

Palm Sunday
“The Lord Has Need of You!”
Matthew 21:1-11

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Since 1886, Lower Broadway in New York City has hosted 208 confetti-filled ticker tape parades down what has been called “the Canyon of Heroes”- an honor usually reserved for athletes and politicians, astronauts and war heroes for their extraordinary accomplishments. On Oct. 22nd, 1931, Pierre Laval, the Prime Minister of France, was heralded with one for his efforts to end the Great Depression. Two months later, he would ALSO add *Time Magazine’s* “Man of the Year” award to his resume. Four days after Laval’s parade, ANOTHER Frenchman was given HIS own. Henri-Philippe Pétain, known as the “Lion of Verdun,” was the great general credited with saving France during the darkest moments of World War I.

And yet such honors and accolades can be so fleeting- here one day and then gone the next. Fourteen years after having been hailed as their country’s saviors down the center of New York’s famous Great White Way, the names of BOTH men would become by-words for infamy, synonymous with traitors and war criminals. During World War II, Pétain was appointed the head of Vichy France, the puppet state the Nazis set up after the fall of France in June 1940, while Laval, as Vichy Prime Minister, was responsible for helping to send tens of thousands of Jews in France off to Nazi labor and death camps. At the war’s conclusion, Pétain was sentenced to life in prison while Laval was executed before a firing squad. Thus, one minute, they’re feted with glory and awarded the highest of honors, and the NEXT, one receives life in prison while the other is sent to his death.

Well, the Gospels share a story that closely parallels this one. Nineteen hundred years earlier, Jesus of Nazareth was given his OWN ticker tape parade as he entered Jerusalem on the back of a small ass during the Jewish celebration of Passover. A great multitude had lined the street with shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel." They waved palm branches--an honor reserved for triumphant leaders--and many even laid their cloaks on the ground before him. But where he’d been welcomed into the City of David in great triumph, within a few days’ time he’d be hauling a cross down that very SAME avenue while on route to his OWN execution. The crowds who had shouted, "Hosanna!" at the beginning of the week would be the SAME ones screaming "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" by that week’s end. The poet Edwin McNeill Potteat captured the fickleness of the crowds in a poem he entitled “Palm Sunday and Monday”:

*They pluck their palm branches and hail him as King,
Early on Sunday;
They spread out their garments; hosannas they sing,
Early on Sunday.*

*But where is the noise of their hurrying feet,
The crown they would offer, the scepter, the seat?
Their King wanders hungry, forgot in the street,
Early on Monday.*

This morning I want to focus, not on his journey into Jerusalem, but rather on a seemingly minor event that occurred just PRIOR to it, when Jesus secured his transport for the occasion. To prepare for it, he sent a couple of his disciples into a nearby town to procure a donkey on which he would ride. All four gospels record the same account of our Lord's entrance into Jerusalem on an ass but only Matthew and John connect it to Zechariah, the Old Testament prophet, who prophesies that their king would come, not as a mighty warrior triumphant in battle, but as a humble and peaceful monarch. Although Matthew suggests that they are to return with TWO animals, the Hebrew quote from Zechariah actually indicates that there is only ONE animal with Matthew's reference to two asses as probably a mistranslation of the original text.

Matthew tells us that Jesus ordered his disciples to "go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and he will send them immediately." Many commentators assume that Jesus had made prior plans with the animal's owner, that a rental agreement had already been set up so that all they had to do was simply go to where the beast was kept, untie it, and then bring it back to Jesus; it would be ready and waiting for them. I speculate, however, that the owner, whom we never meet, was probably an interested follower of Jesus- not a member of his intimate circle but someone curious enough to have attended some of Jesus's seminars and perhaps even witnessed a miracle or two. Something about Christ had so fascinated him that he could not help but come back for more.

And WHY is this significant? Because if the owner had actually been one of Jesus's followers instead of merely the proprietor of a Hertz Rent-A-Mule business, then we can assume that the animal was freely offered up to Jesus to use as he saw fit. It would suggest that his trust in Christ was such that he was willing to make available to him ANYTHING and EVERYTHING he owned- it was ALL at his disposal so all he had to do was ask. If Jesus needed it, it would be his. Of course, this would have been no MINOR gesture on the owner's part. In an agrarian society like ancient Israel, the offer of the use of his ass was really the equivalent of offering him his lone means of transportation- his personal car, or sole piece of farm equipment- his John Deere tractor, so to speak. This ass was no family pet but rather an important and expensive piece of farm equipment upon which his livelihood and the basic subsistence of his family was based. If anything happened to it, he and his family could face ruin. And yet, because JESUS was the one requesting it, he felt NOTHING could be too important for him. If the Lord had need of it, it would be HIS for the asking.

Isn't this how Christ expects ALL of his disciples to live- to be willing and able with open, generous hearts to say, "Lord, here I am, use me. HERE'S my money, HERE'S my tools, HERE'S my car, HERE'S my home. Whatever I have, whatever I AM- it is yours to use as you see fit and for the glory of your kingdom." It is to know that when Christ "calls" us, we are then to be "ON CALL" for whatever need it is he might send our way, whether it is preparing a meal for a shut-in, taking a neighbor shopping or to the doctors, visiting someone in jail, or extending assistance to some homeless person. When I was getting ready to move from Upstate New York to Iowa in America's heartland, Rose and I had dinner with the former Dean of Syracuse University and his wife, two very dear friends of ours. Before we left, he personally took me aside and said, "David, I know that moving is a very expensive business and you might need some extra money. You just tell me how much you need—I don't care how much it is—and it will be yours." I declined the offer, but every time I think of Alex and Margaret, two of the finest Christians I know, I develop a special lump in my throat because of the generosity of their heart, the greatness of their love.

While pastoring in Iowa, Rose and I needed to travel to Tampa, Florida to help move our son Michael back to Waterloo while he awaited induction into the Navy. One of the members of the church came to me and offered us the use of his brand new truck for the move. Again, I refused the overture, but you have no idea how much that meant to us for what was REALLY being offered was not so much a truck but their kindness and their love. Things like that can NEVER be forgotten. Throughout the years, I've seen such generosity and openness demonstrated over and over again in every church I've ever ministered at and I have no doubt that it is because of the presence of Jesus Christ in that place and in their hearts. I'm convinced more than ever that the ESSENCE of Christianity lies not in her doctrines or her creeds, not in her traditions or in all her sacraments and rituals. The most ESSENTIAL characteristic of our faith is to be found in the way we extend Christ's love to one another especially in our generosity towards others in need. The world will only know we are Christians "by our love" as the old hymn goes, and in no other way.

This is why "hospitality" is so paramount in the life of God's people. Here in America, we tend to associate hospitality as a form of etiquette, as showing respect for one's guests by providing for their needs when they come to visit. However, among Middle Eastern nations, it has always been regarded as a duty of the HIGHEST importance. It means going so far as to protect and provide shelter for persons in need, even if they are complete strangers. This is clearly reflected in the Mosaic Law where one was mandated to treat the stranger who resided among them as one of their own, and that they were to love him or her as much as they did themselves. This is reaffirmed in the New Testament when it says in Hebrews, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Jesus told a parable in which the person who offered food or drink or clothing to those experiencing lack or need did as much unto Christ himself. In Peter's Epistle, the church is exhorted to show hospitality to one another without grumbling while Paul told the Romans that they were to "contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." A free and open and generous heart is thus the greatest proof of the love of God in one's life, while a small and truncated heart is the clearest evidence of God's ABSENCE. A selfish, ungrateful heart is the real bane of the Kingdom of God and an embarrassment to CHRIST HIMSELF in whose name we are called to act and serve others.

You might remember the story of Zacchaeus, a corrupt and despised tax-collector whose entire fortune was built upon defrauding his own people, the Jews. Well, when Luke tells us he was a small man, he was saying that he wasn't merely short in stature. He was saying that he was emotionally, morally, and spiritually stunted as well. He was small in love, small in pity, small in compassion, and that's the worst disease that can afflict someone. His entire universe revolved around himself and his money before anyone else. That's the REAL definition of a "small" and "narrow" person.

Well, when he heard that Jesus was passing through town, his curiosity got the best of him so that he decided to take time off from collecting money to see if he could catch a glimpse of him. However, because he was so short, he could not see over the crowds in front that lined the street. So, he climbed a tree in the hope of catching a better view of him. But before he could see Jesus, we learn that Jesus saw him FIRST and the next thing you know, the two men were breaking bread together at his home that very same evening. After that fateful encounter, Zacchaeus was never again the same. Like an early-day Ebenezer Scrooge, he gave half of everything he owned to the poor and reimbursed everyone he had defrauded FOUR-FOLD. Once again, we see that you can't have an encounter with Christ and NOT be changed for the

better, NOT have your heart and your sympathies expanded and enlarged. Jesus will ALWAYS have that kind of effect on you, especially when you least expect it.

William Willimon, the Methodist bishop from Alabama who for years served as chaplain to Duke University, told a story some years ago that powerfully sums up for me what I believe is the church's primary duty. He said it took place in a former church of his during their Sunday morning worship service. Everything was humming along smoothly. The music was sung with gusto, the prayers prayed with great solemnity, and the sermon hit all the right notes. Following his sermon, he segued into joys and concerns and asked if any members had anything to share. Someone stood up to say that a parent had just gotten home from the hospital and was expected to make a full recovery and this was followed by a young girl who wanted to share how she and her high school band had gone on to win an important music competition the day before. And there were also the usual requests for prayer- a member was going in for a biopsy that week while another asked for the church to keep him in prayer as he went for a job interview. Willimon said as the service wound down, he was already congratulating himself for getting through another successful Sunday church service.

Before launching into the pastoral prayer, he figured he'd make one last request to see if there was anything else someone might have to share. At that, one of the members of the church, a woman of around thirty, hesitantly rose from among the pews and with stammering lips said, "Yes, I do. My husband left me this week and I don't know how I'm going to pay the bills or get my children to and from school." Tears welled up in her eyes and the desperation was evident to everyone. Willimon said in that instant that it was the LAST thing in the world he wanted to hear and he couldn't help thinking to himself, "How dare you spoil a perfectly good church service with something like that." But more than the inconvenience that such a problem created for him, he found himself becoming increasingly paralyzed by the thought that he didn't really know what to say or do about the matter. Should he stop everything to pray for her right then and there? Should he tell her that he'd speak to her after the service? What could he realistically do for her? He wasn't quite sure.

But then something happened to once again affirm that you can never underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the church. Almost immediately, one of the members stood to her feet and said, "Janey, you tell me how much you need and I'll make sure there'll be enough money to help you through this. Don't you worry about finances." Another member stood up and said, "I'll come by the house tomorrow morning and take the kids to school when I take my own. I'll also bring them home when school's over for you. They're going to be OK." Another person stood up and said, "Jane, if you need any babysitting, you let me know and I'll be right over. Your time is my time." Still another rose to invite her and the children over for dinner after church and then she would take her grocery shopping afterwards."

Willimon said he stood there with his mouth open- just incredulous at the loving response made for this woman by her church family in a moment of real crisis. He felt inner shame for those selfish thoughts that had momentarily passed through his mind but the guilt was soon dispelled by what was taking place before him- the amazing realization that he had just witnessed the church actually BE the church before his very own eyes. Church wasn't simply a group of Christians gathering for an hour to sing a few hymns, pray a few prayers, and listen to a sermon. NO, it was the Body of Christ in Christian love responding to an immediate need at the very moment it presented itself. It was the members of that congregation essentially saying as

one, “We are going to do right now what Jesus Christ would have us to do and we will do it as though we were ministering unto the Lord himself. We are going to make ourselves available to him to be used as the situation calls for because that’s what being a Christian is all about.”

My friends, Jesus was no stranger to need and want. He was SO poor, he had to borrow EVERYTHING. He literally owned nothing more than the simple “clothes on his back” and even THOSE were eventually taken from him. He came into this world in a borrowed crib. He once had to borrow a boat from a fisherman to preach from. He had to borrow loaves and fishes from a boy to feed the multitude. He had to borrow the use of the Upper Room in which to conduct his last supper with his disciples. And after he was put to death, his body was laid in a borrowed tomb. Now, he has to borrow an ass on which to enter Jerusalem with. Because he owned NOTHING, EVERYTHING had to be a gift for him and for those who knew him, it was sufficient for them to hear, “The Lord has need of it.”

BECAUSE Jesus was in need of all things and therefore forced to borrow from others to accomplish what he had to, he found himself in need of other people. The truth was that he needed THEM just as much as they needed HIM that he might fulfill his work and reveal his Kingdom. He needed their arms and he needed their legs; he needed their minds, their hearts, and whatever resources they may have had. He needed their time, their tools, their money; he needed their EVERYTHING! He required that EVERYTHING be surrendered to him if they TRULY were going to be his faithful followers. There was no other way.

Well just as Christ needed the Early Church, so does he need US this morning to help accomplish his will. Thus, the question before us ALL this morning is THIS: Are we available for whatever it is Christ may need from US? The Bible says that the Lord loves a cheerful giver and there can be no greater privilege, for to minister to another in Christ’s name is to minister directly to JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF. Can you imagine the amazement experienced by the young boy who surrendered his lunch to Jesus so he could feed the 5,000? That had to have been the proudest moment of his life and I bet that fifty years afterwards, he was STILL sharing that story with whoever wanted to hear it. Or how about Joseph of Arimathea whose tomb Jesus’s body was placed in? What humility HE must have felt at the knowledge that it was from HIS tomb that Jesus would eventually emerge resurrected, the victor over sin and death. Or how about the nameless owner of this ass? Though it may seem like his contribution to the Passion Story was small and inconsequential, WITHOUT his colt, there quite possibly might never have even BEEN a procession into Jerusalem and thus no Palm Sunday for us to celebrate each year. For their seemingly small and simple gestures, the church has heralded these persons through countless sermons and Bible Studies for the past two thousand years and they will CONTINUE to be remembered in ages to come. Believe me, there is no such thing as an act of love and generosity EVER being too small or too inconsequential for WHATEVER we offer--so long as it is done CHEERFULLY and QUICKLY and SELFLESSLY, remembering that it is for GOD’S glory and not ourselves—then it TOO will become great in God’s eyes. Let us pray...

Gracious God, may your processional march through Jerusalem and straight into our hearts this very morning. Ride straight into the ruined places, the broken places, the places where we are empty and afraid. And as you come, help us to do more than wave palm branches and lay down our cloaks, but may we lay down our hearts and our lives, everything we are as well as everything we own, that they may all be used for your glory. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.