

What Does the Lord Need From Us?

Luke 19:28-40

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Palm/Passion Sunday

Leslie A. Klingensmith

“Just say this: the Lord needs it.” Those words from the Palm Sunday story have always stuck with me. The whole scenario is odd – Jesus asks his disciples to do something that they wouldn’t ordinarily do. They are to go ahead of Jesus into the village ahead, find a colt (or a donkey) that has never been ridden, untie the animal, and bring it back to Jesus. If asked about why they are doing such a thing (certainly not outside the realm of possibility, especially if people think the disciples are stealing the donkey), they are to respond “The Lord needs it.”

The disciples do exactly as they are told, and thus unfolds one of the most familiar stories in our tradition. But a lot is packed into those four small words “The Lord needs it.” The Lord needs the donkey so that the words of the prophet Zechariah can be fulfilled – that the new and unlikely king will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. The Lord needs this donkey so that he can set off the chain of events – some tragic, others miraculous – that offer us a glimpse of God’s grace and God’s desire for relationship with us.

The Lord needs it. We aren’t given details as to how the people who questioned the disciples reacted to that response...I guess they didn’t put up too much of an argument. If there had been a street fight over the donkey I’m guessing that would have made it into the canon. So I wonder...what would the world look like if we handed over whatever was asked of us, just because we were told that our God had need of it? “The Lord needs your bicycle.” “The Lord needs your fishing rod.” “The Lord needs your five loaves of bread.” What could God do with us and whatever we have to offer if we were that unquestioningly obedient?

And here is another question...what exactly is it that the Lord needs from us? On Palm Sunday, things unfolded just as they were supposed to because some unnamed person was willing for two disciples to walk off with their donkey. What if they had said "You can't have my donkey, but here is a clay pot. You're welcome to it." I believe that human beings normally want to be generous...but we cannot always know the mind or needs of God. Could there be instances where we are misguided in our generosity, offering something with a hopeful spirit, with the best of intentions, that isn't really what God needs? I believe such a thing is possible, and that it is important to be prayerful and discerning. God's needs are not normally so clearly expressed as they were on that first Palm Sunday. What does the Lord need from us, and are we prepared to deliver it?

If you had come by the church last Thursday afternoon, you would have found me auditioning for the part of the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*. I think most of you would agree that I am a fairly easygoing person, and don't normally go on rampages, but in this case I was wound up. It had to do with the shipment of palm branches. For several years now, St. Matthew has ordered our palms from Eco-Palms, an ecumenical organization that buys palm branches that are sustainably harvested and fairly traded. The product has always been good, and I like the full branch rather than the sword-like strips that are common at local florists. Plus, doing business with Eco-Palms is a way that we can demonstrate our commitment to caring for the earth and our neighbors.

When the palms initially arrived, I noticed that they looked a little droopy, and was concerned that they wouldn't hold up until Sunday. I immediately put them in water, hoping that they would perk up. Around 24 hours later I looked carefully, and the palms looked AWFUL. Most

of them were dry and the ends were curled up and many of them had discolored leaves. It was terribly disappointing. I sat down and started going through them trying to decide which were usable and which needed to be thrown out. There were a couple that were so bad that when I lifted the branch, every single leaf would fall off. I would take them into Al's office and say "I think this is the best one." And then a few minutes later one that was even worse would emerge. I wound up throwing out about a third of the palms, while recognizing that at least half of the ones I kept were marginal and would look pretty bad by Sunday.

I know that in the grand scheme of things, this was not too terrible a problem. But Palm Sunday is only once a year, and the thought of handing you all these laughably ugly palms just made me cringe. So...I emailed Eco-Palms and asked for a new shipment of branches. About three minutes after sending the email, I decided time was of the essence and I needed to call instead. I wasn't rude, but I was clear that the product was unacceptable. The Eco-Palms operator was apologetic, yet said I was going to have to use a local florist if I wanted to make a change. It was too late to get fresher branches shipped here. I reluctantly accepted that, but said that I was assuming that the church's money would be refunded. They asked if ANY were usable, and I replied that we could use maybe a quarter of them without embarrassment. She said they would refund 80% of our money. "Okay," I said. "Because I believe in the mission of Eco-Palms, we'll give you all another chance next year. But if the product continues to be bad, I'm afraid that will be the end of our association." I thought that was the best way the situation could be resolved at that moment, took a little bit of satisfaction from getting most of the money back, and went about my day doing other things. But I was still unhappy, and planning to spend part of the next day trying to find more palms to supplement the ones that were salvageable.

So, imagine my surprise when I arrived at work Friday morning and found a series of apologetic messages from the florist affiliated with Eco-Palms who had sent the branches in the first place. She had tracked the package and discovered that our box had sat in an unrefrigerated truck for a week. The true delight was in her closing sentences: “You should receive your fresh palms by Friday morning. Here is the tracking number. We apologize for any inconvenience this has caused you, and thank you for your support of Eco-Palms.” VICTORY!

Now, I know that if we had had to use the dried up palms, and our children’s parade was characterized by curled up leaves falling around everywhere, you all would have been good sports about it. And, to be honest, my conscience has troubled me a little bit about the whole thing – we got our sustainably harvested, fairly traded palm branches, and the people who cut and bundled them were paid a decent wage for their labors. That’s not nothing. But we now have used twice as many as we normally would, and fuel was burned to get both sets here. Did I do the right thing? On all levels? I don’t know. I hope so.

But as all of that unfolded, bear in mind that my mind was also working on this meditation and the question I have raised: “What does the Lord need from us?” As occasionally happens, I began to tease out some guidance from the 2019 Perils of the Palm Branches. We are finishing up a Lenten series on the theme of “Welcoming the Stranger.” We have looked at the biblical call to hospitality in the Torah, the Prophets, the Gospels, and the New Testament Letters, and considered what those scriptures say to us in today’s world about how American-born people should relate to immigrants and refugees who come here seeking a better life. It’s likely that we have different opinions on how people of faith should deal with some of the law and policy issues that affect immigrants, but I sense that we are unified in our concern

for sisters and brothers of all nations. There are some basic standards of decency that we have to push for in our quest to be followers of Christ and faithful citizens.

And what do dried up palm branches have to do with all of these heavy issues? That whole adventure reminded me that sometimes speaking up makes a difference. I'm not trying to say "Oh, I did such a great job." The incident actually made me wonder why I don't raise my voice more often. If I had a dollar for every time I've said "I'm going to write a letter" or "I'm going to call my representative," I could retire tomorrow and take all of you with me. Sometimes I do write the letter (or the email) or make the call. But often I don't. I just let it go. Why? Because there are days when I'm cynical, when I assume that nothing I say or do in an attempt to right a wrong can make any difference. The system is too big and too broken and too many powerful people benefit from the way things are. It won't do any good to demand something better...or so I tell myself.

But guess what? Sometimes it does. Sometimes a person higher up the chain repents and you receive a box of fresh palm branches in the morning delivery. And maybe our voices are exactly what the Lord needs from us right now. The Lord needs us to speak up, and not only about a lousy product for which we paid good money. The Lord needs us to speak up – to shout even – on behalf of those who are voiceless. The Lord needs us to be persistent in our advocacy and relentlessly firm about what is unacceptable. Human beings cannot be kept in cages. Children cannot be deported without their parents, or vice versa.

Today is Palm Sunday, but also Passion Sunday – the moment when we make the turn from the hope and optimism of waving branches to the somber reality of Jesus' arrest, humiliation, and death. The same people who shouted "Blessed is the king who comes in the

name of the Lord!” could be the same ones who shout “Crucify him!” on Friday...or perhaps they didn’t actively seek to harm him, but stood quietly by and said nothing. They were convinced there was nothing they could do. They didn’t want to say anything unless the wrath of the Empire should be directed toward them.

We know that Jesus’ death and resurrection were part of God’s revelation, designed by God as a way of deepening the relationship between him and us. I suppose from that perspective there was nothing that could change the way things played out. But still I wonder...what if someone had spoken up as they spat on Jesus and beat him? Was there another way? Could things have unfolded differently if enough people had raised their voices? We’ll never know.

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Amen.