

Donkey Duty
A Sermon for Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017
Matthew 21:1-11
Lansdowne UMC

Let's put ourselves in the shoes of two of Jesus' disciples: let's call them James and John. Let me tell you about your experience.

In the years that you've followed Jesus, you've been amazed by Jesus' compassion. He would see people that the society considered untouchable-- people with leprosy-- and he would touch them and healed them. You saw people marvel at the authority of Jesus when he healed a centurion's servant at a distance. All Jesus had to do was say the word.

Men, women, young, old, deaf, blind,... even dead. You saw them all get healed by Jesus. It was amazing. Even just a few moments ago as Jesus was nearing Jerusalem, he healed two blind men. And they followed him.

Even apart from the healings, you've witnessed other amazing things. Jesus told a storm to be quiet, and it did. Jesus fed 5000 people from 5 loaves of bread and 2 small fish.

It's like you've been witnessing a war that Jesus has been waging against sickness, poverty, and chaos. But weapons of the war haven't been swords and chariots. They've been prayer and miracles.

You have a sense as you get close to Jerusalem that something big is about to happen. This is where the long-awaited Messiah comes to claim his kingdom in the historic city of the King David. You gather on the mount of olives and remember the prophecy from Zechariah that says this will be the site of a great battle, after which the Lord will become King over all the earth.¹ Of course, you want a part of it.

Just a little while earlier James and John's mother came to Jesus to try to secure her boy's place of glory. She said him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." (Mt 20:21). The two disciples might not be James and John, but at some point earlier all of the disciples were vying for positions of higher authority. They wanted to be greater than one another.

So here you are on the Mount of Olives. Standing in the place where it's all going to go down, but not knowing how it's going to happen. Plus, any time you're on a mountain with Jesus, something amazing is about to happen-- the sermon on the mount, the transfiguration. So what's it going to be this time, and what part are you going to have in it?

And so Jesus starts handing out the assignments. And you feel it. Now is your moment. Now is the time that the glory of the kingdom of the Messiah will be yours. You think to yourself, maybe I'll get to go cast out some demons again, but this time in Jerusalem. Or maybe it'll be like Elijah, and we'll get to call fire down from heaven and consume Roman occupying force.

¹ Zech 14:4,9

Then you hear Jesus call your name, and so your ears perk up. Here is your moment. What's it going to be? "And lastly, James and John," Jesus says. "You're... on Donkey Duty. That's right, I need for you to go into town and look conspicuously like you're stealing a couple animals."

Donkey duty.... Your pastor grew up with horses in his backyard, so I can imagine what that work was like for our two nameless disciples, who I'm calling James and John. I confess, I managed to avoid most of the work, because the horses were my sister's thing, but on occasion I'd find myself mucking stalls or letting horses out into the pasture.

So it doesn't take much of an imagination to understand that Donkey duty can be dirty business.

I'm imagining that the donkey those disciples went to get was named something like "Joy." And even though the disciples thought they were keeping a safe distance from the rear end of the animal and making sure not to startle her, she had a fly bite her at just the wrong time. Joy, of course, would then choose to *kick at* the fly, and one of the disciples would end up with a hoof square in the middle of his chest, not seriously injuring him, but knocking the wind out of him quite soundly.

So in this completely hypothetical story that has no basis in the reality of my childhood at all... Let's just say that Donkey duty can be painful business.

It feels so ironic that on this glorious Palm Sunday, where Jesus is hailed as the coming king by the crowds, these two disciples get Donkey Duty-- a chore that has to be done, but it isn't the main event. Despite

their aspirations for greater glory, the disciples seem to always doing this type of thing. They collect the leftovers from Jesus' miracle of feeding the 5000. They make Passover dinner reservations at a local upper room. You have to wonder if those two disciples said to themselves, "is this what we left our nets for?"

Well, Jesus said "follow me." His disciples understood this to mean that they would not only go where he told them to go, but that they would do what he told them to do.

Do you ever feel like you're put on Donkey duty? This happens a lot at the church doesn't it? Somehow you end up doing the things that other people don't want to do. It's like being put Donkey Duty. It's the dirty work of the church. It's the endless peeling of potatoes, changing light bulbs, and cleaning of the facilities. It's the visiting a shut-in when you're not quite sure that they know who you are. It's taking up a position on a committee that you don't want to be on. All work for the Jesus is sacrificial. After all, you could be at home sitting in your comfy chair eating popcorn in front of your TV. All church work is sacrificial, but some work is Donkey Duty.

I learned this week that when you buy palms for palm Sunday, they don't come like this. You have to strip them into the individual leaves. Maybe it's not this way for everyone, but for me that would be Donkey Duty. Someone at our church took that on voluntarily.

Here's the problem with Donkey Duty, though. It has to be done with the right heart. Two disciples went to go get the two animals. Maybe one of them did Donkey duty out of a sense of sheer duty. I can imagine the

grumbling. “Well, I guess someone has to do it. I just really wish it weren’t me. I don’t know... maybe next time I’ll just say no and go home. That’ll show ‘em.”

That word: duty. “It’s my duty to do this work.” Some things are our duty as Christians. Jesus seems to be pretty clear about that, especially when it comes to how we take care of the poor and vulnerable. But just because they’re our duty doesn’t mean duty should be the motivation that sustains us. Duty is what gets us up to do the right thing when we don’t want to. But duty alone can lead to bitterness. Or burnout.

Maybe the other disciple took a different attitude. Maybe he said, “Jesus needs this Donkey. It’s as simple as that. This might not be the main event, but I’m going to trust that Jesus is going to use it. In fact, isn’t it amazing how this mundane, dirty, stinky, boring work can be used by Jesus? I’m on Donkey Duty, and I have a key role to play in the fulfilling of prophecy, in bringing the glory to God, and in Jesus working out redemption of the world!” Donkey duty is nothing less than that.

Of course, we don’t always get to see Jesus’ mission advancing every time we’re on Donkey Duty. Sometimes we’re back mucking the stall when the action is taking place somewhere else.

At other times, our work seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with God’s plan. If you have a job, you might know what I’m talking about. The stuff that you *really* want to be doing is somewhere else, and the day-to-day grind doesn’t seem to do any good but fill the pockets of the owner of the company, or whatever the case may be. But here’s the

thing: perhaps you've been assigned Donkey Duty by Jesus, at your job, and you haven't realized it. Of course, sometimes God calls us out of certain jobs because they make us participating in evil things-- cheating customers, manipulating or deceiving people, doing something that we know to be wrong. But for the most part, unless you're trafficking people, drugs, weapons, or otherwise doing something to harm people, you can probably do your job to the glory of God. We can choose to have a positive influence on the people around us.

Many of you know this very well-- much better than I do-- and that's the lives that you lead. And so I just want to encourage you today that even when you can't see how God is going to use it, nothing that's done with a heart to honor and serve Jesus goes to waste. God sees your heart and is pleased with you.

There are duties other than Donkey Duty. And not all of us get Donkey Duty all the time. And so, I wonder, where might you have been on that first Palm Sunday? If not fetching the Donkey, then where? Would you be the person saying, "why are you taking that donkey?" Are you a member of the crowd laying your coats and palm branches at the feet of Jesus? (I'd *like* to think that'd be me). Would you have been leading the procession shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Or would you have been one of the people in the city, asking the question "Who is this?"

For much of my life, I probably would have been too timid to be in the procession. And I probably would have been too lazy to be on Donkey Duty. At best I would have been three rows back on the side of the

street, wanting to take it all in and make a responsible assessment of this supposed prophet. For some of us, Donkey Duty is our comfort zone. The problem would have been if Jesus told us to lead the procession. Others of us are afraid of our work not being seen. Will we do the work that Jesus gives to us?

Whatever you have coming up this week, whether it's glamorous or dirty, public or private-- you can choose to offer it to God, like laying a palm branch at the feet of Jesus.... Marvelling that you, even you, have been given the opportunity to participate in the very work of God.