

Donkey Catchers

Luke 19:28-40

Sixth Sunday in Lent/ Palm Sunday, (March 24) 2024

Kyle Childress

Many of you will remember Ray Robberson, church member here who after a long fight with cancer died in 2018. I first met Ray through Ron Watson years ago. We heard Ray had some donkeys on his farm and we needed one to be part of our Maundy Thursday Easter Walk. Ray told me he had seven donkeys to be exact, and he kept them because donkeys are excellent at protecting livestock from coyotes and wild dogs. While Ray was unloading his donkey from the trailer out in the parking lot, and knowing a little how troublesome donkeys could be, I asked Ray how he caught his donkeys. He told me that he fed them treats, sort of like dog-biscuits, and any time he came out of the house with a bag of treats and shook the bag the donkeys would come a running. Otherwise, they'd just stand off at a distance and look at you. Ray said donkeys can be pretty ornery – they kick, stomp, and they would bite a chunk out of you. And if they don't want to be caught, you can spend the entire day trying to catch them.

I mention this because today's Scripture lesson on Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem talks about catching a donkey.

As Jesus was about to descend the Mount of Olives to enter Jerusalem, Luke reports, he dispatched two of his disciples to catch a colt, a young donkey. A seemingly minor matter of transportation it would seem, but surprisingly, over half of Luke's story of Jesus' entry into the city is occupied with mundane details about

acquiring this animal -- where to go to find it, what kind of colt to seek, what to do, what to say.

Though no one knows what these two disciples were thinking, I'm guessing that they had imagined for themselves a grander and nobler role on this day than being on the donkey detail. None of the Gospel writers name these disciples, but maybe they were James and John. Mark says that only hours before these two had proposed to Jesus, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But it hardly matters which two they were. All the disciples had been jockeying for advantage, angling for glory, arguing about who was the greatest. So it is interestingly ironic that on this very public and glorious day of Jesus' ministry, a day when he will be welcomed into Jerusalem with joyous hosannas, they find themselves engaged in a most unromantic form of ministry, mucking around a stable, looking suspiciously like horse thieves, and trying to wrestle an untamed and no doubt balky animal toward the olive groves. I think they were asking themselves, "This is why we left their fishing nets?"

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell this the same way. Most of the story of Jesus' big entry into Jerusalem is taken with catching a donkey. Why? Why does this trivial donkey-catching scene become a matter of advance planning and detailed instructions from Jesus? In the Gospel of John, by contrast, Jesus begins his entry into Jerusalem on foot. The donkey enters the picture only afterward, when the crowd gets caught up in a palm-waving, nationalistic, king-admiring zeal. At that point Jesus finds the donkey, on his own, and sits on it, as if to say, "I'm not that kind of king." In John, then, acquiring the donkey is something that Jesus himself does as a dramatic gesture, and it is a beautiful symbol of his humility in the face of triumphalist misunderstanding. But in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, finding the donkey seems more like a delegated chore -- somewhat akin to taking

down and putting up the chairs around here, one of those thousands of routine and inglorious details of church work that are necessary but not the real action.

Over 43 years ago, when I was ordained, I was asked, “Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors and work for the reconciliation of the world? . . . Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?” I remember those as bracing words. It was as if I was standing on the edge of a precipice with the wind ruffling through my hair when I heard them. Such language implied to me that as a minister I was about to step into a boat and shoot the white-water rapids through dangers on every side toward the transformation of the world in the name of Christ.

I remember that I was here about three weeks and found myself up in the attic precariously balancing on a ladder carefully placed so I would not fall through the ceiling, changing florescent light bulbs, when the church secretary Maggie Driggers, hollered up at me that our area minister was here to meet the new pastor. I hurried down to meet a man in a full suit while I was wearing cobwebs and dust.

When I had been ordained, I did not know a great part of ministry is stuff like changing light bulbs, visiting people in nursing homes who no longer know who you are, making a breathless Sunday morning run to the store because we forgot the grape juice, and, as two of Jesus’ disciples found out, finding a suitable donkey at the last minute.

It is right at this place, though, that Luke imparts some of his best theological wisdom. The Gospels begin with the exhilarating trumpet call to “prepare the way of the Lord,” but they make it clear, by the description of the disciples’ activity in the rest of the story, that the way to do so is not by becoming

a member of the Knights Templar and gallantly defending Christendom, not by becoming a hero, but rather by performing humble and routine tasks. The disciples get a boat ready for Jesus, find out how much food is on hand for the multitude, secure the room and prepare the table for the Last Supper, along with a towel and wash basin, and, of course, chase down a donkey that the Lord needs to enter Jerusalem.

I wanted to be a hero. And I've learned that Jesus and his early followers refused to be heroes. A hero is someone who undertakes the extraordinary and makes things turn out right. Someone celebrated for great exploits is how one of the dictionaries defines it. Heroes tend to be lone rangers who dramatically ride in and save everyone from the bad guys and then ride off to another place in need of saving.

I am not suggesting that Jesus was not courageous or that he did not take great risks, but I think that Jesus was not a "hero" as we usually think of heroes. Jesus embodied another Way. And he called his disciples to this other Way. The humble and mundane. You've heard me speak of the L'Arche communities. L'Arche (French for "ark") is a network of Christian communities in France, Canada, the U.S., and around the world where people who are developmentally disabled, called "core members," live together with folks called "assistants." Love embodied in tenderness and gentleness characterizes the life and work L'Arche. One of their basic teachings is this: "Love doesn't mean doing extraordinary or heroic things. It means knowing how to do ordinary things with tenderness."

St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta said much the same thing when she used to say, "We can do no great things – only small things with great love."

L'Arche and Mother Teresa, and so many other followers of Jesus know that

the Way of Jesus is practiced by doing ordinary things with tenderness and love -- by doing the mundane, gritty details of serving people. And much of serving people is done behind the scenes, in ways that are often over-looked.

Whatever those first disciples may have heard when Jesus beckoned, “Follow me,” it led them into a ministry of handling the gritty details of everyday life.” New Testament scholar Joel Marcus notes, “The Gospels show us the preparation of the Lord’s way in a rather prosaic manner as the arrangements people make for the ministry of Jesus.” We prepare for the Lord’s Way but doing plain, simple tasks.

The “arrangements people make for the ministry of Jesus” -- one could hardly find a more apt description of what we, as disciples, are called to do. This cuts two ways. On the one hand, we are called to prepare the way for Jesus’ ministry, and it is his ministry, not ours, that ultimately counts. We are but donkey catchers. On the other hand, because we are -- in ways often hidden from our eyes -- “preparing the way of the Lord,” the routine, often exhausting, seemingly mundane donkey-catching details of our service become part of Jesus’ redemptive work in the world.

In the Gospels, the Twelve are sent out to proclaim the good news, cast out demons, heal the sick and exercise authority. But Matthew, Mark, Luke, and even John want us to know that what this looks like is often a matter of speaking a quiet word in a committee meeting, spending time with someone who is incoherent and coming apart at the seams or emptying a bedpan at the hospital. It is stacking the chairs and then later unstacking the chairs and putting them out for worship for what seems like the millionth time. It is working in the children’s playground, figuring out the by-laws, mopping floors, mowing grass, filling boxes of food,

stuffing envelopes, listening, and showing up time and time again to do it all over again. The longer I do this, the more I'm convinced that there are few things more important than showing up and simply listening to others.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that when she first moved to the small town of Clarksville, Georgia she walked down to the post office, where she came up a quarter short on a book of stamps. "Don't worry," the blonde clerk said behind the counter. "I'll be here until five when we close." Her name tag said, "Elaine." When Barbara brought the quarter back, she told Elaine her name but Elaine already knew it. Eighteen years later, Barbara says she has learned to stand patiently in line as Elaine greets her customers by name.

Barbara said a white-haired woman lingered at the counter here and awhile back, speaking of things that had nothing to do with the U.S. Mail. Barbara said there were six more people in line behind her, but Elaine never rushed her, never stopped smiling. Barbara said, "When my turn came, I raised my eyebrows as I slid my package across the counter."

"She lost her husband a while back," Elaine said. "She needed someone to listen to her."

I remember years ago, Dr. Bob Carroll telling me of a janitor at Medical Center Hospital who used to polish the floors so well that you could almost see yourself reflected in them. The janitor worked at polishing floors because he said, "Sick people and their families will feel better not worrying over dirty floors."

I know a Christian who for thirty years gets up every morning, says her prayers, and then proceeds to care for her adult child with severe Down's Syndrome. Everyday. No accolades. No publicity.

When I was first ordained, I knew an older pastor who served his small country church with faithfulness and humility for forty years. He was never published and had never been asked to preach at any big events. He received no recognition. But for forty years he was a faithful and good pastor.

I knew an 88-year-old woman who lived on the edge of poverty her whole life but who never missed church for 62 straight years! She showed up. She read her Bible and prayed every day, tithed her tiny fixed income, and never failed to ask needy people into her home and feed them a wonderful country-style cooked meal at her table.

Tom Long says he knows an older, retired couple who have every reason to let their lives slip safely into some predictable groove. They are politically conservative, socially cautious by nature. Their income is comfortable, but fixed. Their children are raised and gone. They have every reason to pat themselves on the back, turn on the television and relax. Through a ministry of their church, however, they began some time ago to write letters of encouragement and support to a man in prison. It began slowly—a chatty letter to the prisoner every now and then, a card and a box of cookies on his birthday. Then they took the next step and actually visited the man in prison. One visit led to another and then one day, the man is paroled, out, free, a human being to be faced and dealt with.

So, on the following Christmas Day, when most retired folks were spending a quiet day carving the turkey and taking pictures of the grandchildren, this couple said grace and broke bread in their home with this newly released prisoner, their new friend in Christ. “I think he was convicted of armed robbery—we’re not sure,” one of them told me. “Anyway, it was good to have him in our home on Christmas.”

Being friends with a prisoner, listening at the post office, polishing floors, showing up -- in the Gospel world, "preparing the way of the Lord" usually looks like standing knee-deep in the mire of some stable trying to corral a donkey for Jesus.

May it be so with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.