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Mark 11:1-11 (Palm Sunday)

DONKEY DUTY

Which two disciples do you think Jesus chose for the job? Which two disciples do you think Jesus picked for donkey duty? We are told that he sent two of his disciples to go into the next village and fetch a donkey for him to ride into Jerusalem. Mark's gospel doesn't tell us which two disciples were given this task, but I personally hope it was James and John. Just hours earlier, James and John had come up to Jesus as they were walking to Jerusalem, and they asked Jesus if they could have the best seats right next to him when Jesus came into power. Of course, they imagined that Jesus was going to Jerusalem to become king. They imagined that as the Messiah, he was going to liberate them from their Roman oppressors and establish his kingdom and rule in power and glory. And it was all about to take place in Jerusalem. So James and John got to thinking that before all that took place, before there was this regime change that they expected, they ought to secure some status for themselves. They wanted to sit right next to Jesus--to be his right and left hand men--when Jesus took power and ruled in glory.

That is why I really hope it was James and John who were given donkey duty--who were sent off on what could only be regarded as an unpleasant, menial chore, to find the donkey, and drag its braying, ornery, smelly hide back to Jesus. James and John clearly had grander and more noble visions of what they should be doing as Jesus' followers than undertaking donkey duty. That is why it would be wonderfully ironic if Jesus had delegated this chore to them--to get the ass.

But really, it was an appropriate lesson for any of the twelve disciples because all twelve of them failed to understand what Jesus had been trying to teach them over and over again about what it means to be part of God's kingdom. Donkey duty was not the first time Jesus called upon his disciples to undertake mundane and menial tasks. On two separate occasions, Jesus conscripted the disciples to hand out bread to hungry hoards--the first time to 5,000 and the second time to 4,000 people. Think of the monotony of handing out chunks of bread over and over again to an endless stream of people, the sun beating down on you, the sweat running into your eyes. Keeping handing them the bread, Jesus tells you, until everyone is fed.

Or when Jesus sends out the disciples in pairs to heal and preach. He told them to take no bag, no bread, no money. Now medicine may seem glamorous from a distance, but up close it is an entirely different thing--it is comprised of sick and diseased bodies all needing to be touched, requiring you to get up close to see that boil, touch that bunion, look down that throat. And then, tired out from all that healing, the disciples still had to go knocking on doors to find somebody who would offer them shelter and food. Talk about being humbled.

Or when Jesus sends the disciples off to prepare for the Passover meal. Go find a room where we can eat, he tells them. So off they go, to find the guy who might have a room, to work out the rent, check out the space, make sure it had the necessary tables and chairs, to arrange things with the caterers--i.e. women--who would prepare the food.

You know about those kinds of boring details that are necessary when planning an event or being part of a church or organization. You've done these kinds of mundane tasks yourself. Taking the minutes for a committee meeting. Turning out the lights and locking the doors when the meeting is over. Setting the tables in advance of a church meal. Driving the donated items to the drop-off site. Cleaning the communion sets after a worship service. Managing the financial

books for the food pantry. Driving another church member home. Sending out a notice about the next Family Promise meal. Calling the plumber when the toilets back up. There is no glory in any of these chores. Quite frankly, they are all "donkey duty."

What do we imagine will be our "lot" as followers of Jesus? There are some Christian communities that teach that you will be rewarded with wealth, health, and success in exchange for your faithfulness to Jesus. It's called "the prosperity gospel," and it is a heresy--in other words, a lie. What we learn from Jesus when we read the gospels, what we learn from Jesus on his Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem, is that the good news he came to share involves humility, service, and sacrifice. Not a lot of glory can be found in any of those.

Jesus' decision to arrive into Jerusalem on a donkey may have confused the disciples. Kings ride horses, not donkeys. In fact, at the same time Jesus would have been entering Jerusalem, the Roman governor Pontus Pilate would have arrived in town in order to ensure that order was maintained during the Passover festival. Pilate would have been riding on an impressive horse and adorned in gleaming armor. He would have been surrounded by a cavalry on horses and flanked by a large squadron of foot soldiers in clanking metal and helmets and swords. It would have been an awe-inspiring spectacle of power and might.

Contrast that with Jesus' little parade, on a donkey, with some local yokels waving palm branches and proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of David. What Jesus was engaging in was political street theater. He came as a king, but not the kind of king people expected. God's kingdom would not be secured through the practices of domination and intimidation. God's kingdom was found in the power of love, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, service, and sacrifice.

The disciples hadn't understood this when Jesus taught them that the first will be last and the last will be first, and that those who want to be great must be the servant of others. They hadn't understood this when Jesus told them that to love one's neighbor as oneself was the greatest commandment of all. And they didn't seem to understand it now, on Palm Sunday, when Jesus sends them to prepare for his grand entrance into Jerusalem by fetching a donkey of all things.

These two unidentified disciples are dispatched with this mundane chore to prepare for Jesus' arrival--and that is exactly the message Mark begins his gospel with way back in chapter 1: the call to prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare the way of the Lord, we are told. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a visible manifestation of the way of the Lord: the way of humility, the way of compassion, the way of service, the way of sacrifice, the way of love.

On this Palm Sunday all these centuries later, we are faced with the same challenge: to prepare the way of the Lord. It isn't just about preparing for the person of Jesus but about preparing for the *way* of Jesus. How do you in your life prepare for the way of forgiveness? How do I prepare for the way of love? What do we do to prepare for the way of peace, the way of justice, the way of generosity in our lives and in our world? Based on the experiences of those first disciples long ago, the way of Jesus is not likely to bring us much in the way of glory or worldly acclamation. Rather, preparing for the way of Jesus more than likely involves a whole lot of donkey duty in service to Jesus' redemptive work in the world.