

“Donkey Fetchers”

Mark 11:1-11

Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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In the season of Lent, we have been following the journey of Jesus toward Jerusalem. He has taught them about the kingdom of God and about humble service, sending them out in pairs to continue what he began. He has challenged corruption and greed by turning over tables in the temple. And three times he has told them that he must go to Jerusalem and die.

The disciples didn't seem to understand. Now, Jesus is entering Jerusalem. As he enters, he is acclaimed as a king, with the word Hosanna which originally meant “Save us” but more generally became an expression of praise.

Listen for God's word.

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹¹ Then Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

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Happy Palm Sunday! We have our palm branches to wave around on this festive day. Some of us are skilled enough to fold them into crosses; I'm not very good at that. Some of us take them home and put them somewhere special.

And some of us like to play with them. I have fond memories of me and my brothers poking each other with our palm branches, and my mother trying to get us to stop. But I know such shenanigans would never happen here at Covenant Presbyterian Church.

Let's take a minute and really think about these palm branches and about Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey. What if we heard these reading in the middle of summer or on some day that wasn't associated with spring and with certain music and with Easter Sunday being just a week away?

Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey wasn't just a fun parade day in suburban Jerusalem, with popcorn and balloons and the local high school marching band. It was a dramatic and risky act.

Many biblical historians argue that this parade of Jesus stands in contrast to the sort of parade that Herod or a great military leader would have had. Such a parade would be a parade of military might, meant to celebrate the established political, military, economic power structure.

Jesus in contrast has a parade on an animal of peace, with people acclaiming him as king.

So this parade of Jesus was a defiant statement in opposition to the established powers of the day. Waving a palm branch was proclaiming your allegiance to Jesus, and not to the powers of the world, the current regime.

So happy Palm Sunday indeed!

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One of the interesting details of the reading is how much attention is paid to the act of finding the donkey, called a colt in Mark's gospel. A majority of the 11 verses focus on the task of fetching the donkey. (By the way, I'm very

grateful to a 2006 article in *The Christian Century* by Tom Long, called “Donkey Fetchers” for the title and some of the inspiration of this sermon.)

Throughout the gospel, Jesus calls people in pairs. After proclaiming what the kingdom of God is, Jesus calls Peter and Andrew, followed by James and John. Later he sends the disciples out in pairs, as we heard last week. And as they are to enter Jerusalem he asks two disciples to get a donkey.

We don’t know the names of these two donkey fetchers. Some biblical scholars suggest that the two were James and John. Just a few verses previously in chapter 10, and perhaps chronologically just a few hours ago, they were asking Jesus to sit at his right hand.

Wouldn’t it be interesting, or “deliciously ironic” as Tom Long says, if these two who had been jockeying for a place of prestige next to Jesus were suddenly called to go to a presumably smelly barn, to borrow a donkey?

But that’s what they were called to do.

And their task, while not prestigious, was a vital part of the day.

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The call of the Christian life is not always prestigious. Sometimes we are called to do the mundane, boring, ugly, dirty, behind the scenes things that no one really wants to do.

Over the years, I’ve gone to soup kitchens, where participants have heard of previous visits, where church folks had having transformative conversations with homeless people, while serving dozens if not hundreds.

But there have been times when we get to the soup kitchen, and all of the popular tasks are taken. And what is really needed is for someone to stock the shelves, or sweep the floor, or clean the bathroom—rather than getting the satisfaction of serving a real live human face to face.

In such situations, I try to explain that the work we are doing is vitally important, even though it may not be personally enriching or what we want to do. Next time that happens, maybe I’ll talk about being a donkey fetcher.

Being a faithful disciple of Jesus means learning to serve, with the needs of others being our primary focus.

So sometimes the faithful Christian thing to do isn't very exciting or glamorous, and plenty of what we're called to do won't look good on a college application or a Facebook post.

We could be called to sit for hours at a bedside with someone who may not know we are there.

Or we could be called be patient and forgiving and courageous in a complex relationship.

Or prepare crafts for a Sunday School class, or to go to long and boring but really important committee meetings.

At work, we might be called to do the stuff that needs to get done, that no one else will do. At school we might be called to reach out to a lonely kid.

We might be called to speak up when it would be easier to keep silent.

We might even be called to let someone else have the last donut on a Sunday morning.

And because of the call of Jesus and our identity as Christians, we sometimes called to be kind when we don't want to be kind, and sometimes we're called to clean up a mess that we didn't make. Let me tell you a story about those callings.

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The car I drove to church today is over ten years old. It runs well, but it looks a little beaten up on the inside, after a few spills and general wear and tear. But when I first got it back in late 2007, it was brand new. I was very excited and proud, and I was determined to take very good care of it, and never let it get dirty.

At that time, I was serving a church outside of Pittsburgh, and one of our new members was an older man named who I will call Bill. He is no longer alive, but I'll never forget him. He lived a couple miles from the church. His wife had

recently died, and Bill was dealing with declining health—physically and mentally. He was delightful and very smart and funny, but he had a hard time with hygiene, and it was challenging to be around him. Let's just say his clothes smelled bad.

He was in church every Sunday, no matter the weather, and what was incredible about this was that he did not own a car, so he walked everywhere, even in the rain and snow.

The people of the church I was serving really took good care of Bill, and there were many people who regularly saw him walking to church and gave him a ride. Sometimes people would take him to the supermarket or the library as well.

You can see where this is going, can't you?

The first week that I had my new car, I was driving back to the church from a meeting. I stopped at Subway to get a sandwich to go. And there's Bill, finishing his lunch.

Keep in mind, at this point, I had driven the car less than 25 miles and no one beside my wife and boys had even been in it. It was spotless and that wonderful new car smell was all around me.

So when I saw Bill, many thoughts went through my head all at once: Maybe he doesn't need a ride. Maybe he won't see me. Maybe I just won't offer to give him a ride. But quickly enough, he saw me and said hello. I said hello and asked if he wanted a ride home, hoping that maybe he had other plans. But with a big smile, he said, "Sure."

So my first official passenger in my dark blue 2008 Honda CRV was a man who was about as close to homeless as you can get. And I remember that it was very cold that day, so we couldn't exactly have the windows wide open.

I look back on that and I can't help but wonder if God put Bill on my path, just to remind me of our call to love one another and to not be afraid of getting a little dirty in the process.

Now it's one thing to do a good deed and brag about it in a sermon. But I want to tell you about some humble servants.

Not long after that car trip, Bill was in church one Sunday morning, sitting in the back of the sanctuary like always. And this sanctuary has hard tile floors, which was fortunate given what happened.

I found out later that day, that Bill had had an accident before worship, and the sanctuary floor was wet. Not a pretty sight or smell.

But thanks be to God, the two early service ushers were there that day, like they were every Sunday, turning on the sound system, getting a cup of water for the worship leaders, greeting people with a smile, and handing out the bulletins.

Apparently, when they heard about the accident, this pair of faithful disciples simply went to work with paper towels, a mop, and some disinfectant, and cleaned up the mess before many people knew about it. They never told me about it, but someone else did, with a bit of disdain for Bill.

Jesus calls us to be part of this new kingdom, with new loyalties, with new priorities, and sometimes with ugly, messy, smelly, unpopular things to do. Thanks be to God that we are called in pairs, and that we journey together.

Let us pray....