

GIVING UP POPULARITY**Matthew 21:1-11****(Read Matthew 21:1-11)**

Intro: I've always been proud of how humble I am. I've never been one to seek popularity – or at least I've always told myself that.

This was called into question recently when someone said of me that I liked being popular. I kind of recoiled at that, because I didn't think it was true. I told them that I thought it was more like I liked people to like me. And he conceded that possibility, but I wasn't sure I actually convinced him. I thought about that interchange a lot over the next few days, especially since I was going to be preaching series in just a little over a week on Giving up Popularity it my second to last sermon in our Lenten Giving it Up series. I hadn't thought it was an issue for me, but maybe it is – and maybe it always had been.

In 1994 we were going through a pastoral transition at Manheim Brethren in Christ where I was the Associate Pastor. My beloved senior pastor was actually being replaced and it wasn't a pleasant transition for him and for the church. The truth was, I very much wanted to be a senior pastor and of Manheim BIC since they needed a new one. It seemed kind of mercenary, so I didn't tell anybody about it except for God and Kathy. Well, one board member did ask me if I would be interested in it and I said yes, but that was the extent of it. I figured if God knew, that was good enough.

I knew that I was appreciated at Manheim BIC, so I thought I had a fighting chance. The problem was I didn't fight it all. I never applied for the job, nor did I ever inform the bishop. I just thought if it was the Lord's will, I would be called to be the senior pastor of Manheim Brethren in Christ Church. Then I proceeded to get my hopes up – because, after all, why wouldn't they want me to be their pastor and it was surely what God wanted, right?

Well, the months passed and I heard nothing. Then in June of that year it was announced that a new pastor had been called, and he had accepted the call. And, seeing that I never heard a thing, I quickly figured out it wasn't going to be me. So when the announcement was made of who the pastor was going to be, and it was announced to the church, and it was all out in the open, I made an appointment with my Bishop. We met at a diner in Elizabethtown, and after we got through the pleasantries that come from a long friendship and ministry together, I said to him: “Bishop Warren, I never told you that I wanted to be pastor of Manheim. In fact, I never told anyone. I just told the Lord that if he wanted me to be the pastor there, I was ready. You didn't know, so from that standpoint I understand why I wasn't called. But, I still want to know why you didn't call me? They know me and they love me, so, why didn't Manheim call me?” His answer, in so many words was, “You weren't what they were looking for.”

That hurt! The truth was, the person that they had a reputation of being a very good preacher and he was a visionary, and he was a natural leader. Apparently I didn't fit that, and so someone else was called. The bishop assured me that I would be very helpful in the transition to a new pastor and he assured me that he had confidence that I would do a good job of that.

But I was bugged! Why wasn't I good enough?! I thought I was God's gift to the pulpit! I thought that I was a shepherd extraordinaire! I thought that would be all that would be needed. Well, apparently the leadership team at Manheim didn't think so. What happened was I had a bit of a tailspin over the next few months. I wasn't as popular as I thought. And I was troubled, that it troubled me. But it did. And, truth be told, it still bothers me.

People want to be popular and they want to be considered influential, so we have the proliferation of “influencers” on social media. It's always interesting to me how anyone, ANYONE! can hang out a shingle as an influencer. They might not know the first thing about cooking or baking, but suddenly they have a million followers for their online show. There are influencers for anything and everything, child care, healthcare, truly, any kind of care! And, people hang on every word of what they say. Even though what they're saying might be diametrically opposite of what the truth is. And when the truth comes out, and they are discovered to be charlatans, they're very swiftly no longer popular. This is a dire consequence for someone who craves it so much.

Here's another thing, in particular this happens with people on who are on Facebook, Instagram, and even Twitter (I refuse to call it. X). If they don't get a sufficient enough number of responses or “Likes” they are

devastated because no one is following their posts! We humans want to be popular and we want to be recognized.

For a few hours on the Sunday before Good Friday, the Sunday we know as Palm Sunday, Jesus's popularity was off the charts! But just a few days later, instead of joyous shouts of "Hosanna!" The same crowd who had been delirious with anticipation on Sunday, were screaming, "Crucify him!" How quickly popularity changes. This is the fickle nature of humanity. Even Jesus was not immune to this. Yes, this was all God's plan for him to go to the cross and be the ultimate sacrifice, but still, it was amazing how quickly he went from the triumphant king to suffering criminal.

The beauty, and we must learn from it, is this: Jesus was not deterred or diminished by his popularity. His heavenly Father's plan was working out beautifully. But he could handle it – after all he was God's son. But he was God's son who was also a human being. He showed us how to handle popularity?

Now, I know that a majority of this congregation are introverts, and for that reason less susceptible to need to be popular, but this is still a good message for us to remember: and what we need to remember is that what really counts is what our heavenly Father thinks. So let's look at it briefly in the remaining time.

First and it's basically from the comment on your worship folder . . .

Popularity is fleeting, and if we put our faith in it, we will be sorely disappointed

- We know this, right? So why do we have to go over it? Because too many of us forget. Some of us would love to be a celebrity – that's popularity, right? That's probably not too prevalent at ABC. A better reflection is that a lot of us want to be liked and most of us want to be appreciated and all of us want to be respected. That's popularity too.
- The problem is when that is what drives us we will come up short. There is a proverb, "You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time", and it's helpful and good to remember, but you have to actually apply it.
- You already know that I'm going to tell us we need to be like Jesus – so here goes: Prior to this Jesus had been purposely shy about publicity. Whenever he healed someone he told them they should not tell anyone. When the crowds got too interested and the religious leaders go too riled up, he would move to another region and minister there. His response when questioned about this was not that he was cowardly or sneaky, but that his time had not yet come. His Father's plan was unfolding and he was in lockstep with him.
- But then his time came. He was in Bethpage – on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and he started it in the works. He sent for a donkey colt – the lowliest beast of burden and he rode into town. David Guzik says this, "*Jesus knew that the religious leaders were going to arrest Him and condemn Him and mock Him and scourge Him and deliver Him to the Romans for crucifixion (you can find that in [Matthew 20:19](#)). Yet He had the courage to not only enter Jerusalem, but to enter in as public a way as possible. This contrasts to His previous pattern of suppressing publicity. If Jesus had not deliberately suppressed the popular enthusiasm over Him and His credentials as Messiah – if Jesus had wanted it, this would have happened long ago and many times.*" (End Quote) Jesus wasn't going for popularity – he was following the plan.
- He was going to suffer and die for the sins of the world – so he wasn't soaking up the accolades, he was setting the stage for the redemption of sinners.
- Instead of seeking renown . . .

We need to put our faith in God's love and grace because it will never go away

- Jesus told his hearers a day or two later, *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away*. Matthew 24:35. God's love and grace AND his plan for us will also never go away. Popularity and fame and our hope for relevance, if it ever gets off the ground at all, will certainly fade away – but God is faithful – he's the one we need to look to for our worth and our mission. What we do and what we can attain is fragile at best – trying to make ourselves more than what God intends in futile – he is the one who makes us worthy – Jesus made us worthy on the Cross.
- That's why . . .

Knowing Jesus will help us through the times that we feel abandoned

- We know this, right? Do we? In case you need to be reminded, knowing Jesus is all we really need. Graham Kendrick wrote the most amazing song that says this very thing and it begins like this:

*All I once held dear, built my life upon
All this world reveres, and wars to own
All I once thought gain I have counted loss
Spent and worthless now, compared to this
Knowing You, Jesus
Knowing You
There is no greater thing
You're my all, You're the best
You're my joy, my righteousness
And I love You, Lord.*

- We don't need recognition or even respect – We need Jesus. Oh, don't get me wrong, recognition and respect are nice, but as long as we are taking our marching orders from God, the way his Son did during this week we call Holy Week, then it doesn't matter what others think.
- On Good Friday Jesus hung on the Cross and cried, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" which means, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*". He was completely abandoned so that we would not have to be. He gave up popularity for us, let us do likewise. Amen.