

April 10, 2022 Palm Sunday

Transforming Power

Luke 19:1-10; 28-40

We read the story of Jesus' Triumphal Entry from scripture – but we start with another story, something that happened earlier that day. We read first from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 19, verses 1-10:

19 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' ⁹Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

And now we read Luke 19, verses 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.'

It's not news that we are living through a time of fragmentation and division, both in our society as a whole and within Christianity in the United States. So widely separated are the different branches of the Christian vine that it sometimes feels as if the only thing connecting us is Christ himself, and even there we often disagree. Who is this Christ? Why does he matter? Many Christian churches find the importance of Christ primarily in last week of Jesus' life – really just the last three days – and say that what matters is what Jesus did for us by dying for our sins and

rising from the dead. All those chapters in the gospels with Jesus' teachings, thus, are often treated as sort of a disposable warm up act to the main event. Other churches, however, focus their attention on those chapters describing Jesus' life and teachings and the new priorities for living that they lay out and then treat the crucifixion and resurrection section as a slightly embarrassing epilogue to the real story.

Well, as is often the case, both sides of this particular divide could benefit from listening to the other, but I'm not going to hold my breath waiting for that to happen. Instead, in the four services of Holy Week – today, Palm Sunday, along with our Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter services – I want to honor both perspectives. My own conviction is that the Christ event – in which term I include his life, his teachings, his death, and his resurrection – is all transformational. Christ came to transform the way we think, the way we live, and the way we die, so that our hope and our future could also be transformed.

Today let's talk about transforming the way we think – our opinions and our priorities. We begin with the story of Zacchaeus, which for all its familiarity represents a revolution in values. Zacchaeus was a Jewish man who collected taxes from his fellow Jews for their Roman overlords. He was thus a collaborator with oppression, a traitor to his nation, and possibly a thief, inasmuch as the Romans didn't care how much money he took from his countrymen, so long as they got theirs. He was justifiably despised. And yet, in the presence of the religious leaders of the nation, the most powerful and influential men in Judea, Jesus embraced this outcast and even went to dinner with him. Now, perhaps you could argue that this was a good strategic move, because even if Zacchaeus *was* despicable, he had at least one sort of power: he had money. A rich sinner is always more accepted than a poor one. But after his meal with Jesus, what does Zacchaeus do but give half his money away and set about making reparations to all whom he might have defrauded. In other words, Zack is no longer a rich sinner. Just a sinner. So, in the course of this one story, Jesus manages to show disregard for all the accepted sources of power in society: influence, status, high position, and wealth.

Now let's look at our second reading from Luke 19, the story that is usually called the "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem. Now it's possible that you've heard that phrase your whole life without thinking too closely about it, but it had a very precise meaning in the ancient world. When a king or general won a great military campaign, it was the custom for that powerful man to return to his capital at the head of a "triumph," a parade that would include victorious troops, wagons filled with the spoils of the victory, and lines of chained slaves. In Rome you can still see ancient carvings depicting such triumphal military parades.

With that context in mind, this "triumph" of Jesus that we celebrate on Palm Sunday feels like kind of shabby thing, doesn't it? Yes, there were crowds, and yes they were shouting excitedly, quoting select lines from Psalm 118, a victory song. But the crowd consisted of poor, powerless people. Those who actually held power in Jerusalem kept a safe and disdainful distance, treating the event not as a "triumph" but as an unseemly local disturbance. Even Jesus refused to act as if it were a triumph. A king or emperor would ride in a chariot or on a great warhorse. Jesus deliberately chose to ride on an unbroken donkey's colt. Why? Let me read you a couple of verses from the prophet Zechariah, chapter 9, verses 9-10:

⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
¹⁰ He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the warhorse from Jerusalem;
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

The prophet envisioned a different kind of triumph: one that has nothing to do with strength or military power, but rather with humility and peace. Jesus chose to live into that definition of power, subverting the expectations and established patterns of the world.

The title of my sermon today is “Transforming Power,” and I’m aware that that could be taken in more than one way. It could be understood to refer to “power that causes transformation,” and you might expect me to talk about ways we could use our faith to achieve power over our circumstances, power over our problems, power to succeed in business or finance, and so on. Sorry. There are dozens of books that promise that, but that’s not what I meant by my title. I think Jesus came to earth not to use power to effect transformation but rather to transform power itself, to flip our definition of the concept. Jesus’ entire life was a study in anti-power: humility, indifference to social stigmas and expectations, and service to others.

For Jesus, true power is the power of not fitting in, not growing strong as the world understands strength, not forcing others to bend to your will but rather to willingly care for others. He told his disciples, “If anyone would be great among you, let him be the servant of all” and he counseled those who were already great in the world’s eyes to give it all up. Jesus’ most famous publicist, the Apostle Paul, put it this way, “power is made perfect in weakness.” Jesus came to realign our priorities – no, to turn them upside-down. He came to teach us that everything our world elevates or honors – position, status, wealth, power – is worthless, and everything that is humble, rejected, or beneath notice in this world is where we find the power of God. And to illustrate that, he rode into Jerusalem in humility, on a donkey’s colt, in a mocking parody of a military triumph.

The cheering crowd that day missed the point, of course, but we can’t really be critical of them, because we do, too, and always have. In our churches and denominations we continue to celebrate all the things that Jesus disdained: influence, growth, wealth, status, success, and strength. We have much angst today as we read continuing flood of reports about the decline of Christianity, but most of that dismay comes from the fact that we have uncritically accepted the world’s standards of success, and now we are fretting because we see ourselves losing market share and having decreased influence on culture. So it’s worth asking ourselves, “Was that ever the plan, anyway?” To become a cultural and political mover and shaker? If not, how do we go about sorting out our values? How do we embrace our new, unfamiliar, humble position?

Christ came to bring transformation, beginning with individual lives, dismantling our presuppositions, casting doubt on our conclusions, and flipping over our inherited values as dramatically as he flipped the tables of the money-changers in the temple. And that’s just the start. There are more transformations to come.

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To wrap up today, I'd like to read a prayer from Brian Doyle's *Book of Uncommon Prayer*. Doyle writes from his own Roman Catholic context, but his prayers are generally universally applicable. The title of this prayer is:

Furious Prayer for the Church I Love and Have Always Loved but Which Drives Me Insane with Its Fussy Fidgety Prim Tin-Eared Thirst for Control and Rules and Power and Money Rather Than the One Simple Thing the Founder Insisted On

Granted, it's a tough assignment, the original assignment. I get that. Love – Lord help us, could we not have been assigned something easier, like astrophysics or quantum mechanics? But no – love those you cannot love. Love those who are poor and broken and fouled and dirty and sick with sores. Love those who wish to strike you on both cheeks. Love the blowhard, the pompous ass, the arrogant liar. Find the Christ in each heart, even those. Preach the Gospel and only if necessary talk about it. Be the Word. It is easy to advise and pronounce and counsel and suggest and lecture; it is not so easy to do what must be done without sometimes shrieking. Bring love like a bright weapon against the dark. The Rabbi did not say build churches, or retreat houses, or secure a fleet of cars for general use, or convene conferences, or issue position papers. He was pretty blunt about the hungry and the naked and the sick. He was not reasonable; we forget this. The Church is not a reasonable idea. The Church should be a verb. When it is only a noun it is not what the Founder asked of us. Let us pray that we are ever after dissolving the formal officious arrogant thing that wants to rise, and ever fomenting the contradictory revolutionary counter-cultural thing that could change life on this planet. It could, you know. Let's try again today. And so: amen.