

Mark 11: 1-11 "Donkey Duty" Rev. Janet Chapman 3/28/21

The last fruit of the Spirit we highlight in the Lenten journey to Jerusalem is joy, listed right after love which started off our journey 5 weeks ago. Some suggest that the order of the ninefold fruits of the Spirit are significant and that love is named first because of Paul's words from First Corinthians 13, "the greatest of these is love." If that is true, then joy's position as second in the list might imply that it is the second greatest among all the fruits of the Spirit. Yet, I am not sure that is what Paul had in mind, especially if he was familiar with the story which precedes today's story. Just a few short verses earlier, we see James and John arguing over who will be the greatest among them, who will get the honored position of sitting at Jesus' right and left hand. This jockeying for status and position was a favorite pastime of the disciples, as is often the case today, but such folks are the opposite of what it means to reflect joy. They are what you might call "killjoys" because they find pleasure in always being right and showing others they are wrong. Their false joy comes from thinking, "I'm the smartest, purest, most deserving person in the room." Unfortunately, no one wants to be in the room with them... not even Jesus. Likewise, outside of love, none of the fruits of the Spirit are deemed more essential than another so to rank them in importance would be instilling our competitive nature upon something which transcends such designations.

Randy Alcorn does point out that all the fruits of the Spirit are ingredients in realizing joy in one's life. The Holy Spirit's dwelling in our lives through the various fruits enables us to experience that divine joy which is deeper than happiness and lasts longer than a lifetime. It is that joy that many people saw when they met Jesus and it bubbled over in the crowd that gathered to welcome Jesus to the holy city of Jerusalem his final week on earth. The procession

down to Jerusalem is one of those very public moments in Jesus' ministry. Jesus is among the many pilgrims coming to Jerusalem to celebrate the joy of Passover, something which began yesterday at sundown this year for our Jewish brothers and sisters. As the story unfolds, we realize that Mark is suggesting that this is a rather well-planned event on Jesus' part. It will be a joyous parade but the first thing that happens is Jesus tells two disciples to go get a donkey. Securing transportation is a relatively minor detail so one has to wonder why is this point included? Mark spends half of his verses giving significant attention to this relatively trivial situation. The mundane task of donkey fetching is enhanced by Jesus' prediction about where the disciples will find the donkey and what will happen when they get there. It is something that had to be done – somebody had to fetch the donkey. Imagine years later, these two disciples trying to explain the significance of their donkey fetching ministry. Maybe the omission of their names reflects how they felt about it. At least one scholar suspects that the two may have been James and John, who had asked for recognition hours earlier and now here they are on donkey duty – not the kind of glory they had in mind! They envisioned far greater tasks for themselves, yet, this is what must be done so that Jesus can make his entry into the royal city. Jesus needs those who will take on the mundane; those who will make PBJ sandwiches for the hungry, those who will send a card to the lonely, those who will prepare communion, those who will pray for those in need.

Jesus is sending a message in this parade. Sometimes we like to think of things like this as spontaneous, but Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he sat upon that humble donkey. It may be his most brilliant act of political theatre. It interests me how that terminology is now considered an insult in today's culture, political theatre, when that is exactly

what Jesus was doing in his final week on earth. As some of us read in Borg and Crossan's book, The Last Week, Jesus is mimicking that imperial, ritzy, procession for Pilate who is entering at the other side of Jerusalem at the very same moment. Pilate rides in on a mighty steed, escorting his legions of troops from Caesarea, to secure and intimidate the overcrowded city at Passover. Jesus' counter procession is like a protest march against the oppression of not just Pilate but all of Rome. Whereas Pilate epitomizes superiority over the weak driving with the powerful reins of a warhorse, Jesus picks up the reins of a lowly donkey and thereby creatively reimagines weakness as strength and the poor as favored by God. Jesus shows his followers how not to deny their poverty but to proclaim it publicly. He puts down the oppressors and their attempts to define reality thus undercutting their political authority. Jesus' joyful procession is heavily influenced by a message of justice and equity, while at the same time ultimately becoming a funeral procession. The 12 disciples should have known what this ride into Jerusalem meant - Jesus warned them time and again of his impending death. But they were blinded by their own demands and limited vision. Overall, it was political theatre at its best.

I thought of this as I sat in last Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting and heard the rants of those who accused the Supervisors of political theatre – of continuing to abide by the state tier system, of the Supervisors continuing to recognize the threat of COVID and the need for masks, and the choice to postpone a vote on interpretation of the 2nd Amendment in light of the recent mass killing in Boulder. The funny thing was the angry speakers who approached the microphone were accusing some of the Supervisors of doing exactly what Jesus did – looking out for the poor, the grieving, and the oppressed, while offending the rich and powerful. Like in

Jesus' day, looking out for the "least of these" was not a popular stance and verbal threats abounded. The reality in this pandemic is that it is the black and latino population who have suffered and died at almost twice the rate of whites. In our very white community, we are quick to forget that. The truth is that since the time of Jesus, the script has often been reversed. Christians now occupy the halls of power, they hold the reins of warhorses, they establish who has voting rights and who doesn't. Reflecting that all-encompassing joy of Christ has taken a back seat to keeping our power solidly intact. It has become increasingly hard to tell whose procession we Christians have chosen to follow. This should give us pause to reflect and cast our gaze outside the city walls to hear the calls for equity and compassion for all, to see the theatre of those who have been cast aside and ignored by society. Christians ought never let access to power rob us of our roots with these folks, who had nothing but palms, blankets, and a borrowed donkey at hand to make their point. All of us must decide which procession to prepare for and support this week— may we find the grace to choose donkey duty and discover that joy which encompasses all the fruits of the Spirit.