
Lent: Give up feeling powerless
Chapel in the Park United Church
April 13, 2025
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. 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 a few moments.

[image: Jesus riding into town]

So to begin with, we've all just heard the Palm Sunday reading. Luke's version of it anyway. So I want to ask you: Are you happy? Are you satisfied? Do you feel like after hearing 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 and fun - seems to be incomplete. It seems like we are only hearing part of the story.

The Bible story about Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem is only part of the story. Ok. So, what is the rest of the story? I'm so glad you asked. In order to find the rest of the story, we need a bit of history. And the history we need is really 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 just says, "goodbye" on the way out the door. But in more formal language, we would say that social structures at the time of Jesus in Palestine operated according to a "domination system".

[image: domination system]

According to theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, domination systems are always based on 3 principles:

[image: first principle]

The first principle is political oppression. Which means that a few powerful people have disproportionate control over the lives of the huge majority of people.

[image: second principle]

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 we might call the "elite". Today, that system is called an "oligarchy".

But 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 choose to follow such obviously unfair principles. That's a great question. And the answer is that domination systems also utilized a third principle.

[image: third principle]

And that third principle is specifically designed to legitimize the first two principles. The key was that the third principle has to be compelling for the common people.

Three very common devices that have historically been used to legitimize the unfair sharing of resources are fear, military force, and - sadly - religion. The third principle in the system must be powerful enough to override our own natural human instincts that say that we are entitled to a fair share in life.

Since the third principle is whatever satisfies the masses, oligarchs operate by supporting whatever it takes to legitimize their power. If fear works, they will use it. If religion works, they will use it. If threats - perhaps military or economic - work, they will use them.

[image: religion is regarded quote]

Unfortunately, religion can easily be used to prop up social inequality. For example, the idea that if a particular person is chosen by God to be king, we allow that king to act with impunity. But there is never any proof that that person was actually chosen by God.

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."¹
[image: Napoleon quote]

Sadly, even Christianity has been used by oligarchs to support the unfair exploitation of common people. Which is so ironic because Christian teachings are specifically opposed to such inequality. The Sermon on the Mount cheers on the downfall of the wealthy and powerful. Nevertheless, some Christian religious authorities have and still do cozy up to the rich and powerful and side with the elite in preserving social inequality. And in Jesus day, Jewish religious authorities were cozying up to the elite of their day. This really is nothing new.

"Religious hierarchies support inequality because doing so serves their own interest as protected members of the elite."² 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]

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."

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.

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

² Ibid.

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.

[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 that part 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 Jesus parade would better be understood today as a protest march.

[image: palm crowds]

The Jesus protest 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 Jews 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 between the haves and the have-nots. 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 protest was a way to regain some power. Joining in the Jesus protest was a way to give up feeling powerless. Perhaps we should all - on this Palm Sunday - join in a local protest and give up feeling powerless for Lent.

I participate in quite a few protests myself. And when I participate, I like to go a bit early and talk to people as we gather. I want to know what motivates people to take time out of their busy days to be at that particular protest. And many people I speak with have told me that they - and these are their words - wanted to reclaim power - to take back power from the elite. People want to give up feeling powerless. People need to give up feeling powerless.

[image: income inequality]

This issue is - sadly - still relevant today. We are still engaged in a battle between people with power and people who feel powerless. The battlefield may have changed over the years. The elite no longer control us using superstitious religious ideas. Unless they work of course. 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.

[image: raise the minimum wage]

This is not hypothetical. It is actually happening right now south of the border. Trump is using fear, threats of military invasion and tariffs, and his twisted version of Christianity to push his oligarchy - a system designed to favour the wealthy while normal citizens pay the price.

Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem might sound like a one-off event. But parades, demonstrations, and protests are actually quite 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 the anti-oligarchy

demonstrations happening all over the United States right now.

[image: donkey on motorcycle]

Palm Sunday - the original Palm Sunday - was a political protest. I am personally disappointed that in the church, we have domesticated this message. I sort of understand why. I mean, it's fun to wave palm branches around in church. It's fun to imagine Jesus riding a donkey. Some churches will have a live donkey at their service this morning just to reinforce that idea. Palm Sunday services can be tons of fun.

But Palm Sunday - the original Palm Sunday - is about speaking truth to power. It's about finding our own voice and speaking up against injustice. It's about finding a way to reclaim our power as a people. It's about giving up feeling powerless.

[image: powerless]

I want to close by taking this message in a more personal way. For one thing, here in Canada we are in an election cycle, so there are limits on what I am permitted to say. But more to the point, I know that many of us do not welcome any sort of political message in church. I was actually tempted to just cancel "Palm Sunday" altogether this year because of the election.

And I suppose the most obvious personal question is - do you feel powerless? I've been rabbiting on about giving up feeling powerless without first asking - do you feel powerless?

Another way to ask that question might be - when we reflect on our reality, how often do we feel like victims? Victims in the sense that we are forced to just accept reality as it is presented to us? And how often do we approach reality like something that we actually have some influence over? Because reality is not always as it appears to be. Our perception affects our sense of reality.

[image: optical illusion checkers shadow]

Consider this image. Do you see the squares marked "A" and "B"?

[image: checkers shadow squares]

Here, I've highlighted the squares with red circles.

[image: checkers shadow]

So now that you see the squares "A" and "B". What do you notice about the

colour of the squares? This week at UCW we discussed optical illusions, and everyone there said that square “A” was black and square “B” was white.

[image: checkers shadow bar]

But in fact, the two squares are the exact same colour. Here I have added a grey bar that shows that the bar and both squares are the same colour. Amazing, right?

[image: checkers shadow]

We often think that reality is as it appears to be. But we are easily fooled. How many of us have been fooled into thinking that we are powerless?

Do you think you are too old? 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.

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

If we give up feeling powerless, we have to admit that we still have important things to do. 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 reality. So this year, for Lent, I encourage all of us to give up feeling powerless.

Besides, if you do not 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 judgmental³. 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 support each other. We are not powerless.

³ Giving up our human frailties has been our theme throughout Lent this year.

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

Amen.