**“Being Right or Being Popular – They are Rarely the Same”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of

St. Andrew’s United Church

for Sunday, March 20, 2016 - Lent 6, Palm Sunday

Scripture Readings:Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 (VU 837, parts 1, 3, 4)

Luke 19:28-40

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Richard J. Doyle in his introduction to the book ***The Wit and Wisdom of Richard Needham*** writes that “Richard John Needham is a man of medium proportions. He is neither tall nor short, fat nor thin. His hair is neither thick nor sparse, gray nor white. His posture is neither good nor bad, his gate is neither springy nor sprung…”

Later Doyle remarks about Needham, “He is a progressive thinker held captive by eternal verities.”

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, Needham was a well-read columnist on the editorial page of ***The Globe and Mail.*** Some people bought the Globe simply to read his column, in the same way people might buy ***The Sudbury Star*** today to do the crossword and Sudoku.

Needham had a view on almost everything, and it was usually controversial. He was one for whom the call would go out that Richard Needham should run for office, but he knew the worst thing to do was seek election, as he liked to say what was wrong, but rarely had solutions for change.

There is always a danger when we take a modern figure and try to make an analogy to someone from the past. There is a greater danger when we compare people to the great religious leaders – Moses, Deborah, Abraham, Sarah, Jesus, Mohammed, or Mother Theresa or Francis of Assissi. Needham was no religious leader,

but he might have done well following the pattern of Jesus to this extent: had he written nothing, his words may have had an even greater impact on the world, but because he was a newspaper writer, all that he said is frozen in time, for good or for ill.

And Needham did not have too many people seeking to praise him as a saviour or attack him as a criminal, but then again, what he had to say could easily be interpreted anyway you liked, and so people tended to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Just some of Needham’s controversial sayings follow:

“A democrat is someone who loathes dictatorships but spends his holiday in one because he feels safer and gets better value for his money.”

“In a dictatorship, the people are afraid to tell the truth to the leaders. In a democracy, the leaders are afraid to tell the truth to the people.”

“If you believe the majority are always right, the gas ovens lie straight ahead.”

Needham has a philosophic, at times whimsical and at other times brutally direct way of commenting on society, culture, education, and politics. Maybe he could do that because he lived at a time where in many ways it hardly mattered who ruled the government or what the education system was – we would get by anyway.

He embodied a real contrast to Jesus and his time. Jesus faced opposition and hatred because he knew what he had to say about God, religion, culture, and traditions mattered. There was no denying that it was an important time, and Jesus was prepared to be outspoken for others. Jesus knew that he lived in a time of transition, and it was important for him to speak clearly and directly to the powers of his day for the sake of others.

But not for himself. He never protected himself in any exchange. He knew the end was near as he went into Jerusalem, and so demanded transportation and quite frankly did not worry how the disciples got it. But he also was not interested in protecting himself. A plot was underway, he had some idea as to what that plot was, and he wanted it carried out, finished, behind him.

There are times to fight for what is right, and what is important, and there are times to let go. There are times to make a strong push for something or someone, and there are times to let it pass.

Jesus knew that doing the popular thing, avoiding the confrontation in Jerusalem where he would be facing a court proceeding and ultimate death, may be the popular thing to do, at least with his followers, but it was not the right thing to do.

There is a phrase that speaks to the constant struggle between doing what is right and doing what is popular: it’s called “peer pressure.”

And in some ways it never ends. Richard Needham put it this way: “For the first half of your life, people tell you what to do, and for the second half of your life, people tell you what you should have done.”

Jesus was not immune to such pressure. He could be persuaded by a mother with a sick child or a woman at a well to engage in actions he did not plan to do.

Yet those around him had big ideas as to what he should do and how he should do it, and he usually nudged them aside. People who do that to us probably come from two different perspectives: they wish the best for us and so prod us into success, or they have had lives that have disappointed themselves and so they try to experience success and importance through another. Either way, the danger is there for someone to tell us what to do at any and every stage of life.

There was a time when the church fulfilled that role – telling people what to do. But I hope today we have a different role—to encourage people to be clear as to how decisions are made in their lives and priorities set, and not be persuaded by the winds of social convention or common practice.

Jesus on Palm Sunday had some established priorities for his life that he lived that day:

* Fulfill your commitments;
* Face power with confidence and clarity;
* Never fear when looking ahead to the future.

Palm Sunday was a “fulfill-your-commitment” day. Jesus would face the political powers of his day and not back down.

He would speak to that power with confidence and clarity for he knew that ultimately nothing awful could happen to him. When one speaks the truth, any consequences are minimized, for the truth will set you free.

And finally, Jesus knew that facing the future should never be fearful, for the sense of God’s direction and guidance that was there in the past, and carried him through the present, will remain there for the future. If only we all had that confidence.

Come to think of it, those are good values to build a basis for an annual meeting that we will enter after worship:

1. Fulfill our commitments;
2. Speak to power with confidence and with clarity;
3. Do not fear the future.

May those values, and those concepts, undergird our meeting today, and support our lives in community, as a people of God. AMEN