

“THE LORD NEEDS IT”

Mark 11:1-10

As Jesus is about to descend the Mount of Olives to enter Jerusalem, being in the neighborhood of Bethphage and Bethany, he realizes there is still a yet uncared for detail. He needs a mode of transportation to properly enter the city. So Jesus dispatches two of his disciples to go into one of the villages to fetch a donkey's colt for him to ride. Interestingly, the synoptic gospel writers dedicate more than half of the account of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem to the seemingly minor details regarding acquiring the animal. Jesus gives instructions on where to find the donkey, what kind of colt he wants, who they need to talk to and what they are to say. Although we have no account of what the two disciples were thinking, I could envision that they had imagined for themselves a more noble role on this special day than donkey detail.

We have no record of the names of the two disciples Jesus dispatches for this mission. Thomas Long, a retired seminary homiletics professor, proposes the possibility that it might have been the brothers James and John. (Thomas G. Long "Donkey Fetchers," *Christian Century*, April 4, 2006) Ironically, just hours earlier these two had gotten Jesus off to themselves to ask him for the special favor of being granted the privilege of sitting at his right and left when Jesus would come into his kingdom. If it were James and John who were sent on this mission, then it was quite a come-down to have been contemplating places of honor in Jesus' kingdom to have been given the task of standing in the muck of a stable, looking suspiciously like horse thieves, and trying to wrestle an unbroken, and no doubt balky, donkey for Jesus to ride. This was quite a job demotion.

This seemingly disproportionate amount of details regarding the mundane task of fetching a donkey can serve as a reminder that serving God can involve seemingly petty, commonplace tasks and chores. Many of us who are in the pastorate probably were attracted to this vocation with the high ideals that it would provide us the opportunity to weekly proclaim the saving good news of Jesus' gospel, to guide the ministry of God's people, to counsel persons in times of crisis, and to be present at the critical moments of life including birth, marriage and

death. But in truth, ministry more often involves mundane tasks like printing and folding bulletins, changing light bulbs, spraying weeds and trimming bushes, responding to requests for financial assistance, attending meetings or visiting persons with dementia who keep asking you your name. The same was true for Jesus' disciples who found themselves being asked to get a boat ready for Jesus, to find out how much food was available for feeding the crowd, to secure a room and make it ready for Jesus to share the Passover meal with his disciples, and, of course, to chase down a donkey for Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. This was likely not what they were expecting when they responded to Jesus' call to "*follow me.*"

One of the most interesting details of the story of Jesus sending two of his disciples to fetch a donkey is what Jesus tells them to say if anyone questions what they are doing. Jesus instructs them to just tell any inquirer, "*The Lord needs it.*" Sure enough, the disciples find a donkey's colt where Jesus had said they would. While the disciples are untying it, they are challenged by some bystanders who want to know what they are doing. The disciples answer as Jesus had instructed, "*The Lord needs it.*" This explanation is enough and the men let them have the animal. How are we to understand these words? Was it a password with the owner or is Jesus exerting his authority? What right does Jesus have to claim the property of another? The message which comes through clearly in this incident is that God has the authority to make claims on our lives as we are called into God's service. Jesus has the right to say, "*I need what you have.*"

In the story of Jesus' Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem, we not only see Jesus' authority exercised in his claim on the donkey, but in other ways also. For instance

- Upon bringing the donkey to Jesus, the scriptures indicate persons take off their cloaks and lay them on the back of the animal—and on the road to form a kind of "*red carpet*" for the donkey and Jesus. Indeed, for whom would we be willing to have our clothes trod on by an animal?
- Also, the people cut palm branches from the trees in order to have something to wave. Did you ever stop to wonder about the reaction of the owners of those trees? They likely

had the same concerns persons have today when strangers walk onto private property and cut flowers or take vegetables from their garden or pick fruit from their trees. Such acts are considered trespassing and stealing because they involve taking something which belongs to someone else. Yet there is a sense in which a person in authority can make a claim on another's property merely by saying, "*I need that.*"

- Additionally, the people shout "*hosanna*" as Jesus passes them. While we usually think of this word as a shout of praise, commentators suggest the word originally was more of a plea for divine help. It was a cry beseeching God to use a leader to give the people release or to save them from their oppressor. In any case, the people cry out in the hopes Jesus is the long-awaited leader who has the power to bring them freedom from their oppressors.

The point is that when Jesus enters Jerusalem on the back of a donkey colt as the crowd rolls out the first century equivalent of the "*red carpet*" by laying their clothes on the road, waving palm branches and shouting "*hosanna*," Jesus is entering the city as a king, all-be-it, a different kind of king. Some writers suggest Jesus on the back of that donkey colt, an animal so small that his feet likely reached the ground as he sat astride it, must have been quite a sight. It certainly did not fit the expected image of a king or military leader riding into town on a prancing stallion. Whatever the imagery, a monarch is a person who has the right to rule in one's life.

Robert Fulghum, an American author and Unitarian Universalist minister, tells of a small paper bag which he treasures and has kept through many moves. (Robert Fulghum, "*It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*," page 25-29) This particular lunch sack actually belongs to his daughter. Soon after reaching school age, Molly becomes an enthusiastic participant with her mother in packing the daily lunches for herself, her brothers and her father. Each bag got a share of sandwiches, apples, milk money, and sometimes a note or treat. One morning Molly hands her father two bags as he is about to leave for work. One is the regular lunch bag and the other is held together with duct tape, staples and paper clips. When asked what is in the other bag, Molly announces, "*Just stuff—take it with you.*" Not wanting to make an issue of this matter, Fulghum

stuffs both sacks into his briefcase, kisses his daughter and rushes off. At noon, while hurriedly scarfing down his lunch, Fulghum tears open the other bag and shakes out the contents. Onto his desk fall two hair ribbons, three small stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny seashell, two animal crackers, a marble, a used lipstick, a small doll, two chocolate kisses and thirteen pennies. Thinking this is charming but seeing nothing he could personally use, he sweeps the desk clean. Into the wastebasket go leftovers from his lunch and Molly's stuff.

That evening Molly asks her father, "*Where is my bag?*" "*What bag?*" he asks. "*You know, the one I gave you this morning.*" The father answers that he left it at the office. Molly further announces that she wants the bag back. When asked why, Molly explains, "*Those are my things in the bag, Daddy, the ones I really like. I thought you might like to play with them, but now I want them back. You didn't lose the bag, did you, Daddy?*" Fulghum lies and assures Molly that he had only forgotten to bring the bag home which he would do the next day. Fulghum realizes that Molly had entrusted her treasures to him—all that a seven-year old holds dear and he had thrown it in the wastebasket because there wasn't anything in the sack he thought he needed.

Fulghum acknowledges it was a long trip back to the office late that evening, but he needed to get there ahead of the janitor. He dumps the entire contents of the trashcan on his desk and begins to sort through it. After washing mustard off the dinosaur and spraying the whole thing with breath-freshener to kill the smell of onions, he carefully smoothes out the wadded ball of brown paper into a semi-functional bag and puts the treasures inside. The next evening he returns the bag to Molly; no questions are asked and no explanations offered. The bag doesn't look so good, but all the stuff is there. After supper Fulghum asks his daughter to tell him about the stuff in the sack. Molly gladly takes each piece out of the bag and lays them in a row on the dining room table. Every item has a story, a memory, or is attached to a dream or imaginary friend.

To Fulghum's surprise several days later Molly again entrusts him with the bag of her treasures to take to work. It is the same ratty bag with the same stuff inside. Each evening he returns it to Molly intact. This procedure is repeated occasionally over the next several months.

In time interest in that game is lost and Molly turns her attention to other things. In the end, Fulghum is left holding the bag because one morning Molly gives it to him and she never asks for it to be returned, but now he knows better than to ever throw it away. The contents of the sack still belong to Molly and she has the right to ask for them at any time, and her father needs to be prepared to return them. Likewise, **what we have—our time, talents and treasure—belong to God and we need to be prepared to give them back when God says, “*I need it.*”**

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March 28, 2021