

Wants and Needs: Palm Sunday

John 12:12-19

If my parents had gotten me what I wanted for Christmas in 1977 I probably wouldn't be here today. In my part of the world that was the year of the moped. You remember those, right? Part bicycle, part motorbike, all noise. I wanted one so badly—I could just imagine the freedom of being able to see my friends—to get to school and even to church more quickly and in more style. I used to dream about tooling around Burbank on my own wheels, but it wasn't to be.

First off, they were pricey, but more than that, they weren't safe. The winter of '77-'78 was the first time I can remember hearing about 'El Niño,' a weather pattern that dumped about 40 inches of rain on Southern California. I might not have survived driving around town in that weather—I'm glad I'm still here to tell that story. More than that, though, my parents knew that in a year or two I would be learning to drive a car, and that once that happened the moped would probably never come out of the garage again.

In the end it wasn't so much that my parents didn't give me what I wanted, it was that they knew I wanted the wrong thing.

Closer to home, I saw in the paper the other day that a woman had received a police warning for ignoring Health & Safety regulations [if you're in the US, think OSHA on steroids]. Here's what happened: This lady, a mom herself, was walking by a local school and noticed a 6-year-old boy stuck 20 feet up in a tree. He'd climbed up there and was too scared to make his way back down. The school administrators had checked their manuals to figure out what to do in that situation, and had decided to implement the 'observe from a distance' option. (I'm not making this up.) The woman walking by had consulted, um, her common sense, and helped the boy out of the tree. When the police came they told the woman that she had 'approached the school in an inappropriate way,' and warned her not to do it again.

Seriously, I understand the reason for the rules and regulations that are designed to keep us safe and healthy, I really do. But do you see how what happened here is a perfect example of the rules we want sometimes come at the expense of the safety we really need? Keep that in mind as we look at the familiar Palm Sunday story of Jesus entering into Jerusalem.

12 The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.

13 They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,

Hosanna!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the King of Israel!

14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written,

15 Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt.

16 At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

17 Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. 18 Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him.

19 So the Pharisees said to one another, See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!

By the time we get to our text, Jesus has been teaching and healing out in the countryside for a few years. His heart has always been set on going to Jerusalem—it was the home of the Temple, the central worship space of the Jewish faith. Just before our story Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and that story had spread all across the region.

Jerusalem at the time was under Roman occupation. There was a Hebrew king acting as the local political leader, but he answered to Rome's representative. The Pharisees and other religious scholars worked behind the scenes, and made the rules for the Jewish people. This period of Roman occupation had a strong influence on the Jewish hope for a Messiah. God had made all of these promises about sending a savior, but over the years the hope for the Messiah had turned into a hope for a new political leader who would raise an army and overthrow Roman rule.

So where we pick up the story Jesus is headed into Jerusalem, and the people

wave palm branches and shout 'Hosanna' and call Jesus the 'king of Israel.' The Jewish leaders are worried that Jesus is going to rock the boat with Rome, because so many people are starting to believe that Jesus is the promised one. In the midst of all that intrigue, Jesus enters the city and begins the final stage of his ministry. The people lining the street couldn't have been happier. The Messiah was finally here, and things were about to change.

Somehow, though, all of this went terribly wrong. The same people shouting 'Hosanna' and 'Blessed is the king of Israel' will be shouting 'Crucify him' by the end of the week. The words of the people waving branches make it clear that they thought Jesus was their king. The problem was that Jesus came as the king they needed, instead of as the king they wanted.

The issue here is the difference between Realm thinking vs. Reign thinking. Realms have lines and boundaries—they mark out territory at the exclusion of other places. Realms are bound by time and space—they are by their very nature, limited. The concept of a Reign is much different. When Jesus preaches about the Kingdom of God, he's not talking about a realm, he's talking about his sovereign rule over all people and all places—he's talking about his power over all things, even death.

In our text today the difference between realm and reign thinking shows itself as this important difference between what we want and what we need.

This question about wants and needs in material things has become more important over the past few years. Amitai Etzioni wrote about this in the aftermath of the banking crisis. He wrote that once our real needs have been comfortably met, we add extras—what would have been luxury items in the past—we add those to the list of things we need to survive, and fall into the trap of getting and buying and spending and consumerism.

It's not just about money. We do it with our careers and our kids, too. More money, great schools for our kids, bigger houses, better cars. How much of that really makes us happy? How much of that has strayed from what we wanted to what we can't live without?

It might surprise you to know that in most Western nations there is no real correlation between more money and increased happiness. A disproportionately high number of people in industrialized countries report feeling unsatisfied—even

deprived.

Mostly it's because no matter how much stuff a person has, we tend to feel unsatisfied when people around us have more. Any of that sound familiar to you?

Tim Keller is a author and pastor in New York, and one of his books is on our reading list in the bulletin. In that book, *Counterfeit Gods: When the Empty Promises of Love, Money and Power Let You Down*, he makes the connection between the things we've redefined as necessities and the biblical idea of an 'idol.' He writes:

"What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.

A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would hardly feel worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement and critical acclaim, or saving "face" and social standing...

An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure." There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is worship."

It should hit all of us right between the eyes that the stuff we've placed on a pedestal—the earning and status and possessions and success for our kids that we've made the most important things in our lives—hit should come as a warning to all of us that all of that can be defined as *worship*. Because we know, right? We know that God is the only true focus for our worship, and that anything else that gets in the way of that is, uh-oh, an idol.

We want things we can control, but often they can end up controlling us. That's what the people lining Jerusalem Boulevard 2000 years ago couldn't see. It's what we tend to miss while we're planning out our lives and the futures of our kids.

We want the realm—the list of things that we think will make us happy, but what

we need is the reign—the rule of God in our hearts and minds. Jesus enters Jerusalem offering the world everything it ever really needed, but they reject him because what he was offering wasn't what they wanted.

How's that work for you?

What is it you want from Jesus the Messiah?

How does it measure up against what you really need from him?

Health and safety represent two of the core desires we all have for ourselves and for the people we love. But we've already seen that the health and safety we want can get in the way of the health and safety we need.

As we move into this Holy Week and Easter season, the call to each one of us is to let Jesus be the savior we need. He's more than just a good guy, or a role model or a moral guide.

Jesus the Messiah came to rule in our hearts and minds and to bring us into full, healthy relationships with God, with ourselves, with each other and with the earth.

The only question left on the table is this: Will we let him? Will we allow Jesus to be the savior we need, even if that turns out not to be what we think we want?

Don't let another Easter season go by without wrestling with that question. Don't let the celebration of Christ's sacrifice go by again without understanding what it means for you.

We complicate a lot of things in this life of faith. The gospel of Jesus Christ shouldn't be one of them.

Jesus the Messiah came as a fulfillment of God's promises. He lived and loved, he healed and served, he died and was raised again so that we could be reconciled to him and to each other.

He offers all of that to all of you—to each one of us. If that's something you want to know more about, then find me or Stephanie or the person sitting next to you and talk about it. Don't let another Easter season go by.

Over these last few weeks of Lent we've been talking about the Lent Challenge—praying the Lord's Prayer five times each day between now and Easter. Let me encourage you to do that in the coming week. We can start right now...