They have the ability to understand humor in general and your humor, specifically. They just didn't care enough to listen, to take a minute off from their interests and concerns and hear what you had to say.

This was what happened on that first Palm Sunday.

It was supposed to be a joke. A king riding on a donkey. Don't you get it?  
It was a poke in the eye of every earthly king. Of Caesar. Of Herod.  
It was a joke on every person who wielded or yearned to wield earthly power. On Pilate and on Caiaphas.  
It was a little piece of absurdist street theater that laughed at the presumption of those who thought that power came from the edge of a sword and the strength of an army, who thought that wealth and possessions made a person morally superior, who thought that Caesar was divine and Rome was immortal.

It was a joke.

Only, they didn't listen. Their ears were stopped and their eyes were blinded by their own agendas and fantasies. They couldn't see what Jesus was doing and they couldn't hear what he was saying because they were yelling, too loudly.

They wanted another David. They wanted a warrior. They wanted a soldier king who would slay the wicked and destroy the enemies of Israel with chariot and spear and sword. "Blessed is the son of David!" they said.

But Jesus was not a warrior king. He was not a soldier.  
His chariot was a donkey's colt, his sword was kindness, his spear was love.  
He told them to love their enemies and pray for those who mistreated them. He told them to love one another. He befriended the friendless, accepted the unacceptable, loved the unlovable, and healed the hopeless.

This, he said, was the work of a true king. This was the work of one who lives and reigns in God's kingdom.  
This is not the son of David.  
This is the son of God.  
And if we expected anything else, then the joke's on us.

Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!