

Palm Sunday - April 14, 2019

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-24

Zechariah 9:9-10

Luke 19: 28-40

Sometimes We Get It Right



"King of Kings" by Craig Mullins

On the outskirts of Jerusalem the donkey waited,
Not especially brave or filled with understanding.
He stood and waited.

How horses turned out into the meadow, leap with delight!
How doves released from their cages clatter away splashed with sunlight.
But the donkey tied to a tree as usual waited.

Then he let himself be lead away.

Then he let the stranger mount.

Never has he seen such crowds!

And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.

Still, he was what he had always been: small, obedient.

I hope, finally, he felt brave.

I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,
as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.

"The Poet Thinks about the Donkey" by Mary Oliver

A reading from Luke's gospel, chapter 19.

When Jesus had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.

As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

*"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"*

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray:

Come by here, Lord Jesus. Teach us with this word and lead us, King Jesus, that we may be forever yours. Amen.

You don't have to read very far into the New Testament to discover that Jesus' first disciples were sometimes blockheads, bumblers, and dolts. The Twelve weren't great at following orders. They argued when he told them to hush. When he asked them to stay awake they fell asleep. They panicked when he said, "Be still." They were constantly missing clues, misunderstanding meanings, needing to hear the instructions over and over and over again -- until today, the first Palm Sunday. On this day, they got it right! They followed orders precisely.

He told them:

Go into the village ... you will find a colt tied there. ... Untie it and bring it here.

He sent two of them, but which two? Luke doesn't say, but I like to think it was James and John, the bombast brothers. "Sons of Thunder" they were called. They had just been arguing on the road about who was the greatest, and insisting that Jesus allow them to sit, one on his right and one on his left when he assumed the throne of glory.

And Jesus probably thought:

Now, let me see, which of you should go and get the donkey?

Whoever it was, I'm certain that every one of the disciples imagined himself doing something more important and glamorous that day, the day the Savior of the World victoriously rode into the Holy City, something more glorious than mucking around in a stable, looking suspiciously like horse thieves, trying to wrestle an untamed animal toward the olive groves. For this they'd left their fishing business?ⁱ

It was not what they'd expected, but it was what they did. On that all-important day they didn't argue; they didn't answer back. They simply followed orders. They responded to his word. Because they did, they received a gift of immeasurable value -- the opportunity to play a key role in this holy plan, the chance to serve Jesus, to minister to him during the most important week in human history -- a week that would culminate with the salvation of the world.

Palm Sunday is the day when obedience won and when trust conquered fear and ego.

Sometimes they got it right! I know; Jesus' disciples were often clueless, sometimes rebellious, bullheaded and dopey, but on this day they got it right.

They carried out his orders; they were obedient. Obedience has always been tough for our people. The Presbyterians have always been free thinkers. We have been challenging authority since our very beginning. King George III more than once referred to the American Revolution as "that Presbyterian Rebellion." But we need to understand and practice obedience. The Scots theologian P.T. Forsyth was right when he said, "The first duty of every soul is to find, not its freedom, but its Master."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus said, *if you love me you will keep my commandments.*ⁱⁱⁱ There's really no reason to make it more complicated than that.

A few years ago, on a trip to Dallas, some of my clergy colleagues and I shared a remarkable dinner. Our host that night was football great, Roger Staubach. He took one look at my nametag and asked if I'd sit with him at dinner. I was terrified. As you know, Mr. Staubach quarterbacked for Navy and won the Heisman for it in 1963. I assumed he wanted to talk about Navy football, which I follow, but not well enough to talk to Roger Staubach about it!

I needn't have worried. He didn't want to talk about football. He wanted to hear about this community that he remembers with love and gratitude. He wanted to talk about faith and the church. Roger and his wife are practicing Catholics. We had a good talk about the similarities and the differences. I said something about Catholics being better at obedience...that the Presbyterians tend to push back on everything, question everything.

He said something I'll never forget. He said:

"When we (talking about the Cowboys) went to the Super Bowl in '71, I wasn't calling my own signals. Coach Landry sent in every play. He told me when to pass, when to run. Only in an emergency was I allowed to change the play, and I'd better be right about it. Landry was a genius at the game, but it was still hard for me; I wanted to run my own team."

He continued:

"But once I learned to listen and trust my Coach, it all came together. Victory."

That's a good word. When Jesus told his disciples to "go get the donkey," he didn't spend any time explaining why. He just said, "Go," and they went. There's a long history of that kind of

trust among the people of God. “Go” is one of God’s favorite words, all the way back to the beginning when God told Abraham and Sarah, *Go from your ... home and your people to the place that I will show you. ...So Abram went.*^{iv} Abraham and Sarah got it right, that time at least, they listened to the voice of the Master.

When God told Jonah to “Get up and go to Nineveh,”^v the little prophet caught the next boat going the other way. There was a whale and some other things that happened, but eventually, even Jonah got it right.

On the first Palm Sunday Jesus’ disciples got it right. They brought the colt; they threw their coats on it and Jesus sat on it, kind of a “poor man’s saddle” someone has called it. It was that, but more than that. In ancient Palestine people didn’t usually own more than one coat. Remember way back in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said, *if you have two coats give one to someone who has none.*^{vi} If...only wealthy people had more than one.

These weren’t fitted coats but large, dyed, pieces of fabric they used every day to shield their bodies against the sun and the cold of desert nights. That same cloak was a picnic blanket for traveling, and protection against sandstorms. That coat was most people’s prize possession, and they spread them on the ground for Jesus to walk over.

That wasn’t a Sir Walter Raleigh moment, but an act of pure devotion. Like Mary, who poured out her precious oil on Jesus’ feet, these disciples gave Jesus the very best they had. They laid it all down for Jesus’ sake, in the same way that he was about to lay it all down for them.

Sure, there are a lot of times when Jesus’ first followers got it wrong, but on Palm Sunday they got it right.

I don’t know if you noticed when I was reading the gospel, but in Luke’s version there are no hosannas, no palms and no tree branches waving. We learn about those from the other gospels. What Luke describes is worship that’s spontaneous and real. *The whole multitude of the disciples praising God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power they had seen.* How often have you been part of something like that? It’s what your worship leaders try to make possible every Sunday, but we can’t worship God for you. You have to do that for yourself. If you come here looking to get something out of it, rather than giving something to it, you may be disappointed.

Neil Marten, a British Member of Parliament, was once leading a tour of the Houses of Parliament for some of his constituents. True story. They were moving through the iconic building when the Lord Hailsham, at that time the Lord Chancellor, passed through the hall wearing his spectacular gold and black regalia. The Lord Chancellor recognized MP Marten and called out “Neil!” The group of about two dozen visitors dropped immediately to their knees.

It’s easy to get it wrong, to worship the wrong things. That happens all the time. We worship our sports teams. We turn our kids into idols. We bend the knee to whatever we think will help them get ahead. We often place wealth and position above justice and mercy. We hallow our national and personal security, cherish guns and our right to own them, and our cars and the freedom they provide us. We revere celebrities and venerate politicians. We prioritize recreation and hobbies, and place them above our commitment to God. Let’s be honest. We get a lot of things wrong a lot of the time. Not all the time, but often. Today, in this holy moment, at the beginning of this holy week we need to get it right.

Before you start calling and writing to me saying, “Preacher, you’re being too hard on us.” Try these simple tests, and I will too. Think of the thing that is your passion. Something you love... since the Masters is today, say it’s golf, or some other sport, or music, books, boating. These are all good things, very good.

Give your thing the Time and Attention Test. How much time, devotion and unquestioned loyalty do you give to this particular thing? Is it more or less than you give to God?

Take the Loyalty Test. Compare your Loyalty to God to Other Loyalties. What commitment is first in your life? Look at the intensity of your attention to see what comes out on top. What’s first? Second? Third? There’s a reason why the first of the 10 Commandments is, *I am the Lord, your God...you shall have no other gods before me.* The Creator designed it all to be: God...others...self. That’s the only order that works.

Finally, use the Ethical Effects Test. Ask yourself, does my thing make me more Christ-like, more compassionate, merciful, truthful, generous and kind? ^{vii} If it does, then you are getting it right. If it doesn’t, then whatever “it” is could be a false idol.

The question of allegiance is urgent for every individual and family. And it is particularly crucial for the church. There are too many times when the church has simply gotten it wrong, devastatingly wrong -- from the Crusades and the Inquisition to protecting sexual predators, from the unholy treatment of scientists like Galileo, the support of slavery and segregation, and the historic exclusion of LGBTQ people and women from full participation in church. There’s a long list of flub-ups, missteps and dumb decisions.

Looking back, every single time the church got it wrong, there is one reason, one reason, and one reason only. It happened because a flawed and imperfect church was worshiping some idol, something other than God. Sometimes it was money, usually it was power, security, popularity, tradition, bibliolatry (There’s a SAT word for you! It means worshiping the bible instead of the God of the bible.) Every single time, with every misstep, the church was about putting something else in the place of God.

Pastor and author Brian McLaren published an article on New Year’s Day of this year. He said, “The most important thing that the church can do in the New Year is just three words: “We were wrong.”

The spiritual value of Lent is taking a good, hard look in the mirror. Ours is the God of mercy and of grace. Jesus never expected his disciples to get it right all the time, and there have been some times when the church got it awfully wrong.

Thankfully, on the first Palm Sunday the church got it right. Nancy Taylor is senior pastor of Old South Church in Boston. She thinks that we might be wrong to call Pentecost the birthday of the church. Maybe, she said, the beginning of the church wasn’t the day the Holy Spirit came upon the believers with wind and fire; maybe the church’s true beginning was on Palm Sunday, the day that the followers of Jesus grew up, found their voices, summoned the courage to assume their role as witnesses to God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. ^{viii}

That’s what we’re doing here today, at least what we’re trying to do. We’re praising God as they did, worshipping God as they did, pledging our first allegiance in obedience to Christ, as they did.

He is our Savior and Lord. There's a lot of competition for that allegiance and we don't always get it right. Maybe you've had a rough week; a lot of things went wrong. You made some mistakes, took some missteps. Maybe you've denied him once or twice. But you're here now and so am I, and we're going to continue to be here, or somewhere, praising God, forever. For this one brief shining moment, we're here, we got it right! And I'll bet it's not the only time.

Jim Summerville, a pastor in Richmond asked:

“Have you recognized Jesus for who he really is, even for a moment?
Have you fallen in line behind him and followed him even for a few steps?
Have you done exactly as he commanded, even once?
Have you ever spoken or sung or even shouted his praise?
Have you told one other person what he means to you?”

If you have, congratulations! On that day, in that moment you got it right! ^{ix}

Lord knows we don't always get it right, but someday, sometimes, we do. ^x

ⁱ Thomas G. Long, “Donkey Fetchers” *Christian Century*, April 4, 2001, 18

ⁱⁱ Goodreads.com

ⁱⁱⁱ John 14:15

^{iv} Genesis 12:1,4

^v Jonah 1:2

^{vi} Luke 3:11

^{vii} “The Top 7 Idols in America” *Churchplants.com*

^{viii} Nancy Taylor, “Players and Protagonists in the Kingdom of God” *Day1 radio broadcast*, first aired, March 20, 2016

^{ix} Jim Summerville, *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, March 11, 2016

^x *ibid*