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Lent: Give up feeling powerless  
Martin Grove United Church  
April 14, 2019  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 19:28-40

What's going on here? This is Palm Sunday. Rev. Paul promised he would get off his recent fixation on the idea of giving things up for Lent. He promised us that this week would be all palms and platitudes. Well, you should have known better anyway. You must know that I am not big on platitudes. Besides, just because I am inviting you this week to give up something else for Lent does not mean that this is not a celebration of Palm Sunday. Perhaps there is a connection between Palm Sunday and the call to give up feeling powerless. Or perhaps I've just decided to give up making sense for Lent.

In any case, we've all just heard the Palm Sunday reading - Luke's version of it anyway. Are you happy? Are you satisfied? Well I'm not. I'm not satisfied because the story - while interesting and provocative - seems to be incomplete. It seems to only be giving us half of the story. To me it reads like most stories we get in the news these days, where the story we are given makes it obvious that something more is going on, that we are not being told about.

In order to find the other half of this story, we might need a bit of history. And the history we need is interesting - because social conditions at the time of Jesus were surprisingly similar to social conditions today. In today's language, "power speaks". And historically, we would say that social structures at the time of Jesus operated according to a "domination system".

According to theologians Margus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, domination systems are based on 3 principles. The first principle is political oppression - meaning that a few powerful, wealthy elites had disproportionate control over the lives of the huge majority of people. The second principle is economic exploitation, mainly through the control of the means of production - in Jesus's day, the means of production were primarily land and labour. These two principles together place wealth and power in the hands of a very small number of people. Putting wealth and power into a small number

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of hands is clearly unethical by just about any standard, and we might wonder why societies would choose to follow these principles. The third principle of domination systems was therefore some method to legitimize the first two principles. Two very common schemes to legitimate unfair sharing of resources are military force and religion. Or sometimes, religion and social structures worked together, declaring - for example - that a particular king was chosen by God to rule and then letting that king rule with impunity.

Today of course we are more sophisticated than that. The elite no longer control us using superstitious religious ideas - unless they work of course, which they actually do in some parts of the world including parts of the United States. For those of us who are immune to religious ideologies, our elite use fear as a primary mechanism to keep their unethical concentration of wealth and power. Fear of immigrants, fear of global economic meltdown, fear of "Russia", fear of Islam, fear of refugees. You know the list. And if you don't know what you are supposed to fear, just read any newspaper that comes to hand and it will tell you exactly what the elite want you to be afraid of.

In any case, social injustice has historically often been legitimated by an appeal to either military force, religion, both. As Borg and Crossan state, "in premodern societies known to us, religion has been used to legitimate the place of the wealthy and powerful in the social order over which they preside."

And that's the missing piece of history that will allow us to see the complete riding-on-a-donkey story. Oh - that and one more detail. The Jewish people living in Palestine at the time of Jesus were politically and economically dominated by Rome. Passover was approaching, and that meant that many Jewish pilgrims were heading to Jerusalem. And passover for Jewish people represents a story of liberation from slavery and domination. Passover in Palestine would be a reminder of liberation in a place where Jewish people did not feel very liberated. Tensions would therefore naturally be high. In order to keep the peace, Pilate would have brought in troops to help control the crowd - to make sure that the passover festivities did not become a catalyst for civic unrest and rebellion.

And so, during the event that we commemorate on the Palm Sunday, we had 2

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parades. Through one gate, we have Pilate, riding on a war horse, leading a large, well-equipped and well-trained army. That parade represented power, force, control, and domination. Through the other gate, we have - Jesus. Riding on a donkey, with no army, no wealth, nothing of power. But where Pilate would have been greeted with a mixture of indifference and fear, Jesus was greeted with joyful crowds, grateful crowds, loud crowds, singing crowds.

In the biblical stories, we only hear about the parade that Jesus led. But modern biblical scholars pretty much all agree that Pilate would have had his own parade too. The classic way to put on a show of military strength is to put on a show - a parade. That annual event was very distasteful to the Jewish people in Jesus's day, and they all knew about it, so they didn't bother to write it down. The Jesus parade was in fact a parade in response to Pilate's parade. Jesus's parade was actually a parody - perhaps even a lampoon - of Pilate's parade. Jesus's parade was criticism. It was ridicule. It was sarcasm. It was the sort of mocking response to authority that can get you killed!

The story raises the obvious question: why does Jesus go to Jerusalem? If Jesus is opposed to the concentration of wealth that is a natural outcome of a large number of pilgrims coming for the passover, why does Jesus go there? Why doesn't Jesus continue his ministry with the rural poor? Why doesn't Jesus enter Jerusalem when the political pressures are lower? It seems that Jesus could easily have avoided a confrontation with the authorities if he had wanted to. It's almost as if Jesus sees his mission as a mission that includes confronting the wealthy authorities of his day. Jesus seems to believe that ministry involves comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable, just like I do. Jesus not only rides into Jerusalem. Jesus is driven into Jerusalem. Jesus is driven into Jerusalem as part of his ministry.

When we say it like that, it perhaps sounds a bit strange. But in fact, it is very common. Demonstrations by the masses against the people who control things is nothing new. Injustice is nothing new. Inequality is nothing new. Racism is nothing new. Think of "Black Lives Matter". Think of "Arab Spring". Think of the "Palestinian Right of Return". Or on a more basic level, think of the 1000's of students and teachers who marched last weekend against proposed educational cuts by the Ontario Government.

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Most days, teachers help their students by working directly with them. But once in a while, they need to march, they need to have a parade. Jesus spent most of his ministry teaching and healing people on the fringes of society. But apparently, once in a while he needed to march. He needed to have a parade.

The Jesus parade was far more political than it was religious. Jesus was riding into town to the cheering of the masses in opposition to Roman rule and to the many people who conspired on the side of the Romans, which included many of the religious elite. It was not a battle of good vs evil, it was not a battle between different religious groups, it was a battle to expose the stark division between the wealthy elites and the common, poor, masses. It was a battle to expose the stark division between people who obsess on power, and those who felt they had no power. Joining in the Jesus parade was a way to regain some power. Joining in the Jesus parade was a way to give up feeling powerless. Perhaps we should all - on Palm Sunday - join in and give up feeling powerless for Lent.

If you have ever wondered what it felt like to be at the Jesus parade, ask someone who marched on Queen's Park last weekend and you might get the right idea. I saw interviews of some of the people - teachers and students - who marched last weekend and they actually said that there were marching because of their own need to take back power from the government. This idea of giving up feeling powerless is actually important, yes even today.

Besides, why should we feel powerless in the first place? I know that for many of us, we imagine that the best parts of our lives are in the past. But don't forget, only the present exists anyway. If that's too philosophical for you, consider this: Today you are the youngest you will ever be again. Think you are too poor? Half the planet lives on less than \$2 per day. And what's more, think of every single Jesus story you know. Is there even a single Jesus story where Jesus hands out cash? No! Is there even a single Jesus story where Jesus asks for cash? No! Jesus even refuses to ask for money from the rich young ruler. Do you think you are too uneducated? Compared to world standards, you are very well educated. There is a surefire way to know if you still have a mission on this earth. If you are still breathing, you still have a mission. You just have to be realistic

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of course. But feeling powerless is a choice was make, not a reflection of reality. Give up feeling powerless.

Besides, if you refuse to give up feeling powerless, how on earth could you give up any of the other things you've been asked to give up during Lent over the past few weeks: your need for control, your expectations, your resentments, your being judgmental<sup>1</sup>. If you have struggled giving up those things, perhaps you need to give up feeling powerless first.

Join the Jesus parade. Jesus said you will find new life. That's what resurrection is all about, but we'll get to that next week.

*Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> See Rev. Paul's lenten sermons for 2019.