

Palm Sunday, April 1, 2007

**“Are We Untying Anything for the Lord?”**

Luke 19:28-40

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There once was a lovely but quite poor old woman known to all by the name of “Old Betty.” I’d say she had a heart of gold, but gold, though precious, is very hard. She did not have a hardened heart at all! So I’ll say instead she had a heart of pure, bright sunshine. Old Betty made it a habit to visit those who were sick as often as possible, and Old Betty gave of the little money she had to people who had even less. Always, always, she told people about the love of God in Jesus Christ.

But one day Old Betty grew very sick. She lay in bed month after month, worn down by pain and helpless. During one of the visits from her minister, he found himself asking about whether or not it was all a terribly difficult change for her, given how active she had been. Old Betty gently replied, “No sir, not at all. When I was well, I used to hear the Lord say day by day, ‘Betty, go here. Betty, go there. Betty, do this. Betty do that,’ and I used to do it as well as I could. And now I hear him instruct me every day, saying, ‘Betty, just lie still, Betty, just cough.’”

Old Betty displayed a truly obedient heart, whether serving others or struggling for a breath. She loved and served the Lord in good times and bad times, whether it was to help the Lord help others or to help her. She had no agenda other than to be obedient to the directions she was given by God in the print of the Bible and interpreted by the Holy Spirit to her heart. And this gave her a constant sense of peace and joy all the days of her life. She lived happily ever after.

What do you think of when you hear the word “obedience?” Do you think of obedience as a peaceful, joyful sort of way to live? Or does it feel more restrictive, perhaps even oppressive?

Right now, I’m thinking about how we can’t teach our pet gerbils the same way we can teach dogs to obey commands. With a seed in my hand, I say “give my your paw” and all they do is look at me all beady-eyed before quickly burying their heads in shredded toilet paper rolls! Cute, but just not the same as a dog trick.

I also, more seriously, think about *people* who faithfully obey commands. Like the many very brave men and women who serve their neighbors near and far through helping and healing professions (like police officers, fire department personnel, medics, doctors and nurses). And, with enormous respect, I surely think of all those who are

serving our country's military. Rather than just obeying to get a treat, so to speak, these loved ones and neighbors obey, often at great personal risk, for the sake of safety, community well-being, and promoting the divinely inspired ideals of life, liberty and justice for all.

A quick check of a dictionary explains that the word we know as "obey" is originally from a Latin word meaning, roughly, "to turn our hearing toward." In other words, obeying has much to do with who we are listening to and understanding why we feel compelled to do so.

Of all the people we Christians need to feel compelled to obey, Jesus is – need I even say it? -- the most important. But why do we do so? Is it because we feel we should be obedient because that's what others expect of us? Is it because we have a deep, personal relationship with Him for which we feel very grateful? Maybe you aren't comfortable asking questions like when it comes to matters of faith. I believe, however, that we do need to ask questions in order to strengthen our relationship with the Lord. It's how we keep our faith fresh and relevant to our lives. It's how we come to understand the Bible as our most important tool for living a righteous life rather than just as a book of old sayings and instructions. So, this morning, let's ask the Gospel of Luke why we should obey Jesus and what He wants us to do to be obedient to Him.

According to the account in Luke we just read, we turn our hearing toward Jesus because He is the most wonderful, most authoritative, crystal clear example of what it means to be faithful to God's word as it is found in the Bible. He was a teacher of what we know today as the Old Testament. His perfect union with God the Father, the Author of all things, gave him the inside scoop on every detail of every story, law, teaching, poem and prophecy. Even still, he studied it all for nearly thirty years before he began teaching and healing and revealing to the world what on earth and in heaven's name he was up to.

So he knew ... he knew from the Scriptures that it was his responsibility, his purpose for living, to take all of our sins and sufferings and make them his own. Every wrong thought, word and action we've ever had toward others, ourselves and above all God, he knew he was destined to take the blame for. Like someone paying off a several million dollar debt with no strings attached, he understood he was to take it all so we could start over and have a good account with God once again. And he knew ... he knew from the Scriptures that the cost would be his life; with the big pay-off coming when he would journey to Jerusalem, the City of David, and suffer every form of human suffering imaginable. Even though he knew his execution was certain, he was obedient

to the end because he loved us more than we can ever really possibly know.

One big part of what he knew and was obedient to, was revealed through an Old Testament prophet named Zechariah. This guy found himself preaching that the day was coming when a new King would come to Jerusalem, the holy hub of God's chosen people, and that this new king would arrive "triumphant and victorious" yet "humble" and riding on a colt. Upon his arrival, he would "command peace" to every nation of the world, and his rule would be from sea to sea to the ends of the earth. (Zech. 9). He was speaking of Emmanuel! Of Jesus! The Son of God, the King of Kings.

We know this because Luke tells us Jesus indeed asked for a colt just before entering the holy city. Not some amazing stud of a war stallion, but just a little 'ol hee-haw donkey. He didn't care how this was going to look or how many people actually understood why he was doing it. He knew only to be obedient to God's Word. To do this, though, he needed help from his friends, his disciples. He commanded them to go and borrow someone's colt, saying only that the Lord had need of it.

Maybe these disciples thought the idea of entering Jerusalem on a donkey would not exactly signal to all the people that Israel's King of King, Lord of Lords had arrived to win back the holy city. Or maybe they knew of Zechariah's prophecy. Either way, what these disciples knew and what they have to teach us is that *even the smallest act of obedience to Jesus is in service to Jesus' greater act of obedience*. Asking a stranger to borrow his colt, to untie it for the Lord, wasn't as impressive as going on a big mission trip or becoming a minister of the Word and Sacrament. And yet it was ... for if this hadn't been done, there might well have been a bump in the bigger plan mapped out in the Bible. The grand pageant that was that very first Palm Sunday just might not have fulfilled that which was prophesied long ago. So, no thing done in the name of the Lord is a small thing! Obedience, both great and small, when grounded in God's word, is useful to the ministry of reconciliation and liberation that Jesus was born to carry out.

If you read closely, there isn't any mention of royal palm branches in Luke's Gospel. He simply was not concerned with telling all the regal trimmings of the event. Instead, he wants us to stay focused on that symbol of simple obedience, on going and untying a colt just because the Lord had need of it. He wants us to read this part of his Gospel, especially today and throughout this holy week now upon us, and consider what we are untying for the Lord. What small acts of obedience are we doing to help carry on Jesus' greater act of restoring all of humanity's relationship with God, of showing the world that he truly is the King of Kings?

May Jesus' example inspire us always. May we forever find ourselves turning

our hearing toward Him. May we ever be like Old Betty, so that we too may know true peace and joy throughout our life journeys. Amen.