

“The Lord Needs It”

Luke 19:28-40

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Jesus woke up on that first Palm Sunday morning, crawled out of bed, and knew he was on a mission that day. It would be a staggering, earth-shaking mission. He knew the local authorities had been plotting to do away with him. The local authorities, intimidated by Jesus' many acts of compassion and by the ground swell of support for his teaching, wanted him dead.

As he dresses himself for the day, he imagines confronting all this hostility with one grand gesture of peace. Rather than confront his accusers with power; he decides to confront them with a humble presence of peace. Rather than donning the clothing of royalty, he slips into the clothing of a common citizen.

Knowing that a donkey has always been a sign of peaceful intent, Jesus instructs his disciples to go into a certain village to acquire a donkey, an unmistakable symbol of peace.

The disciples consider this unusual request and they reply, ‘what if the owner of the donkey balks at our request...what shall we say? And Jesus answered, “Just say, ‘The Lord needs it.’” And, indeed, when they went to the nearby village and requested the donkey, the owner did give them a doubtful look. “The Lord needs it,” is all they needed to say. It was like Ali Baba saying ‘open sesame.’ It was as if there were a secret, insider language among the followers of Jesus. And the password was a four word phrase, ‘The Lord needs it.’

The donkey, an animal that had never been ridden previously, becomes the center of attention. A political king enters a city riding on a steed or a regal camel. A Messiah king enters a city on the humblest of four-legged creatures, a symbol that the One who rides comes in peace.

As I read and re-read this portion of the Palm Sunday story, I started to wonder about these words, ‘the Lord needs it.’ I got to wondering, ‘what gifts for peace does the Lord need from me?’ ‘What gifts for peace does the Lord need from South Church?’ What does any of us have that the Lord might need in order to establish the reign of peace? Two thousand years ago, he needed a donkey. What does the Lord need today?

I quickly thought of three essentials that contribute to the possibility of peace. First is a belief that peace begins right here with me, with my actions, with my words, with my decisions. I can not wait for the United Nations or NATO or the Secretary of State or any other person to usher in the day of peace. I must take responsibility for peace-making right here where I live and work and recreate. If I believe peace will emanate from some other quarter, I am gravely mistaken. What the Lord needs today from me and from you is this audacious belief that peace begins with me.

I am thinking now of the ways we express our anger. I actually know a few people who have learned to express their anger in ways that deepen a relationship. Most of the time, anger endangers a relationship because it is expressed in a cutting way. Peace has a chance when we all learn how to express, not repress, but express our anger in ways that deepen the bonds between us. Does that sound like it would take a miracle? It might, but it is a basic peace-making strategy.

We would all do well to come to some agreement, with the people we love, on how our anger will become a sacred part of our life together. This is what the Lord needs from us.

Second is a willingness to learn an additional language. It may be a specific language such as Chinese or Russian or Spanish. Or it may be a specialized language such as teen-speak or elder-speak or California-speak. Or it may be sign-language or it may be Braille, or it may be the languages of the Bible: Hebrew and Greek and Aramaic.

What I've noticed is the huge difference it makes when traveling abroad to make the effort to learn the simple greetings, or the vocabulary for ordering off the menu, or for arguing with a cab driver. I love arguing with the cab drivers outside the airport in Lilongwe. They are stunned that I know their language and that I have the nerve to ask for the local price not the tourist price. They moan and groan and shake their heads. But once a deal has been struck, they laugh and shake hands and smile and do a little rejoicing! We've all had these kinds of experiences! When we learn someone else's language, we are showing respect; we are meeting that person on their turf; we are, in my opinion, engaged in peace-making.

One of the languages I have learned is the language of Alcoholics Anonymous. I know the vocabulary: co-dependency, fifth-step, enabler, higher power, surrender, serenity. What I know is that the Lord needs us to become students of at least one additional language. When we do this, we are riding on a donkey, parading peace through the highways of a troubled, conflicted world.

Third is a readiness to have a love affair with planet Earth. Peace becomes possible when human beings choose to love the Earth. I so enjoy watching people who are in love.

They bend over backwards to treat each other with kindness, with gentleness, and with tenderness. They hug and kiss and hold hands and carry on.

Peace has something to do with being in love with the Earth, bending over backwards to treat her with kindness and gentleness and tenderness. I've been on the lookout for people in love with the earth. I see at least two each day. I see someone composting. I see another recycling plastic bottles. I see another planting a tree. I see another carpooling. I see another installing a solar panel. I see another on bended knee praising God for the fertility of the ground.

Part of our work as church people is to establish peace by helping people bring their theology and their practice into alignment. Most everyone believes the Earth is among God's best handiwork, a stroke of divine genius, the Eternal Artist at work. Yet, our actions and decisions don't always reflect that belief. What the Lord needs of us is to bring these two into harmony, our beliefs and our practice.

I love the image of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. The donkey was just what he needed. I'm offering this sermon as a way of inviting the church to ponder what the Lord might be needing from each of us individually, and from all of us collectively. This is what I wanted to say to the church on this Palm Sunday morning, in the greatest of hope. Amen.