

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."

Bible scholars and historians have long pointed out that what we call the "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem would have been seen differently in Jesus' day. I always picture the scene as a great celebration of the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah. But historians say that such processions were the way The Empire of Rome honored *conquerors*. When a general got back from winning a war or subjugating one more territory, the army would wait outside the city until everything was ready and then the great man would come into town, usually on a powerful horse, accompanied by his army and displaying conquered slaves and captured treasure. So, when Jesus got on a donkey, and came into the capital of Jerusalem accompanied by a crowd of locals honoring him with whatever came to hand – he was not

just trying to be humble. If he wanted to be humble, he could have just slipped into town unnoticed. Jesus was making a point. Jesus was mocking political and military power. This was political satire. Jesus was giving a demonstration that he brought freedom from political and military power; his power would be different.

As often as I have heard this assertion and as much as I like political satire, I have not found it particularly meaningful that Jesus mocked Roman authority because I do not feel particularly oppressed by Rome. Throwing off the yoke of Rome does not have much to do with my relationship with God. Jesus was coming into Jerusalem where he would be killed within the week, and I have always thought more along those lines.

But this time, at Peace Lutheran Church, Palm Sunday is also Consecration Sunday and I have been thinking about the importance of freedom as we plan what we will do together as a congregation in a society that does not always have the same values that we proclaim as Christians. Perhaps I have been too narrow in my definition of “political oppression”. Perhaps domination goes beyond military occupation and law makers and office holders. I think we are oppressed by the values and priorities of our culture and we would welcome a liberator who would mock and satirize our overbearing rulers. It is only that we do not see our overbearing rulers riding at the head of an army. We see them in television commercials celebrating materialism, we see them in demanding schedules, the disapproval of neighbors we are trying to impress, and the tyranny of our own comfortable habits. Those perennial rulers have conquered more societies than Rome ever got around to.

Our situation is different from first century Jerusalem. We are not under a police state, or an occupying army, or the possibility of chattel slavery. But there are things we need to be freed from. I know of people who are anxious about their children’s happiness - so they buy them more things and expect less personal conversation – and there is bondage in that

situation. I know people who often surprise themselves by how their spontaneous choices and thoughtless actions often do not reflect their beliefs – and that calls for liberation. I know of people under the tyranny of other people's opinion, of a Sabbath schedule set by someone else, of the apathy that will regret the loss of shared values but will not try to preserve them. And Jesus does ride into our lives and he is ready to make fun of the things that have conquered us. He is ready to offer us freedom.

On this Consecration Sunday, we will form a procession and approach the altar with a declaration of how we will live in the coming year. It is an act of freedom. That is an important point because these little cards make a lot of people nervous. Some folks think that writing how much money one plans to give to the church in the coming year is one more form of bondage. They are afraid that at the end of the year, someone may turn the card over to a collection agency. Or compare cards. Or ask for more. Any of those things would be oppression – and Christ mocks oppression.

I know a story that is appropriate because it is about planning to give money and it is about freedom: The ELCA officially began its life on January 1, 1988 so it was still very new when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. That is significant because many of the Eastern Bloc countries had historic roots in Lutheranism and religion had been repressed for a good part of the twentieth century. Now, these long lost brothers and sisters were able to communicate openly with each other and with the rest of the world, and the newly formed ELCA wanted to offer support. So the Conference of Bishops decided to send a delegation to tour some former Eastern Bloc countries and make contact with church leaders there. I was in Oklahoma at the time and my own bishop was appointed to the delegation. (His German is pretty good.) He said they were treated like rock stars. Everywhere they went they were welcomed. They had their pictures taken; they shook hands with mayors; they ate too much. And people were very curious about the church in America. They had heard that

the church in America was strong and that it had social programs and education concerns and regular worship services. They had been told that there were religious leaders and educators who did nothing else for a living. Of course, they had also spent generations being told by their government that religion is authoritarian and superstitious. They wanted to talk to these people from America to see if the marvelous claims of religious strength were true. And we wanted to see if the people from America were observably oppressed or intellectually...under par.

My bishop told me of a reporter who asked about the social programs and seminaries and colleges and church buildings and who looked skeptical when my bishop said that – all that and more was true. The reporter's experience told her that any program that lasts any time at all or makes any difference at all must be run by the state so she asked how the work of the church was funded and the bishop explained that all the Christians give money so they can cooperate in these ministries. The reporter said, "Yes, yes, anyone can give money to a good cause. We do that here, too. But the real funding – what keeps the buildings standing and the teachers employed – where does that money come from?" The bishop repeated that *all* the money was given by church members. As an example he told the reporter that he and his wife chose to tithe. They gave a financial offering every week that represented one tenth of their income. By such gifts from him and millions of other members of the ELCA the work was done. The reporter said, "I thought you were employed by the church." The bishop said, "Yes." The reporter asked, "So the church pays you?" The bishop said, "Yes." She was a good reporter; she would get to the bottom of this. She asked, "So the church pays you. And you take part of your salary and give it to the church?" The bishop said, "Yes." The reporter had apparently reached her own conclusions about the bishop's emotional stability but she risked one more question: "Why does the church not just reduce your salary by ten percent?"

It is so difficult to explain *freedom* to someone who has not experienced it.

How could the bishop explain that the money in the church account did not give him a relationship with God. He celebrated his relationship with God by *choosing* to put money in God's hands and seeing what God will do with it. God will work his miracles, but we have the freedom to choose to be a part of them.

Every week, we bring to the altar the bread and the wine and the money we give. We bring it in the faith that God will do miraculous things with those gifts. He will bring the Real Presence of Jesus to us in the bread and the wine. He will take the money we freely give to show his love here in this building and around the world. And, today, he will take these cards we bring and make them sacred. That is what "consecration" means – they will be made sacred and a part of God's work in the world.

We are offered the limitless freedom of living by the strength and vision of God.

Like the people of Rome's colonies, we have seen second rate rulers claim power so often and we have seen society and people we love follow them so regularly, that freedom may not seem to be worth the struggle. If all we know of living successfully in society is convincing other people we are right, then reaching out to people we disagree with will not be attractive. If all we know about providing for our families is buying them things, then teaching our children our priorities and discipleship will not be worthwhile. If we think it is someone else's responsibility to talk to our loved ones about God, then sitting with our loved ones in a worship service will seem like a burden.

Jesus has other plans for us. He is a different kind of king, the permanent kind. Five days after the Palm Sunday procession, Jesus was under arrest and standing in front of Pontius Pilate. And the religious leaders who wanted Jesus dead had made their choices between a shallow brand of power on the one hand, and freedom on the other. They shouted at Pilate, "Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor." (John 19:12) They were right. Jesus was offering to liberate that crowd from the emperor and there were

even some in the crowd who recognized it as good news. They wrote it down, and the words of freedom are recorded in the scripture. The words are still calling you to live your life strengthened by Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit. We can be free of things that oppress us.

Giving and serving change this world more than any show of military force could hope to achieve, and you can have the joy and excitement of showing God's love to the world. But it is our choice. Let's join together, once again, to come forward and meet our liberator – Jesus Christ.