

Luke 19:28 Jesus went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰“Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ tell him, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³²Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴They replied, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

³⁷When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: ³⁸“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” ³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” ⁴⁰“I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

Do you know someone really good at giving gifts? I’m talking about someone who not only loves to give, but who gives in a way that it’s not just a gift you get from them? Gracious givers can take the sharp edges off a hard life. They give a milkshake, a pair of shoes, a little bit of beauty in a house of bare walls, and they make you feel like you won the lottery. You feel loved when they give. That’s special!

There is something just as much a God-given gift as giving graciously, graciously receiving. One of the only times I can ever remember my mom criticizing my dad was about this. She did it lovingly, without raising her voice—at least not much—but she hadn’t liked what she had seen. The details I can’t remember, I only remember the gist of what she said. What she said went something like this: “If someone gives you a gift, don’t tell people that you don’t need what they are giving you, or that they need it worse than you do. That all may be true. Don’t say it. Just say ‘Thank you.’” I’m glad I overheard that conversation about receiving graciously.

“*Twalumba kapati, mufundisi,*” they said. “We thank you so much, pastor!” and they handed me a chicken. It wasn’t a plastic-wrapped Tyson’s chicken. This chicken’s feet were tied so it wouldn’t run away. I had no idea what to do, even how to untie it. It was given to me by people who were struggling to feed their own kids. I accepted it. Receiving graciously is important. Another time after a shut-in visit, an impoverished woman with holes in her shoes, living in a house with a leaky grass roof handed me a little bit of local currency cash and told me to go buy the kids something. I still have trouble remembering that without tears. I accepted it. Receiving graciously is important. I could go on for quite a while like this, and not all of it Africa stories either. What if I had said, “Look, I don’t need this. You need this money, this chicken way worse than I do. Just keep it.” What if I had said that? It would have been... demeaning. I am so thankful God let me overhear that

conversation between my mom and dad.

There is not only something to giving, but something to receiving.

Look at the many different people in that Palm Sunday crowd. They offered what they could. Two of Jesus' disciples obediently went on a little errand. I don't know if it is just me or if it really breathes out of the text, but I have this idea that they didn't really want to walk into town, make like horse thieves—or donkey thieves—and give the excuse, “*Oh, the Lord needs it*” (30-31). At that point I would have been thinking, “Are you serious, Jesus? You want me to do what?” But they did it. They offered their obedience to Jesus. The donkey owners in Bethpage offered their donkey at Jesus' request. Not that he needed it. He had walked thousands of miles around and across Palestine over the last three years. He didn't need a donkey to get him the last mile and a half into Jerusalem. But he wanted it, so they gave it to him (32-34). All Twelve offered their coats and put them on the donkey for Jesus to sit on, and now their coats smelled like donkey. Oh, well (36). The crowds, seeing the whole thing develop, getting all wound up for the annual Passover celebration channeled their enthusiasms to this Jesus. They offered their Passover praises speaking, chanting, probably singing; their voices in the thousands. They offered what they could.

But here is something to think about: Jesus didn't need any of it. What they offered was like giving a live chicken to a billionaire; a couple ones to a hedge fund manager. Jesus would have been no less the Son of God if they had given him nothing.

Not only could one argue that Jesus didn't need what they offered, we can also argue that what they offered really wasn't worthy of Jesus. Many of those people had messed up ideas about who Jesus was. Some expected him to oust the Romans at the sharp end of a sword. Others were along for the miracle ride: “Let's see what you can do today, Jesus!” We can certainly question their sincerity. We who know what happened later in the week might conclude that the praises of many were insincere. Wasn't this the same crowd that shouted “Crucify him!” five days later? (Actually, we don't know that. Just because there was a big crowd on Palm Sunday praising Jesus and a big crowd on Good Friday condemning him doesn't mean they were the same people. Likely, there were some individuals.) Even these Twelve who closely circled Jesus, who seemed to serve his every beck and call, would they not in a few days scatter and abandon Jesus in his time of need in the darkness of Gethsemane? Could we perhaps suggest that all the hoopla around Jesus on Palm Sunday was just hypocrisy? Pretend? Chaff, not wheat?

Well, we might be tempted to say that. If any gift offered to Jesus has to be 100% pure, all their gifts fell short. Even the most informed of Jesus' followers were still swimming in quite a bit of ignorance. Most of them didn't *really* get that Jesus would have to die to save them. Others were more wrapped up in selfish hopes of better days than in concerns for their relationship with God. Others were weak-willed, prone to make all kinds of wild promises of commitment to Jesus, and then at the first sign of trouble to crumple and fall into sin. The motives, the sincerity, the knowledge of all these people was deficient, not worthy of Jesus.

But you, too. When was the last sermon you did not doze off in the middle of it. Maybe

you can blame that on the messenger—okay. But how many of our hymns do you sing thoughtfully from beginning to end? How many days in the last week can you say you prayed as much as you should have? Which week was it you didn't laugh at an inappropriate joke, you didn't think ill of someone, or share a juicy little gossipy complaint. And yet here you are today, in God's house? Should we toss your praise out? Should we all be labelled hypocrites?

With the prophet Isaiah we must confess, "*All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.*" Nothing we can offer is actually worthy of being presented to Jesus. All of it is sin-stained in one way or another.

And yet... and yet, look at Jesus on Palm Sunday. He rides the donkey, cresting the Mount of Olives, riding into the Kidron Valley to ascend into Jerusalem. Look at Jesus surrounded by crowds praising him at every step. Besides their voices, they offer the shirts off their backs to be trampled by a donkey. He needs none of it; it is imperfect; but he accepts it all. He's not like you and I who hunger for, even to an extent need, praise. He just smiles to receive it. These imperfect people praising him, they are what he came for. He came that fallen imperfect human beings might be brought close to him, to him who makes them perfect. Jesus rides through that crowd of imperfect people marred by sin, their praise and deeds marred by sin. He accepts all of it, though it is offered in partial knowledge, in mixed motives and imperfect faith. Jesus receives their gifts, and he is pleased.

In fact, when some objected to the praise the crowd was giving Jesus, he replied, "***I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.***" It is as right as the sun rising in the morning that people praise Jesus, perfect or not.

I. Palm Sunday makes me want to praise Jesus, to give to Jesus, because I see that he graciously accepts all that I would give him.

There is another Palm Sunday reason that I want to praise him. This is not explicitly found in our reading today, but it is what people who have been Christians a few years know about Palm Sunday. On Palm Sunday Jesus is riding to his death. And Jesus knew it. And how he rode into Jerusalem that day was an assurance of his willingness.

The donkey he rides proves his willing submission to our needs. A donkey is a humble animal, but it was not a humiliating animal, at least not in that time and place. In the Old Testament, when Solomon, son of King David, rode to his coronation to be Israel's king in 1 Kings chapter 1, he rode his father David's royal mule, a cross between a donkey and a horse. This more humble animal showed the people that their king David, and then Solomon, was not a king who ruled his people through force. He ruled approachably, for their good, with them in mind. In this way, King David was a picture of the future Messiah, and that Messiah David's greater Son. Jesus riding a donkey also fulfilled a prophecy of the prophet Zechariah who said, "*Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!... See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey*" (9:9).

All of these details of Zechariah and David and Solomon and Jesus spiral together to show us that Jesus is on the brink of completing the great work of his life. On Palm Sunday he is completing a life lived in their (and our) place. In five days he is going to a cross to suffer and die in their (and our) place. All of our sin, failure and shame is piled on his shoulders as he rides into Jerusalem. Even as he accepts praise, he accepts the burden of sins, their sins, our sins! The sins of the very ones praising him. Yet he does not call them out as hypocrites. He does not stop the donkey and turn it around. He keeps going. This is why he has come. This is the fulfillment of his great love for us. It is why we should sing even more loudly than the original Palm Sunday crowds, ***“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”***

II. Another reason I want to praise Jesus is because he is our Savior. He is worthy of praise, for who he is and what he has done.

So, because Jesus has willingly taken on the burden of my sin to make me acceptable to God, because Jesus willingly accepts praise of the likes of you and me, now I know that I can lose myself in praise to Jesus.

It doesn't matter if I sing off-tune hymns, Jesus is pleased to hear it. It doesn't matter if my generous giving is small compared to what others give, Jesus treasures it. I can offer my abilities to Jesus, though there are a million who do the same things better than I do, because I know that Jesus accepts it all. I don't worry about whether it's good enough. (Of course, I ought not be lazy or cheap in what I offer if I really treasure Jesus.) I thankfully give to Jesus as he has blessed me, and I don't worry about whether Jesus will receive it because he always does. He accepts it all with a look of approval as his did on that Palm Sunday, as a mother receives her kindergartener's artwork and adds it to the refrigerator full of refrigerator art. It's all good.

We see Jesus graciously giving on Palm Sunday. But we cannot help but be impressed at how graciously he receives. Let it fill us with joy, with confidence, with generosity, with boldness to sing our Savior's praises in whatever way we can. Amen.