

What Parade Are You In?

Philippians 2:5-11 & Matthew 21:1-11
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
April 9, 2017 — Palm Sunday
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Philippians 2:5-11 (NIV)

⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Matthew 21:1-11 (NIV)

¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ⁵ “Say to the Daughter of Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest!”

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” ¹¹ The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Which Parade Are You In?

A pastor was asked to speak at a certain charitable organization. After the meeting the program chairman handed the pastor a check. “Oh, I couldn't take this,” the pastor said with some embarrassment. “I appreciate the honor of being asked to speak. But you have better uses for this money. You apply it to one of those uses.”

The program chairman asked, “Well, do you mind if we put it into our special fund?” The pastor replied, “Of course not. What is the special fund for?” The chairman answered, “It's so we can get a better speaker next year.”

Have you noticed? Life is full of humbling experiences.

A humbler man never lived than Jesus of Nazareth. That is the essence of the Good News for the day. On the one hand, we see that no greater man ever lived than Jesus Christ. He was the very Word of God come down from the Father. He was the Life, the Light, the Truth, the Way! And yet no one ever emptied Himself more completely of pride and arrogance than did Jesus Christ.

Consider the donkey on which He rode into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. You or I would have chosen a handsome stallion on which to ride into the city. After all, we are careful about the kind of car we drive, are we not? The world will not respect an old beat-up Chevrolet like it will a new BMW or a Mercedes. At least, that is what we tell ourselves. In comparison to a fancy car, Jesus chose a battered up 1957 Rambler to drive into Jerusalem. That is how I like to imagine that lowly donkey. Certainly that humble beast was not a symbol of pride and prestige.

Jesus' entrance into the Holy City was consistent with everything He lived and taught. Remember how offended Simon Peter was when Jesus sought to wash his feet? That was a job for a servant, a slave even — not for a distinguished rabbi. The idea that greatness is related to servanthood was a principle that Jesus' disciples had a difficult time grasping.

The washing of the disciples' feet took place at the Last Supper. Luke tells us that on the way to that sacred meal the disciples had been arguing over which of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom.

The disciples thought of greatness in terms of worldly success. To achieve success was to have others serve you. They were not prepared, then, to handle Jesus' teaching that "whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10: 44-45)." That was a radical teaching for them, and it is a radical teaching for many of us. Yet there is an important truth here for our lives.

Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week.

IT IS INTERESTING TO WATCH THE STRONG SON OF GOD ACKNOWLEDGE HIS DEPENDENCE ON GOD THE FATHER DURING THOSE FINAL HOURS.

In the garden Jesus prays, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me..." On the cross, at the height of His despair, Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

You and I have prayed that prayer even when we knew that God had not forsaken us. "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit!" Jesus prayed at the end. My friends, if Jesus found it necessary to utterly and completely depend on God, how can you and I live our lives without depending on God as well?

I read somewhere that ninety-seven percent of all people offered a new pen to try, write their own name. Now that is understandable. After all, the only time many of us use a pen anymore is when we sign our names. Nevertheless, such a statistic does seem symbolic.

It is very difficult for many of us to see beyond our own needs and our own circumstances. It is so essential this morning that we see that humble Galilean riding into Jerusalem on that donkey. His concern was not for His welfare, but for ours.

In the Nicene Creed Christians affirm that Jesus was “very God of very God.” Yet here He was humbling Himself to be sacrificed like a farm animal on the cross of Calvary. Indeed, Jesus is referred to in the book of Revelation as “the Lamb that was slain (5:12).” No crown — no throne — no comfortable palace — Jesus gave it all up for sinful humanity. This has always endeared Jesus to people at the bottom of society.

John W. Gardner, in his book, *Excellence*, includes a letter by Sarah Gooder, a young girl working in the coal mines of England in 1842. Here is what Sarah wrote:

“I am Sarah Gooder, I am eight years old. I’m a coal carrier in the Gawber Mine. It does not tire me, but I have to [work] without a light and I’m scared. I go at four, and sometimes half past three in the morning, and come out at five and half past in the evening. I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when I’ve light, but not in the dark; I dare not sing then. I don’t like being in the [coal] pit. I am very sleepy when I go in in the morning. I go to Sunday school and learn to read. They teach me to pray. I have heard tell of Jesus many a time. I don’t know why He came on earth. I don’t know why He died, but He had stones for His head to rest on.”

And yes, that is how people in civilized England lived around the time of our Civil War — an eight year old girl working 14 hours a day in a coal mine.

Did you notice what impressed Sarah Gooder about Jesus, though? “He had stones for His head to rest on.” No soft pillow in a luxurious mansion for Jesus. He cared enough to come down to where Sarah was! Do you have that much greatness within you — to see the needs of the least and the lowly? Or are you one of these petty, little people who can see only his or her own needs?

HUMILITY IS THE KEY TO GREATNESS.

That is an important thing for us to see. Servanthood is the path to true success. Some of the greatest people who ever lived have viewed themselves as servants, and they have blessed our world.

There was an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer sometime back about a 14-year old Jewish girl at the end of World War II who was discovered lost, alone, and barely alive lying on the platform of an abandoned railroad station. It was the day the Russian army liberated the Nazi controlled labor camp where she was held captive.

Though she was free, she was half-starved and too exhausted to pick herself up off the ground. She thought she would die there. But then a young priest came beside her. He offered her tea, two slices of bread, and some cheese.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked her. “Krakow,” she managed to reply. “I’m going there too,” he said. “Let me help you up.” He tried to lift Edith to her feet, but she collapsed. So he picked her up and literally carried her two miles to the train to Krakow.

“What is your name?” he asked. “Edith Zierer,” she replied. “My name is Karol,” replied her rescuer. When they arrived at Krakow, they were separated and they never saw each other again — until the year 2000.

In Jerusalem, at the Holocaust memorial, Edith Zierer, with tears in her eyes, clasped the hands of a Polish priest named Karol, whom the world grew to know as Pope John Paul II. The Pope had performed that quiet act of service of lifting up and carrying this poor Holocaust survivor and had forgotten it. But Edith had not. Before the whole world she declared, “He came like an angel out of nowhere and gave me life. He saved me. There’s no other word for it. It’s thanks to him I’m here today.” Then Edith Zierer quoted a verse from the Talmud which says, “To save one life is to save the world.”

Sometimes when we think of the pope we associate him with the pomp and circumstance of his lofty office. We forget that many of the modern popes, including the current one, have had the heart of a servant. All greatness grows out humility and service.

Dr. Ken Carter tells a story that comes to us from the Russian Jewish tradition. It is about a rabbi in a small village who vanished for several hours every Friday morning. The villagers bragged that during these hours their rabbi ascended to Heaven to converse with God.

A skeptical newcomer arrived in town. He had trouble believing that the rabbi ascended each Friday to converse with God. He determined to uncover where the rabbi really was during these hours.

On Friday morning, the newcomer hid near the rabbi’s house and watched him. He saw the rabbi say his prayers and then clothe himself as a peasant. Next, he saw the rabbi take an ax and go into the forest. The newcomer watched as the rabbi chopped down a tree and gathered a bundle of wood. Next he saw the rabbi proceed to the poorest section of the village, in which lived an old woman and her sick son. He watched as the rabbi deposited the wood, which was enough for a week, at the old woman’s door and then quietly returned to his home.

The story concludes with the newcomer staying in the village to become a disciple of the rabbi. And the story ends like this: whenever he hears one of his fellow villagers say, “On Friday morning our rabbi ascends all the way to heaven,” the newcomer quietly adds, “if not higher.”

Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Part of this was undoubtedly to fulfill an ancient prophecy. When Solomon was anointed king, he rode into the city on a mule, to the shouts and praises of the people. We find that in 1 Kings 1:43-45. Zechariah prophesied that the Messiah would arrive the same way “gentle and riding on a donkey (Zech. 9:9).” Jesus knew about this prophecy when He chose a donkey for His ride.

But this act was also completely in Jesus’ character. “He humbled Himself,” writes St. Paul “and became obedient unto death — even death on a cross.” We find that in Philippians 2:8.

You see, according to theologian Marcus Borg, there were two parades in Jerusalem that Palm Sunday. We see Jesus riding on a small donkey, accompanied by His followers coming from the north into Jerusalem. But that parade wasn’t the largest or most spectacular parade in town during that particular Passover season. Also entering Jerusalem at Passover, from the west, was the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

Like the Roman governors of Judea before him, Pontius Pilate lived in Caesarea by the sea. In other words, Pilate spent most of his time at his beach house. But with crowds of devout Jews flowing into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, Pilate put on a display of force. After all, Passover commemorates the Jews’ deliverance from the rule of Pharaoh. Pilate didn’t want them to get any ideas about a similar liberation from Rome.

When Pilate entered Jerusalem with his army, his aim was to prevent any possibility of violent rebellion against Roman rule. No one likes the foot of a foreign power on their necks and, to make matters worse, Rome imposed high taxes on subject nations. So there was always the threat that zealots would stir up the Jewish population to try to throw off the yoke of Rome.

The Roman army that accompanied Pilate included, “cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold.”

There was also the sound of “marching feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums.” All this would have had a sobering effect on those who saw this parade.

No one shouted “Hosanna!” as Pilate rode his imposing war horse into Jerusalem leading a regiment of his most trusted soldiers, hoping to strike fear into the resentful onlookers. And if things did get out of hand, Pilate had several battalions of Rome’s finest garrisoned on the west side of Jerusalem ready to flood into the city to crush any hint of rebellion.

So, there was Pilate — willing, without exception, to take the life of anyone who dared question his authority, and there was Jesus — willing, without exception, to lay down His life for the least and lowest.

No contrast could be starker. And we are left to choose. Will we go with Pilate the merciless who would crush others to gain his own way — or will we go with Jesus, who mercifully lay down His life

for others, including us? It is a choice we make more often than we think in the way we treat those we come into contact with each day.

I hope we will choose Jesus. I hope that we will choose Him by opening our own hearts and praying, “O God, give me the ability to love others as much as Christ loved me. Help me to live a life of service as Jesus lived a life of humble service even though He was Lord of all creation. Help me to make whatever changes that you would have take place in my life that I may also be a man or woman committed to the service of others.” Amen.

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