

April 9, 2017 – Philippians 2:5-11 & John 12:12-19

St Louis is not normally known as a celebrity hangout. Aside from local sports heroes and the occasional star who grew up there, it's not the type of place where you expect to see a big Hollywood actor. And yet, during my fourth year of seminary, we had such a star grace the city. In fact, he showed up literally across the street from the seminary. You see, large portions of the film "Up In the Air" were filmed in the suburb of Clayton where the seminary is located.

At the time, I really didn't know what this movie was about. I knew that it required dumping several inches of fake snow on the Cheshire Inn next to St Mary's Hospital. That it required clogging traffic up and down Clayton Rd with trucks, equipment, and trailers. That it drew about half the Clayton police force, as well as a sizable private security firm. And that hundreds of fans risked their lives by crowding together on the edge of a major thoroughfare just to grab a glimpse of the man: Dr. Doug Ross, Mr. Danny Ocean, the former-Batman himself... George Clooney.

I wasn't among them. I guess I've just become a little cynical about celebrities in America today. We've got steroid pumped athletes paid astronomical salaries. We've got singers who can't sing and actors who can't act. And then we've got what I consider the most mind-boggling group of all: people who are famous... for being famous. Reality TV stars and wealthy heirs to family fortunes. People who have done absolutely nothing at all except stumble in front of a camera at the right time, like a blind squirrel tripping over a nut.

So with this loose definition of celebrity in mind, I don't think it's too far fetched to call Jesus a celebrity of his day. Certainly he had done a lot more to deserve the title than most of the so-called celebrities right now.

Rousing sermons that drew thousands. A claim to royal authority over the nation. Fantastic feats of miraculous power. Even raising the dead. This was a celebrity. And the people knew it.

And as we look upon the Gospel reading for today, I wonder whether we grasp how chaotic Jesus' welcoming into Jerusalem really was. This was a city packed to the gills with people. Everyone who had the means came to Jerusalem for the Passover. Everyone. Thousands of extra people crammed into a single city.

And then you add Jesus to the mix. And it's like dropping George Clooney into an already crowded Clayton, Missouri. You can imagine the blind, chaotic rush of people through an already crowded street just to get a glimpse of a true celebrity.

Human nature hasn't changed much, in this regard. We still have our celebrities. We still spread tantalizing rumors about them. We still rush to see them, particularly after they've been a part of some major event, be it making a new movie or raising a man named Lazarus from the dead.

And we still turn on them just as easily. Jesus spent three years building a celebrity status with the people. And he lost it in five days. Not only did he lose it, he became the most hated man in all of Palestine. He couldn't even beat a convicted murderer in a popularity contest. Five days and those who had praised him as the King of Israel nailed him to a cross.

It's hard to imagine such a stark turn of events. But really, maybe it's not. We turn on our celebrities everyday. Why do we turn on them? Usually, because they don't meet our expectations. The athlete we cheered on the field gets caught cheating on his spouse. The actress we drooled over ends up in rehab with an addiction. The singer we listened to endlessly turns out to be a thug who beats his wife or girlfriend.

And I really think that's what the people of Jerusalem saw in Jesus of Nazareth that Good Friday morning. A fallen celebrity. A failed Messiah. A man for whom they had so many expectations. He was as wise as a prophet. He was as powerful as a priest. He was the king of Israel and he was going to lead them into a new Kingdom of God!

And yet here was this great king. Convicted by the Pharisees of heinous crimes without even trying to defend himself. Beaten to within an inch of his life. Dragging a Roman cross through the streets. Hanging in infamy for all the world to see. And all he could do was cry out to God and complain of his thirst. He was no celebrity that they wanted. He was no celebrity that anyone would want.

Jesus hadn't met their expectations. And if he had arrived two thousand years later, I'm pretty certain he wouldn't have met our expectations either. St Paul writes in our Epistle lesson that though Jesus was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. Jesus wasn't interested in our definition of celebrity. He wasn't interested in our definition of glory. He wasn't interested in looking like God.

No, instead, he made himself nothing, taking the form – not of God – but of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus wasn't interested in our expectations. He had more important things to do. Like take on the humblest form he could possibly take. That of a convicted criminal executed by one of the cruelest, most painful methods ever devised by men. Crucifixion on a cross.

And for that great sacrifice, for that great act of perfect humility and selflessness and love, His Father highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name. That at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow.

Not just the knees of those who lined the streets on Palm Sunday morning. Not just the knees of those who stood around the cross hurling insults when they should have been lifting up praise. But the knees of every being in heaven and on earth and under the earth. So that at the name of Jesus, hell itself bows down in submission and surrender and declares that Jesus Christ really is Lord.

This was God's plan all along. A plan to take weakness and turn it into power. A plan to take shame and turn it into glory. A plan to take death and turn it into life. A plan to take the crucified body of his Son and raise him up on the third day. A plan to save you and me.

When Jesus hung on that cross the people hurled insults at him. "He saved others, but he can't save himself." He saved Lazarus. He saved the leper. He saved Jairus's daughter. He saved the adulterous woman.

But what they didn't know was that he saved all of them that day as well. He stayed on that cross not because he couldn't save himself, but because he didn't want to save himself if it meant that even one person should perish.

If the crowd had understood what Jesus did that day, they would have seen the ultimate celebrity. A man who exceeded their wildest expectations. A man who fulfilled every prophecy ever written about the Messiah. A prophet. A priest. A king. And more than that... The one and only Son of the Living God. Jesus the Christ.

Days and weeks later, the people would realize what a celebrity that had in town that day. They would realize what they had missed. They would repent. They would be baptized. They would be filled with the Holy Spirit. And they would proclaim his message of salvation until billions came to know the Gospel. The party begun that Palm Sunday would start anew, fueled not by human expectations, but by the demonstration of God's love.

That celebration continues to this day. It continues in this church with the singing of songs and the waving of palm branches. In the preaching of the Word and the reception of the Sacrament. It continues every time we bow our knee and confess that Jesus Christ is our crucified Lord and our risen Savior, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.