

**Text:** [John 19:31-42 \(CEB\)](#)  
**Date:** March 29, 2026 – Sixth Sunday in Lent  
**Title:** “Unlikely Allies” – An Unlikely Lent Series, Palm Sunday (week 6)  
**Theme:** When we don’t act with courage, sometimes our actions end up being too little, too late.

## 1

Sometimes we find friends in unexpected places

I’ve discovered, through the years, that there are often people  
thinking of you, praying for you  
Sometimes even *cheering* for you  
Without you even knowing anything about it

Especially in this age of social media, when we can observe  
people’s lives at a distance  
This isn’t always obvious to us  
In fact, it’s easy for us to believe no one’s paying attention  
That no one cares

I think many of us would be surprised to learn just how often we’re  
thought of by others  
Often we just feel so pressed for time that even when we are  
thinking of someone  
We don’t make that call, that we don’t send that text, that we don’t  
drop a card in the mail  
But we should

## 2

Part of the terrible irony of the gospel story around Jesus’  
crucifixion  
Is that some of his most powerful friends only made themselves  
known after he died

I mean, on Palm Sunday plenty of people came out  
Jesus was welcomed into the city, greeted with celebration

But even then, presumably some stayed at home  
These were the folks who were watching his ministry from a  
distance  
Because it felt too risky to be associated with Jesus

>>Have you ever had a friend it felt risky to be seen with?

I'm thinking about a pastor friend, who has since passed on, God  
rest his soul

I'm going to call him Jerry  
Jerry was one of the funniest people I ever met  
And one of the most earnest

I got to know him because he was working in a nearby town –  
not as a pastor –  
When I was in Morris County  
Jerry used to stop by my office and check on me from time to time  
Just to chat, to share some wisdom, to share some laughs

Jerry loved people, and he loved Jesus, he was a great preacher  
Jerry was also gay  
In a time when the Church would prosecute you for it  
And so Jerry retired earlier than he would have wanted to – if you  
know what I mean  
But he stuck around the annual conference

There's a part of conference  
We call the clergy session, and it is by far the most boring part of  
what we do  
But one year, I was there with Jerry  
And a couple other people – fun people, funny people

That's the only way to get through it – is to find the people who  
will cut up a little bit  
I laughed the whole way through that session

As I walked out of the room, I will never forget  
One of my colleagues – who has also since passed on  
He pulled me to the side and said, “you should really be more  
careful about the company you keep”  
And I couldn't help thinking, “Is this real right now?  
At a church gathering?  
Has this guy never read the gospels?”

I tell you one thing:  
I never looked at *him* the same way again

### 3

I wonder if people ever said something similar to Nicodemus and  
Joseph of Arimathea  
If they dared to say something positive about Jesus to their  
friends on the Council

We know Nicodemus visited Jesus at night, in secret  
They had that famous conversation about being born again  
And that Nicodemus spoke up for Jesus at the Council – we read  
that in John 7  
People mocked him for it

Joseph is more mysterious  
We don't read anything about him until he shows up as the one  
who asks Pilate for custody of Jesus' body  
It was a bold thing to do  
Jewish law then, as now, required bodies to be buried within 24  
hours  
What's at stake in that, according to Deuteronomy (21:23)

Isn't just the honor of the person, but the honor of Israel, the  
nation's blessing  
To leave someone – even a condemned criminal – unburied was  
seen as a stain on the land

Now, Rome didn't care too much about this  
The crosses were there for a reason – as a deterrent

But it was almost Passover  
And so to leave someone on the cross whom the crowds had  
celebrated just a few days earlier would have been offensive

So Joseph went and asked Pilate  
Because he had standing as a member of the Council  
He could make an argument based on religious belief  
“Help me help you, Governor”  
“I'm not saying people will riot, but you never know”  
“I just want to keep the day holy”

But if holiness were Joseph's only concern  
Then any grave outside the city would have been fine  
An anonymous grave in the burial ground set aside for criminals  
would have been typical

That's not what Joseph did, though  
He buried Jesus in his own tomb – the one he'd had prepared for  
himself, a brand-new tomb no one had ever been buried in  
And then we get this wild detail that Nicodemus showed up with  
spices to anoint Jesus' body – 75 pounds' worth  
That's a lot to come up with on short notice  
And much more than anyone would expect to be spent on the  
burial of an itinerant preacher

Jesus clearly meant something to these men  
Because what's being described here is a ROYAL burial

>>Pilate hung a sign over Jesus' head proclaiming him king  
Joseph and Nicodemus acted like they believed it

#### 4

We might wonder if things might have gone differently for Jesus if  
some his allies had spoken up more forcefully a little earlier?

Nicodemus tried, but people laughed at him (John 7:52)  
“Prophets don’t come from Galilee, everybody knows that”  
That’s what people said  
>>Where was Joseph of Arimathea then?

I don’t mean to sound too harsh  
You know, I didn’t say *anything* to the guy who told me I should  
“be careful who my friends are”  
I was too shocked  
I never *forgot* it, but I never *addressed* it with him, either  
Which makes me sad when I think about it now

Because I betrayed my friend Jerry by not saying anything, by not  
speaking up for him  
And I regret that

#### 5

Joseph and Nicodemus were two people who really cared - they  
did  
They risked a lot, they invested a lot  
To care for Jesus  
The gospel writer wants you to know that

We might be tempted to judge them for waiting too long  
For not speaking out loudly enough  
We might be tempted to say: what you did feels like too little, too  
late

But how often have we been guilty of the same?

How often have we watched people from a distance rather than  
making a more meaningful investment in the relationship?  
How often have we failed to stand up for our people when it really  
mattered?

Or let opportunities to connect pass us by?

Sometimes, that's meant we've left people we care about feeling  
unsupported

Or we've left them to take on hard things all by themselves

>>Maybe the question isn't *whether or not* we're late  
Maybe the question is *what we do* when we *realize* that we're late

On Palm Sunday, I read this scripture as a call to courage  
The relational courage to stay connected  
And the moral courage to stand by those we believe in

We might think it's too late  
That our window has passed  
That it's not worth reaching out or speaking up now

But the gospel writer will tell you that's just not true  
What Joseph of Arimathea did *mattered*  
What Nicodemus did *mattered*  
They stepped up for Jesus in a moment when most of his friends  
where nowhere to be found

>>Palm Sunday faith is not about what we do when everyone else  
is cheering  
It's about what we do when everyone else turns away

So, even if it feels late  
Even if you feel guilty – like you've missed your window  
Trust that it's never too late to stand with people you love  
With those you care about  
It's never too late to stand for what's right

So today – ask God for the courage to speak, to stand, and to  
show up when it matters

Amen.

**By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ**