
Lent: Give up feeling powerless
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 19:28-40

What is going on here? This is Palm Sunday. Rev. Paul promised he would get off his recent fixation on the idea of giving up something for Lent. He promised us that this week would be all palms and platitudes. Well, you should have known better anyway.

[image: principles without programs are platitudes]

You know that I do not like platitudes. Besides, just because I am inviting us this week to give up something else for Lent does not mean that this is not a celebration of Palm Sunday. Perhaps there is a connection between Palm Sunday and the call to give up feeling powerless. Or perhaps I've just decided to give up making sense for Lent. I guess we will all know whether or not that is the case in about 10 minutes.

[image: Jesus riding into town]

So to begin with, we've all just heard the Palm Sunday reading. Luke's version of it anyway. Are you happy? Are you satisfied? Do you feel like after reading the story you have a complete understanding of what was going on 2000 years ago? Well I do not. I'm not satisfied. Because the story - while interesting and provocative - seems to be incomplete. It seems like we are only hearing part of the story. To me it reads like most stories we get in the news these days. Most news stories today make it obvious that something more is going on that we are not being told about. Modern journalism seems to be more about the narrative lens than about what is happening on the ground. Most news stories today only give us part of the story. The part of the story that supports the narrative the author wants to reinforce. That is why it is so important these days to read news content from Russia, China, India, and other places if we want to understand world events.

The Bible story about Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem in Luke is only part of the story. Ok. So, what is missing from the story? I'm glad you asked. In order to find the rest of the story, we need a bit of history. And the history we need is interesting. Because

social conditions at the time of Jesus were surprisingly similar to social conditions today.

[image: money talks.]

In today's language, "money talks". And that's true. It is just unfortunate that when my money talks, it usually says, "goodbye". But historically, we would say that social structures at the time of Jesus in Palestine operated according to a "domination system".

[image: domination systems]

According to theologians Margus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, domination systems are based on 3 principles. The first principle is political oppression. Which means that a few powerful elites have disproportionate control over the lives of the huge majority of people. The second principle is economic exploitation. This is done mainly through the control of the means of production. In Jesus's day, the means of production were primarily land and labour. These two principles working together place wealth and power in the hands of a very small number of people.

[image: trickle down theory]

Putting wealth and power into a small number of hands is clearly unethical by just about any standard we can imagine. So we might wonder why societies would choose to follow those unfair principles. Domination systems always had a third principle. And that third principle is specifically designed to legitimize the first two principles. Three very common schemes to legitimize the unfair sharing of resources are fear, military force and - unfortunately - religion. The third principle in the systems must be powerful enough to override our own natural human instincts that say that we are entitled to a fair share in life.

[image: religion is regarded quote]

These factors can also work together of course. Fear of strangers and military force can work together in complimentary ways. This is what leads Canadians to fear refugees while our military and economic policies are creating those very same refugees. Another example is using religion to prop up a social structure. Like stating without evidence that a particular king was chosen by God to rule. And therefore letting that king act with impunity.

[image: income inequality]

According to an article in Psychology Today, "... organized religions emerged as a support system for political hierarchies and continue in that role to this day. If [organized religion] had turned against the privileged secular authorities, they could expect trouble ... Religious beliefs often provide a justification for the arbitrary assumption, and use, of power by secular authorities, from the divine right of English kings to the deification of Aztec emperors as the guarantors of good harvests.

[image: raise the minimum wage]

Ironically, some religious doctrines, specifically Christian teachings, are opposed to inequality. For example, the Sermon on the Mount cheers on the downfall of the wealthy and powerful. The Christian religious authorities nevertheless cozy up to the rich and powerful and side with the elite in preserving social inequality. Religious hierarchies support inequality because doing so serves their own interest as protected members of the elite."¹ This is nicely summarized by the line, "when money talks, truth keeps its mouth shut."

[image: when money talks, the truth keeps its mouth shut]

Today of course we are more sophisticated than that. The elite no longer control us using superstitious religious ideas. Unless they work of course. Which they actually do in some parts of the world including parts of the United States, and even here in Canada. For those of us who are immune to religious ideologies, our elite use fear as a primary mechanism to keep their unethical concentration of wealth and power. Fear of immigrants, fear of global economic meltdown, fear of "Russia", fear of Muslims, fear of refugees. You know the list. And if you do not know who you are supposed to fear, just read any newspaper that comes to hand and you will know exactly who the elite want you to fear.

[image: Napoleon quote]

Social injustice has historically often been legitimized by an appeal to either military force, religion, both. As Borg and Crossan state, "in premodern societies known to us, religion has been used to legitimate the place of the wealthy and powerful in the social order over which they preside."

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-human-beast/201708/why-religions-support-elites>

And that is the missing piece of history that will allow us to see the complete riding-on-a-donkey story. Oh - that and one more detail. The Jewish people living in Palestine at the time of Jesus were politically and economically dominated by Rome. When the story of Jesus riding on a donkey allegedly happened, passover was approaching. And that meant that many Jewish pilgrims were in Jerusalem. And passover for Jewish people represents a story of liberation from slavery and domination. Passover in Palestine would be a reminder of liberation in a place where Jewish people perhaps did not feel very liberated. Tensions would therefore naturally be high. In order to keep the peace, Pilate would have brought in troops to help control the crowds. To make sure that the passover festivities did not become a catalyst for civic unrest and rebellion.

[image: war horse and donkey]

And so during the event that we commemorate on Palm Sunday, we would have actually had two parades. Through one gate, we had Pilate, riding on a war horse, leading a large, well-equipped and well-trained army. That parade represented power, force, control, fear, and domination. Through the other gate, we had - Jesus. Riding on a donkey, with no army, no wealth, nothing of power. Pilate would have been greeted with a mixture of indifference and fear. In contrast, Jesus was greeted with joyful crowds, grateful crowds, loud crowds, singing crowds.

In the biblical stories, we only hear about the parade that Jesus led. But modern biblical scholars pretty much all agree that Pilate would have had his own parade too.

[image: flyover]

The classic way to put on a show of military strength is to put on a show - a parade. That annual event would have been very distasteful to the Jewish people in Jesus's day. And they all knew about it, so they didn't bother to write it down. The Jesus parade was in fact a parade in response to Pilate's parade. Jesus's parade was actually a parody. Perhaps even a lampoon of Pilate's parade. Jesus's parade was criticism. It was ridicule. It was sarcasm. It was the sort of mocking response to authority that can get you killed!

The story raises the obvious question: why did Jesus go to Jerusalem right then? If Jesus is opposed to the concentration of wealth that is a natural outcome of a large number of pilgrims coming for the passover, why does Jesus go there? Why didn't Jesus

continue his ministry with the rural poor? Why didn't Jesus enter Jerusalem when the political pressures were lower? Jesus could easily have avoided a confrontation with the authorities if he had wanted to. It's almost as if Jesus sees his mission as a mission that includes confronting the religious authorities of his day.

[image: comfort the afflicted]

Jesus seems to believe that ministry involves comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable, just like I do. Jesus not only rides into Jerusalem. Jesus is driven into Jerusalem. Jesus is driven into Jerusalem as part of his ministry.

When we say it like that, it perhaps sounds a bit strange. But in fact, it is very common. Demonstrations by the masses against the people who control things are nothing new. Injustice is nothing new. Inequality is nothing new. Racism is nothing new. Think of “Black Lives Matter”. Think of “Arab Spring”. Think of the “Palestinian Right of Return”. Think of more recent events.

Jesus spent most of his ministry teaching and healing people on the fringes of society. But apparently, once in a while he needed to march. He needed to have a parade.

[image: palm crowds]

The Jesus parade was far more political than it was religious. Jesus was riding into town to the cheering of the masses in opposition to Roman rule. And in opposition to the many people who collaborated with the Romans. And that included many of the religious elite. It was not a battle of good vs evil. It was not a battle between different religious groups. It was a battle to expose the stark division between the wealthy elite and the common, poor, masses. It was a battle to expose the stark division between people who obsess on power, and those who felt they had no power. Joining in the Jesus parade was a way to regain some power. Joining in the Jesus parade was a way to give up feeling powerless. Perhaps we should all - on Palm Sunday - join in a local parade and give up feeling powerless for Lent.

I'm sure that many of us have participated in similar parades ourselves. I remember marching on Queen's Park one year to protest against cuts to the educational system. And of course when I join a march, I talk to people. I want to know what motivates people to participate. And many people I spoke to that day reflected to me that

they - these are their words - wanted to reclaim power - to take back power from the government. They wanted to give up feeling powerless. And many people have reacted to covid restrictions using the same mantra.

[image: donkey on motorcycle]

I find it interesting that in the church, we have domesticated this message. I sort of understand why. I mean, we can focus on the palms and then we get to wave them around, like we did this morning. Or we can focus on the donkey. I don't doubt that some churches today have a live donkey involved in some way.

But the palms and the donkey are completely irrelevant to the point of the story. The story is about how we need to give up feeling powerless.

[image: powerless]

Do we feel powerless? Is that really a problem? Well, after being with you for over two years I can say, yes. How many times - since covid started - did you utter the magic phrase, "I can not do ... because of covid". How many times did we not do something we wanted to do instead of finding a new way to do it? Instead of empowering ourselves to keep doing important things in new ways. In general, we do feel powerless. Many of us feel powerless. Sometimes for reasons that are good. And often, for excuses that sound good.

And let's be honest. This situation was true long before we ever heard of covid. I know that for many of us, we imagine that the best parts of our lives are in the past. We have stopped actively working for a better future. But don't forget, only the present exists anyway. If that's too philosophical for you, consider this:

[image: today you are the youngest you will ever be again]

Today you are the youngest you will ever be again. Do you think you are too poor? Half the planet lives on less than \$2 per day. And what's more, think of every single Jesus story you know. Is there even a single Jesus story where Jesus hands out cash? No! Is there even a single Jesus story where Jesus asks for cash? No! Jesus even refuses to ask for money from the rich young ruler. Do you think you are too uneducated? Compared to world standards, you are very well educated.

There is a simple test to see if you still have a mission in life. Hold one of your

hands in front of your face. Can you feel your breath on your hand? If so, you still have important things to do. Yes, of course we have to be realistic. But feeling powerless is a choice we make, not a reflection of reality. So this year, for Lent, I encourage all of us to give up feeling powerless.

Besides, if you refuse to give up feeling powerless, how on earth could you give up any of the other things we have been talking about during Lent over the past few weeks: your need for control, your expectations, your resentments, your being judgmental². If you have struggled giving up those things, perhaps you need to give up feeling powerless first.

[image: power grid]

And remember, we are not alone. We have the gift of each other. We have the gift of the spirit. We are connected and we can support each other. We are not powerless.

Join the Jesus parade. Jesus said you will find new life. That's what resurrection is all about, but we'll get to that next week.

Amen.

² Giving up our human frailties has been our theme throughout Lent this year.