

Are you taking a trip for Spring Break? None of us who travel for Spring Break like all the traffic, those long, slow, tiring journeys to and from our destination – “are we there yet?” If you are headed to Tennessee the rock slide on I-40 is still causing problems, if you are headed to Florida those two lane sections on I-95 or I-75 will get you every time! And will there ever be an Interstate all the way to Myrtle Beach? In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has been on a long journey to Jerusalem – a journey that began way back in Chapter 9 concludes with Jesus’ arrival into the city. Today’s passage marks the end of the middle section of Luke’s Gospel, known as the travel narrative, and the beginning of the final section known as the passion narrative.

Jesus entered Jerusalem, as a king, but his royalty was not pomp and power but humble obedience. In obedience, Jesus had set his face to Jerusalem, Jesus had talked openly of the fate that awaited at journey’s end. As Jesus made this journey, in obedience, we discover Him eating and drinking with sinners, forever remaining faithful to God’s desire to gather in the rejected and the lost. Then on this day, this Palm Sunday, Jesus entered the city in obedience - to make peace with the offering of his own life.

For all of us, and for any and all who wish to live the Christian life we are required to follow this very same pattern, the pattern of Jesus’ obedience. We need to allow obedience to be the drumbeat marking our own steps along the pilgrim way. For Jesus, obedience meant carrying the cross; for most of us, it means lifting a thousand little and daily crosses in the complexities and demands of our many relationships.

Because our obedience relates to the many little and large details of our lives, I point you to the rather odd account of the disciples being sent to fetch a colt for Jesus. It is kinda strange, how in the midst of this great and suspenseful drama of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, that Luke devotes part of the narrative to fussing about this rather peripheral matter of how it was Jesus secured His transportation. Yet in this detail we have the story of the disciples’ small obedience performed under the canopy of Jesus’ great obedience. In the securing of the colt, they do as they are told, they do as they are told by Jesus, and because they do as Jesus told them, the small and tattered strands of their lives are woven into the great story of God’s redemption of the world. “One small step for them, one GIANT Step for all humanity!” The disciples’ small act of service, becomes a part of the great act of service that is the life, the passion of Jesus.

This incident provides the inspiration for today’s sermon title: “Life is like a game of tennis....the player who serves well seldom loses.”

Our English translations of this passage obscure the delightful play on words in the verses dealing with the colt. When Jesus sends the two disciples to fetch the colt, he instructs them to say to anyone that asks what they are doing, "the Lord needs it". As the disciples untie the colt, its owners indeed ask why they are untying it. The disciples say, "The Lord needs it." In Greek the word used for owners is kurioi, which is the plural of the word kurios used for the Lord. Not only that, but in Greek there is a possessive pronoun with the word, “Lord”, thus "Its Lord – the colt’s Lord needs it." Very clearly, Jesus is in charge here. He is the Lord, and he knows what he is doing.

Jesus arrived in the city that was the center of his people’s political and religious life at the time of the Jewish Passover – their annual celebration of the exodus from Egypt. Given that the Jewish nation was

at this time under the dictatorial power of the Roman Empire, nationalistic feelings and longing for liberation ran high. The possibility for unrest led the Roman authorities to elevate the Alert Status to Red! The authorities were on the lookout for agitation against Rome among the pilgrims flocking to Jerusalem. The new full body scanners were in use for the first time!

Throughout his ministry Jesus had been hesitant to speak directly about his messianic identity and he had forbidden his disciples to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Yet, Jesus chooses to enter Jerusalem on a donkey as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah – an act that was interpreted, rightly interpreted by those who participated, as a messianic act. The crowd accompanying Jesus jubilantly proclaimed Him the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ. Blessing Jesus as the One coming in the name of the Lord!

Jesus had never previously made such a statement. He had not wanted to encourage misplaced messianic expectations, expectations that were in any way nationalistic or political in nature and therefore contrary to his own self-understanding of the suffering Messiah. But now in his "crossing of the Delaware" the possibility of misunderstanding the nature of his messiahship was no longer an issue for Jesus. Now that the time of his suffering and death was very near, Jesus could expressly demonstrate that he indeed was the Messiah, though still the serving, suffering Messiah.

Palm Sunday gives us cause and opportunity to look to Christ for our example of what it means to be a servant. It is good we have this opportunity because the role of servant is no more in vogue in the 21st century than it was in Jesus' day. If you are in any doubt about this all you need to do is to go to any "Barnes & Noble" and find the "Self-help" section. There you will find hundreds of books telling how to get ahead in your career or in the community. You will also notice that there is a blurring of the lines between these self-help books and those in the "Religious" section. And if you take some time to check out some more information about these books you will find way too many in which the faith of Jesus Christ and its focus on serving others has been bent into some sort of a system or technique for achieving what we want in life.

Or if you dare – tune into one of the most popular daytime television programs, "The Oprah Winfrey Show," a blend of spirituality mixed with "You-deserve-the-best" philosophy. The annual episode for which the demand for tickets is highest comes when Oprah parades her "favorite things," items she then gives out to the audience. As her "elves" distribute a sack of expensive cosmetics, a thousand dollar purse, a kitchen gadget, or whatever, the members of the audience scream their delight, making so much noise that Oprah has to calm them down so that she can go on to the next prized goody. These participants like us have been bombarded with messages telling us how better and more important we will be if we have or will purchase some or other brand of car, deodorant, or gadget. To the advertisers, and maybe to ourselves: "We are what we own." A recent study tells us that if we watch 3 straight hours of television, 52 of those minutes consist of commercials and network promotionals, an average of 130 "important messages" telling us that all will be well when we have what we are being told we need.

The Rolling Stones once sang, "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime, you just might find, you get what you need." And this was exactly what happened when Jesus came into Jerusalem for the Passover. The crowd did not get what it wanted, the strong, powerful, nationalistic Terminator but it did receive what they needed, indeed what all of us need.

To the dismay of the crowd, Jesus was no local revolutionary, no national freedom fighter.

Jesus did not arrive flashing a sword and swaggering in might, nor carrying a concealed weapon, but lowly and riding on a donkey.

Jesus did not come with empty promises or a slick put downs for any who opposed him, but to offer all he could, the life and love of God in his own being.

Jesus did not come in the name of the nation, but . . . and here is the irony . . . he really did come in the name of the Lord.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem, the crowd did not get a conquering hero; it got a suffering servant. It did not get a politician or a general; it got a savior.

It did not get a guru who somehow floats on some higher spiritual plane but One who identified, down and dirty with the deepest and most profound needs of the poor and the lost, and One whose own life represented exactly what it means for us to respond to God.

The crowd did not get what it wanted. . . . but it did receive what they needed, indeed what all of us need.

Jesus lived his life—from the time of his birth right up to the time of his death—in such a way that he identified with the people around them – the disciples, doubting and fearful, wandering all over the map; the woman at the well, alone because of her indiscretions and loose morals; the tax collectors and rogues – berated because they worked for the Gentiles; the lepers – isolated and victimized due to their illness; the victims and even the victimizers – prisoners, and jailers; politicians and judges. Jesus sought to share both their joys and their pains and in the embrace of his love Jesus showed his willingness to share in their suffering.

In all these ways, in all these encounters and relationships Jesus truly embodied "The Compassion of the Christ." "Compassion" - a word derived from the Latin *com*, meaning "with," and *passio*, which means "suffering." Jesus is the Compassionate One willing to suffer with and for others. It is this Jesus who is the example and pattern for our living, and it is from and in this Jesus that we find the power and strength to live as a servant people. There is a sense in which Jesus, the real Jesus makes me nervous! The real Jesus makes me nervous by calling into question my best guesses and long held assumptions, Jesus makes me nervous by opening me to new possibilities and new opportunities for partnership and fellowship, Jesus makes me nervous because Jesus is the One coming to us in the name of the Lord! To be clear, if you had started to think that I have somehow figured out every angle on our Savior and on my faith – now you know better. The Jesus we are asked to welcome today, the Jesus who parades into our lives comes asking questions, raising issues and challenging every pre-conception. The Jesus who rides into our line of sight comes to turn us around, make us over, dust us down and send us on our way with new passions, perspectives and purposes.

As we respond to this Jesus who brings all of us the challenge of purpose there will seldom be a dull moment, our lives will be a thrilling spiritual adventure. "Life is like a game of tennis. . . .the player

who serves well seldom loses." With God, in Jesus, the person who serves well never loses. Never! Even when their efforts seemingly lead to little result, even when they are ignored and belittled, even when they are hung on a cross – they never lose! Never! They never lose, we never lose because God's way of intruding into our world and into our lives is in the person of Jesus Christ, the Jesus who this day rode on a donkey and entered the life of the world and our lives to offer a new beginning and the call to service. Amen.