

**Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta**  
**“Jesus Remains a Friend for You” (Mark 15:1-39)**  
**Palm Sunday: March 28, 2021**  
**Dave Johnson**

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

On the opening track of his 1964 album, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, the Nobel Prize laureate sings:

I ain't lookin' to compete with you  
Beat or cheat or mistreat you  
Simplify you, classify you  
Deny, defy, or crucify you  
All I really want to do is, baby, be friends with you

No, and I ain't lookin' to fight with you  
Frighten you or tighten you  
Drag you down or drain you down  
Chain you down or bring you down  
All I really want to do is, baby, be friends with you

On Palm Sunday we are reminded of the immeasurable and unconditional love of our Savior Jesus Christ for a world in which he was often ridiculed and dismissed by many as a “friend of sinners” (Matthew 11:19). People often mistake Jesus’ immeasurable and unconditional love as having some kind of ulterior motive, some kind of agenda, some kind of strings attached. The idea that the Son of God could love the world, and love *you*, so much he was willing to die to prove it—that all Jesus wants to do is be friends with you—seems too good to be true...but it is true...it is the gospel—as the Apostle Paul put it, “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

One of the many aspects of Jesus’ passion that always moves me is how Jesus refused to defend himself. When Jesus stood before the council and as Mark tells us, “Many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree” (Mark 14:56)—Mark tells us that in response Jesus “was silent and did not answer” (Mark 14:61).

Later, when Jesus stood before Pilate and an angry crowd, and Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus simply replied, “You say so.” And when the chief priests, the religious leaders in Jerusalem, “accused him of many things”, Jesus said nothing. Pilate did not understand how Jesus could refuse to defend himself with his very life on the line—“Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.” And yet “Jesus made no further reply” (Mark 15:1-5).

When the crowd demanded Barabbas to be released in his place, Jesus said nothing. When the crowds shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Jesus said nothing. When Pilate washed his hands of the matter, Jesus said nothing. When Jesus had his hands stretched above him and tied to a post so that each and every time the Roman soldier whipped him with a flagellum at the end of which were several strands each with a sharp rock or shard that were dragged across the taut skin of his back again and again and again thirty-nine times, Jesus said nothing.

When soldiers covered his lacerated back with a purple robe and pounded a crown of thorns into his sacred head sore wounded, Jesus said nothing. When they spat on his loving face and mocked him “Hail, King of the Jews!” Jesus said nothing. When Roman soldiers nailed him to the cross and he was ravaged with unspeakable pain in both his hands that had touched and healed so many people and both his feet that had trod countless miles of dusty roads as Jesus had sought out the least, the last, and the lost Jesus said nothing...well, not to people anyway, he did pray to his Heavenly Father, “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

As passersby mocked him and shook their heads at him and dismissed him as a charlatan and a fraud and an imposter, Jesus said nothing. And when the same chief priests that had falsely accused him and demanded that he be crucified further mocked him—“He saved others; he cannot save himself” because apparently what they had already done had not been enough, still...Jesus said nothing.

Throughout his betrayal and arrest and sham trial and death sentence and hours and hours of brutal suffering culminating in crucifixion—a death so degrading it was illegal for Roman citizens to undergo it (Jesus was a citizen of a different kingdom)—Jesus said nothing.

Through it all Jesus refused to defend himself. Why? Because Jesus did come to earth defend himself...but to defend *you*, because all Jesus wants to do is be friends with *you*.

You see, throughout Jesus' earthly ministry of preaching and teaching and healing, as he touched untouchables and stood up for those for whom no one else would stand, and befriended those who had no friends and really needed one, Jesus was dismissed and misunderstood.

When it came to the people he came to save, people "harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd" for whom Jesus was moved with compassion (Matthew 9:36), although Jesus had not come to compete with them or beat them or cheat them or mistreat them, the world responded by competing with him and beating him and cheating and mistreating him.

Jesus had not come to simplify them or classify them, or deny or defy or crucify them, the world responded by simplifying him ("he's a blasphemer") and denying him (ask Peter) and defying him (ask everybody) and yes, by crucifying, him.

Although Jesus had not come to fight with them or frighten them, or drag them down or drain them down or chain them down or bring them down, the world responded by fighting with him and frightening him, and by dragging him down and draining him down and chaining him down and bringing him down...and leaving him to die on the cross.

And Jesus refused to defend himself...for the entire time Jesus' stance, Jesus' starting point, Jesus' motivation had always been and would always be, "All I really want to do is be friends with you." This is why Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

Jesus is a friend of sinners, including you, and loves you so much he died for you to prove it—that is the good news of the gospel. And this means that no matter what has happened in your life in the past, no matter what is happening in your life in the present, and no matter what will happen in your life in the future...Jesus remains a friend for you.

Amen.