

## “What If it Were Your Donkey?”

**Date:** March 25, 2018    **Place:** Lakewood UMC    **Occasion:** Palm Sunday  
**Texts:** Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44    **Theme:** Palm Sunday; Sacrifice

In the course of our study together on Monday nights, a group of us recently experienced a new method of Bible study, using the St. Ignatian Method. It's not an intellectual quest for understanding, as we sometimes do in Bible study, but rather it involves our imagination.

It begins by asking the question, “Where do I find myself in this story? With which character do I feel the closest connection?” The author of our study, James Harnish, tells us about a time when he was preparing for Palm Sunday, and he was living into the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

And something unexpected happened: he found himself identifying with the unnamed owners of the donkey that Jesus rode into the city. Do you remember that part of the story? When they saw the disciples untying the colt, they asked, “What are you doing? Where do you think you're going with our donkey?” (Luke 19:33, with author's paraphrase)

Rev. Harnish says, “I could understand their reaction. After all, if I saw a couple of strangers taking my car, my response would be very familiar. Wouldn't you if it were your car, or your donkey? Of course.

The only answer the donkey owners received was that the Master needed it. But that was enough. The owners let go of their donkey and let Jesus use it.

The story raises all kinds of questions that the Gospel writers aren't the least bit interested in answering. Who were the donkey owners? Were they in the Rent-A-Donkey business? Had Jesus paid for an advance

reservation with his Visa card? What happened to the donkey after the parade?

Rev. Harnish continued to meditate on this passage of Scripture, and as he lived into the story, he realized the Gospel writers weren't interested in those questions because none of them gets closer to the deeper, more disturbing questions the story began to raise in his soul:

- What if it were *my* donkey?
- Would I be willing to let it go?
- What if, like the owners of that donkey, I *am* being called to give something up of myself to Jesus?
- What if the way toward perfection is the way of surrender, the way of letting go?

And then he says, "Those questions led me to think about some of the most challenging words Jesus spoke: "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will save them." (Luke 9:23-24)

In John 12:24 Jesus says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Those words express the central paradox of Jesus' life and our discipleship: the only way to find the new life that Christ offers us is to learn to die to those things that are less than God's highest purpose for us.

E. Stanley Jones, one of the most outstanding global witnesses for the gospel in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, often described one of the central themes of his life as the discovery that we are not called to imitate Jesus but to surrender ourselves to Him.

He explained the difference between “self-realization” and self-surrender,” saying that in self-realization we assume the answers to life’s questions are inside us, whereas in self-surrender to Christ we find our answers in Him. Based on Jesus’ promise that it is in losing our life that we find it (Luke 17:33), E. Stanley Jones taught that we find ourselves when we lose ourselves in surrender to creative love.”

In trying to live this kind of life, I’ve experienced this kind of surrender as the movement from a “me first” mind-set to a “Christ first” mind-set. It is the movement from self-serving to self-giving, from living life *my way* to living life *Christ’s way*.

There was a time when I was searching for a one-time moment of total surrender that would take care of these issues for the rest of my life. But I have learned along the way that surrender to Christ is not a one-time event, but a pattern of living in continuous surrender.

It is in the daily surrender of my life to Christ that allows the love of God in Christ to become a continuous source of transformation in my life. Surrender is the way I participate in the process of being made perfect in love.

What have *you* been called to surrender to Jesus in the past? What part of *your* life has God asked you to turn over to Him so that he can have greater access to your heart? It may have been some particular habit, or sin that God asked you to turn over, to let him love you to health and wholeness.

On the other hand, it may not have been something bad or wrong or immoral. It may have been something perfectly innocent, but it had become especially important to you and had gotten in the way of

allowing God to be the highest priority of your life. What have you been called to surrender to Jesus in the past?

But let's not keep it back there in the past. Are you being called, today, to give up something of yourself to Jesus? What is your current "donkey" that Jesus wants you to let go of? Is it an attitude? Is it a habit? Is it a sin that you seem particularly fond of and keep holding on to? Is it some particular possession that you own, that now owns you?

What is your current donkey? Jesus wants you to let it go, give it to him, surrender that part of your life.

You see, the transforming paradox of the gospel is that new life comes only through death. The journey toward perfection always leads to the cross – where we die to old attitudes, habits, assumptions, sins, and ways of thinking and living. We die to the old, so that we can be raised to the new life that Christ has for us.

It's what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in my body, I live by faith, indeed, by the faithfulness of God's Son, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20)

You see, the question we should ask is not, "Who were the donkey owners?" The truth is, that in a sense, we all are donkey owners. The important question is "Will we surrender to Jesus, all that we have and all that we are?"

Know this - if we will surrender, God's saving love can become a tangible reality in this world, through us. Amen.

Let us pray:

"Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, my entire will – all that I have and call my own. You have

given it all to me. Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and grace. This is enough for me. Amen.” - Reuben Job

This sermon borrows heavily from the daily workbook of the book *A Disciple's Heart: Growing in Love and Grace*, by James A. Harnish with Justin Larosa. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, pp. 61-63.