

## **“WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?”**

Mark 11:1-11, 14:3-9

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Monday morning I started thinking about Sunday's sermon. I know that it's Palm Sunday, so I don't have to double check the scripture. I've preached on this story a few times over the years, so I'm a little worried that I won't have something new to say. And I'm a little more worried because I'm thinking that I'll have to step away from the series we've been preaching in Lent, stories related to Jesus' journey to the cross, stories with a question. I'm assuming there's no question in this story because, well, I've always talked about the triumphal entry, the celebration, the lifting up of Jesus as King or I talk about the contrast between the enthusiasm of this day and deep sorrow of Good Friday.

Well, it was quite a pleasant surprise when reading the text to discover that there *is* a question here. Jesus sends his disciples into town to get the donkey and he tells them that people are going to ask them, "Why are you doing this?" Now isn't that just the perfect question to end our Lenten reflections? Why are we doing all this?

So there I am congratulating myself because I've never gone at this story from this perspective and I've never heard of anyone else emphasizing this question. Nice. Creative. Original idea.

A few minutes later, I'm browsing through emails when I come across one from Presbyterian Outlook. Jill Duffield does a weekly reflection on the lectionary text for the next week which I never look at because we don't usually choose our texts from the lectionary. But it's Palm Sunday and this story just so happens to be assigned for this day, so I figure I'll take a peek. Maybe it'll have something I can use. So I open the article and there is my sermon, title and all. It's not the first time I've read an article and thought: "That's just what I want to say." But it is the first time someone stole my title.

Well, I have to admit that it's a pretty good article and worth the trouble to look it up. She does a fabulous job of linking the Palm Sunday processional with the many marches taking place today.

But it's a big question and there's room in it for another sermon. "Why are you doing this?" In the context of the story, Jesus provides the answer his disciples are supposed to give. "The Lord has need of this." It's all a bit odd if you think about it.

So Jesus sends his disciples to fetch this colt which we must assume doesn't belong to him. He anticipates that some kind of objection will be made probably because it will appear to others that they are stealing it. And their justification is to be that Jesus needs it.

It makes me think of two children playing with blocks, each building their own tower. A fight erupts when both children lay claim to the same block. When the adult removes the block, both children scream, "But I need it."

Well, no drama occurs. Either the owner is satisfied with the disciples' assurance that the colt will be returned promptly or is perhaps a follower of Jesus as well. Why are you doing this? The Lord has need.

The disciples are of course happy to comply with the request. Perhaps they're familiar with the scriptures that speak of the messiah riding into Jerusalem on a colt. This little parade with the adoring crowd is the prelude to a coronation. The city has come on tough times, occupied by the Romans, ruled by Roman puppets, heavily taxed, religious leaders accommodating their oppressors. It's time for the king to release them.

It's clear why the disciples are doing this, why they're pumping up the crowd, stirring things up. One step away from victory, from reversing their fortunes, from powerlessness to positions of power. They've been excited about this journey to Jerusalem and now the day is here! "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Centuries later, we feel the excitement too. We've been walking to Jerusalem right along with the disciples. We heard Peter declare that Jesus was the Messiah and have been pondering what that means, thinking perhaps that Jesus means to do something for us and wondering what he could have meant when he asked, "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world while losing life?" We've wondered about the cup that Jesus will drink and whether we are able to drink it as well. We've declared along with Bartimaeus that we want to see.

It's easy to see why we do this. Who doesn't like a good parade? Caught up in the excitement of the crowd, we look forward to a better future. In this respect, the colt represents the culmination of a huge misunderstanding. Or should I say we misunderstand the humble nature of the colt. Now a real king would enter the gates on a grand stallion, in fancy dress, the gold shimmering, and followed by an imposing army. But the messiah comes in humble attire, one of the people, who the crowd believes will soon rise to power.

And yet Jesus has been very clear, that new life comes through death. "Don't you know that I must go to Jerusalem? Don't you know that I must suffer? Don't you know that I must die? Before I rise again?"

Before Easter comes death and death is the end of our Lenten journey. So why do we do this? Why do we continue to this day to follow Jesus into a city ravaged by war, afflicted with poverty, torn apart by violence? Why do we wave our palm branches and cheer with the crowd in the face of enormous suffering? Why do we continue to serve the needs of the Lord after all these centuries? Is the world really any better for our efforts?

The disciples get a lot of criticism for misunderstanding Jesus, but what if they knew? What if they did hear Jesus and they knew that by week's end he would be dead? What if their excitement was built around the promise of resurrection? What if their eyes were totally focused on the end of the journey to Jerusalem?

Of course, you can't read the Bible and get this version. They were clearly surprised by the resurrection. But they didn't have to be. Jesus told them the whole story. He told them about Easter. Palm Sunday is a kind of pre-Easter event. It's about life and hope, about as Jill Duffield says, marching for peace, for justice, for the poor, for the oppressed, for the victims of violence and racism and sexism.

She writes: "Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is Jesus' entry into Washington and Parkland, Newtown and Columbine, Aleppo and Ferguson... Jesus is coming to all the places in desperate need of him." Palm Sunday is Jesus' declaration that he is for all who are in need. And we do this, wave our palms and walk with him, because we too stand with those who are hurting for whatever reason.

It's a good day, a boost to our spirits, encouragement to keep on with the struggle, not because we don't know that the struggle will be hard, but because we see Easter beyond the struggle.

So the parade ends, the colt is presumably returned, and Jesus walks into the temple and he looks it all over. He sees the moneychangers, the beggars, the lame, the soldiers. He sees it all. And then he goes home. There was no time left in the day to begin the challenge. But tomorrow, he'll be back and there won't be a parade. The work will be hard. The price will be high.

In a few days, he'll be having dinner with Simon the leper. An unnamed woman will come in and anoint him with expensive oil. Maybe it cost her everything she had. And the disciples will again misunderstand. But Jesus sees that she is serving his need. You know that the question going through everyone's mind is "Why is she doing this?"

We might say, "The Lord has need," but there's something behind serving those in need that should be said. One of the other gospels tells this same story, but makes it clear that it's about love. We do this. We follow Jesus. We care for others. And we do it for love.

As this woman stuck with Jesus beyond the celebration of the triumphal entry, so too we follow Jesus closer to his death. Were it not for love, we could not do it. Jesus' needs will grow greater as the week progresses. The colt was easy. The expensive perfume that honors the sacrifice that he will make not so easy. Looking through the cross to resurrection helps. But there's no standing by Jesus, standing with Jesus by those in need, without love. Why do we do this? Again Jill Duffield has an articulate response. She got there a different way than I did, but it's the same answer. She says, "We make public our loyalty and love for Jesus Christ, and our commitment to follow the Lord of all, everyday, everywhere, anywhere." Amen.

#### Resource

Jill Duffield. "Why are You Doing This? What are You Doing?" The Presbyterian Outlook, March 25, 2018.