

April 14, 2019

PALM SUNDAY Sermon – Rev. Ryk Brown

Scripture Reading: Luke 19:28-40

28After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 30saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" 32So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. 33As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" 34They said, "The Lord needs it." 35Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. 36As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, 38saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" 39Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." 40He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

So, did you hear about the man on the mountain in Hamilton this week posing as a police K9 officer and going up to rural houses and asking if he could use their yard for training purposes? He wasn't wearing a uniform and he wasn't in a police car. So, naturally, people were suspicious and called Hamilton police who said they had no K9 officers in the area, and immediately sent a police car out to track down this imposter. Well, they found him. And it turns out he wasn't an imposter after all. He was an RCMP officer and they were doing training in the area. But somebody at the RCMP forgot to notify Hamilton police that they were going to be in the area.

So, what do you do when somebody comes to your door and wants something?

As you know, I ride a motorcycle, and I have lots of friends who ride motorcycles. And every motorcyclist has a road story. Last week, I was at my riding club's monthly meeting, and one of the guys was sharing a riding story about a trip he took out west. It was a long distance between gas stations, too long, and he and his buddy ran out of gas. So, they pulled over to the side of the road and spotted a farm house in the distance. Figuring farms often have gas they walked down the road and up the lane to see if they could buy some gas from the farmer. They were more than happy to pay for it. Sure enough the farmer had a big gas tank beside his house and even a jerrycan sitting beside it to carry the gas. So, they knocked on the door to ask the farmer if they could buy some gas. No answer. They knocked again. No answer. They figured they only needed a little, one can would do them to get to the next gas station, and that wouldn't be much out of the whole tank. Since nobody was home, they decided to help themselves and just leave the money tucked under a rock by the tank to pay for the gas. They were even going to leave a little extra as a thank you. As they were about to start pouring the gas, the door of the house opened, and this big dog came running out and chased them off the property. Turns out the farmer had been home the whole time, but he just didn't want to open his door to two bikers.

So, what do you do when somebody comes to your door and wants something?

In generations past, we were much more trusting, and, chances are, if a stranger came to your door asking for something, you'd open the door and do your best to help. But these days we're far more suspicious.

So, what do you do when somebody comes to your door and wants something?

That's exactly what some poor homeowner had to deal with 2000 years ago in our bible story for today when two of Jesus' disciples showed up at his house and asked to borrow a donkey, because "the lord needs it."

Actually, that's not quite how it happened. If you read carefully, you'll see that Jesus did not tell his disciples to go and ask for the donkey. He told them to just go and take it. And only if somebody asks them what they're doing, then they should say "the Lord needs it." As if that should be a good enough reason to steal a donkey.

And that's what happens. They're in the middle of untying the donkey when the owner catches them and asks, "just what do you two think you're up to?" So, they tell him that "the Lord needs it," just as Jesus told them to say.

What always amazes me about this story is that was apparently a good enough reason to satisfy the homeowner and he freely gives the donkey with no more questions asked.

Now, back then, a donkey was not just a pet, it was a work animal. It would be the equivalent to a pickup truck today. Imagine you're at home and you hear something in your driveway. You look outside and see two guys trying to break into your pickup truck. Now, you probably wouldn't go out to confront them. You'd probably just call the police immediately. But, say you did go out to confront them, and asked them what they were doing, and they said, "oh, the Lord needs your truck." Would you say, "oh, alright then, if the Lord needs it, here's the keys!" No! You would never say that! It would never happen!

This is actually an outrageous story! We often gloss over this part of the story when we're celebrating Palm Sunday, because we want to get to the parade. That's the big deal of Palm Sunday: the parade into Jerusalem.

That's the part we like to celebrate with the kids. We bring in the donkey. We wave the palm branches like the crowds did back then when they were welcoming Jesus. We talk about the significance of Jesus riding humbly on a donkey and the symbolism of the donkey. We talk about the fact that, here at the beginning of Holy Week, the crowd is gathered to enthusiastically welcome Jesus, but just a few days later, on Friday, the same crowd will turn against him, and they will be shouting for him to be crucified. How quickly people can change.

These are the things we usually talk about on Palm Sunday. We like to focus on the parade with Jesus on the donkey. But we rarely focus on how Jesus actually got the donkey in the first place.

The fact that he presumed to be able to just help himself to some stranger's donkey, and that the explanation of "the Lord needs it" would be good enough to secure the donkey. That's outrageous!

But it's not really until we put it into modern terms with somebody trying to take your pickup truck out of your driveway without asking, only to say, "the Lord needs it"; only then do we see just how outrageous this story is!

This would never happen!

But it did happen.

Jesus' disciples were so confident in the righteousness of their mission that they didn't even hesitate to go and get the donkey. And the homeowner was so persuaded by the righteousness of their mission that he didn't even hesitate to give up his donkey. All because "the Lord needs it."

Would you do the same?

When confronted by the immediate need of Jesus' mission here on earth, would you immediately respond like the homeowner, saying, "yes, please, take whatever you need. How else can I help?"

'Cause that's exactly what we're confronted with in terms of Jesus' mission on earth today. The world needs Jesus more urgently than ever. As the world disconnects from Jesus more and more with each passing generation, we see a corresponding rise in selfishness and hatred.

As Jesus' message of love hits fewer ears, we see more selfishness and more anger, and more hatred in the world.

The rich are getting richer. They're not sharing their wealth with those in need as much as they used to. They complain and lobby against taxes meant to help the needs of the less fortunate. They claim they want to determine their own charitable givings, and not have the government decide for them. But, the reality is that they don't give as much when they have the option, and they don't give where the need actually is. They give to the charities that strike their interests.

Now there are worthy exceptions to this trend. Author JK Rowling who wrote the Harry Potter books, went from living out of her car to being one of the wealthiest women in the entire world in just a short period of time. She also became famous for being one of the few people to fall off of the Forbes Billionaires List because of her charitable givings. She came from nothing so she recognizes the value of the blessings she's received, so she gives extremely generously. Now, I don't know if she's a Christian or not, but, what I can say, is that she definitely gets the message of Jesus and lives by it.

We also see an increase in givings to all kinds of Go Fund Me campaigns, but at the same time we see education budgets and health care budgets and poverty initiatives being slashed. Granted, governments need to be held to real accountability for how those taxes are spent, but good government should always be about supporting the needs of the less fortunate.

Now, don't get me wrong. Go Fund Me is a great thing. And it's great to give to Go Fund Me campaigns. This town has rallied to the aid of the family on the 5th concession who lost their house in a fire recently through supporting a Go Fund Me campaign.

And, I have a very good friend who was struck down by a freak virus that attacked his spine and left him partially paralyzed. He lost his job and he'll probably never work again. He and his wife had to do thousands of dollars worth of renovations to their home to make it accessible for him. Money they couldn't possibly afford on their own. The only way they could do the renovations was through a Go Fund Me campaign.

So, Go Fund Me is good. But at the same time as we see these campaigns succeeding, we also see education, health care, and poverty initiatives, all being slashed, with tax breaks being given to those who can afford to pay taxes.

And then, as if to prove my point, did you hear about the fellow in Vancouver this week who was complaining on social media about the taxes he had to pay on his new car? Well, BC has a luxury surtax on luxury cars worth more than \$150,000. They believe that if you can afford to buy a car worth more than \$150,000 then you can afford to pay a little more tax to assist those in the community who are less fortunate. Well this guy was buying a new car worth \$5 million and he lives in a house worth \$50 million and he's complaining about the taxes he has to pay on his new car! Trust me, if you can afford to spend \$5 million on a car then you can afford to pay the taxes so that other people can benefit from social services.

As a society, we're less generous than we used to be. As society disconnects further and further from the message of Jesus, we see a corresponding rise in selfishness. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. And the wealth is being held by an ever smaller group of people.

And, we're also seeing a rise in hatred.

We see an increase in anti-immigrant sentiments, forgetting that, unless you're indigenous, the rest of us all come from immigrant families. And it's not just happening in the States, although that does seem to hog all the airtime. We're seeing it in Europe and here in Canada too. But what message does the bible say to us about immigrants? From Deuteronomy: "For the Lord your God...loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt." This message is being lost today.

Fear and hatred are on the rise.

Facebook made the news again this week because they finally got around to kicking off a bunch of hate groups that have been using their network to share messages of hate around the world. A good start, but still a long way to go. Racism is on the rise. Hatred is on the rise. Terrorism is on the rise.

And, it's not that we're just hearing more about it than we used to because we're so interconnected now. It's actually on the rise. Statistics Canada released a report at the end of last year stating that 2017 (the latest year they have statistics for) was the highest year on record for hate crimes in Canada. With the most incidents occurring against Muslim, Jewish, and black people. And Ontario and Quebec were the worst of all the provinces for hate crimes.

And just this week, the head of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service said that his agency is more and more preoccupied with the threat of violent right-wing extremism and white supremacists.

So, it's happening right here at home.

After the murder of Muslims in New Zealand the other week, I actually had somebody say to me that Islam is a racist religion, as if to say, "they're racist, so why shouldn't we be racist back?"

Another person said to me that Muslims are just a bunch of murderers and rapists. And he actually believed these words. He's a former soldier who served in the Middle East, so he's seen the worst of Islamic extremists first-hand, but he believes that what he's seen there is true of all Muslims and he blames Islam as an entire religion. He quoted me an article about how many people were killed by Islamic extremists last year, as if that justifies hatred against all Muslims. He can't tell the difference between a Muslim and an extremist. I told him that any Muslim I've ever met condemns these acts of terrorism as being contrary to the teachings of the Koran, but he wouldn't listen. And this was a Christian I was talking to. And local!

Even some people who claim to be followers of Jesus are losing touch with his actual message of peace, love and forgiveness, and they are filling their hearts with prejudice and hatred.

I remember, when I was a teenager, I was asked to play flute at a wedding. Back then I wore my hair long and had an earring. Actually, I had three earrings. The minister at the church where the wedding was, confronted me about my earrings and asked me if I was gay. I said, no, but what difference should it make? He said that all homosexuals should be lined up against a wall and shot. After all, it says in the bible, that if a man lies with a man it is an abomination and they should be stoned to death. This was a Christian minister!

Believe it or not, this was actually a United Church minister. He was one of the founders of the group known as the Community of Concern back when the United Church was first debating the issue of the inclusion of homosexuals within the church. The Community of Concern was vehemently opposed to embracing homosexuals in Christian unity. That's the kind of hatred the debate provoked 30 years ago. And, for some, it continues today.

But the quote from the bible that he used to justify his hatred is actually accurate. The bible really does say that men who lie with men should be stoned to death.

The bible actually contains a lot of outrageous ancient laws that we would never enforce today. Innocuous stuff like don't wear cloth woven from two fabrics. Or don't have tattoos. As well as really horrible stuff like rapists must be forced to marry their victims, women should not have authority over men, and homosexuals should be stoned to death.

Yet, some Christians claim their condemnation of homosexuality is just being faithful to the bible. But if they were truly being faithful to their literalist interpretation of the bible then they'd also have to enforce all these other ancient laws too. Which they don't do. So, they're not actually being faithful to the bible. They're being faithful only to the parts that support their prejudices.

But, when Jesus was asked about the importance of the ancient laws, he said, "the most important laws are to love God with your whole being, and love your neighbour as yourself." Even some people who claim to follow Jesus have lost touch with this message today. Love your neighbour as yourself. This is the message that the world needs to hear, now more than ever. This is the message we need to share with the world, now more than ever.

Love your Muslim neighbour, your Jewish neighbour, your Christian neighbour, your Sikh neighbour, your atheist neighbour, your gay neighbour, your straight neighbour, your transgendered neighbour, your immigrant neighbour, your indigenous neighbour, your black neighbour, your brown neighbour, your white neighbour, your poor neighbour, your rich neighbour, your female neighbour, your male neighbour, your old neighbour, your young neighbour. Jesus didn't distinguish. He said, "love your neighbour."

The world needs the peace, love and forgiveness message of Jesus more now than ever before in our living memory.

So, when the urgent need of the Lord comes knocking at your door, it won't be to borrow your donkey or your pickup truck this time, it will be to ask for your full resources, your whole life! To share the message of love with a broken world. When the Lord comes knocking, will you respond like the homeowner in the story, and say, "yes, by all means, take whatever you need. How else can I help?"

Because it's happening now! The Lord needs you!