

“Fit To Be Untied”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Psalm 118:19-29; Mark 11:1-11

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Given it has been nearly ten years since Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan published their book, The Last Week, you may have heard other preachers recount the writers’ suggestion there could have been a second procession into Jerusalem the same day Jesus rode the donkey down the Mount of Olives. Here is how they describe it:

“Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30 ... One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class ... On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of ... Judea... entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus’ procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate’s proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’s crucifixion. [Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, pp. 2-5]

Pilate, as governor of Judea, was pretty much compelled to leave the leisure of his country or seaside residence to be physically present in Jerusalem during Jewish festival days. It was not because he was going to participate, or even needed to curry favor with religious leaders, but simply to fulfill his duty to keep to keep order for the Roman Empire. Then as now, when a lot of people flock to a city, even for religious festivals, you need to supplement the local police. So, as the writers suggest, it is quite likely Pilate would arrive in the city with “a visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leathers, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums.” [Ibid.]

Even if Pilate did not ride into Jerusalem that same day, it seems clear Jesus intentionally, deliberately mimicked a competing royal entry from the other side of the city. Biblical scholars concur Mark envisions Jesus to be in total control of this day’s events. Jesus sends disciples to find a colt, a donkey, and there is no indication he has made prearrangements with Hertz rent-a-colt. He tells them they will find the animal tied, and what they are to say if they are questioned about untying it: “The Lord needs it...” Jesus is in control of this day.

Kings ride horses that have not been ridden by another. Jesus purposely calls for a colt, a donkey that has never been ridden. Jesus will not call himself a king, but he doesn’t challenge the greetings he receives when he descends into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. Jesus is in control of this day.

If there were a drone flying over Jerusalem that day, taking video allowing us to view two processions entering the city, we would see a Jewish peasant teacher on a donkey with a ragtag army of followers and greeters, some likely even strangers, shouting accolades and praise. And we would see a Roman governor on a horse accompanied by military people and weaponry more interested in control than praise. Borg and Crossan write of Pilate's "... silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful." [Ibid.]

Even if Governor Pilate did not enter Jerusalem the same day, the people would have seen such processions of empire power in the past, and made the connections with Jesus' entry. Further, as leaves are strewn before him, Mark's readers will recall the account of when Jehu was greeted in the same way when he became the new king, but when Ahad was still king making it a coup d'etat. (II Kings 9:13) We have competing processions and authorities. Jesus is in total control of this day, leading us into the week to follow, and he is not too subtly calling for a choice to be made as to what procession we will choose. We know those who choose Jesus' procession today, will shout the empire's call for crucifixion later this week.

When a choice is clear between what is right and what is wrong, we don't mind making public choices. Yet, when there is a competition of allegiance, such easy clarity diminishes. Pledging allegiance is an expectation of nations and empires, to maintain loyalty often in exchange for security, or at least a perception of protection; yet, not only empires call for allegiance. From the Crusades to the Inquisition to modern day radical groups, it is clear religions and faiths can also call for submissive allegiance that oppresses and controls; at its worst, it leads people to violence and the instilling of fear to engender obedience. This occurs when faiths or religions become cultish in proclaiming their belief as the only truth. We are wise to recognize such controlling, "my way is the only way" extremism exists in Christianity, not just Islam or other faiths.

By contrast, religions often find a way to fit in, as we might imagine with religious leaders seeking to appease Pilate and Caesar to be allowed to practice their faith and keep the temple open. As such, they begin to offer a watered down spiritual security to avoid creating a competing allegiance with imperial powers. This is the concept of God and country, coexisting, and it is not isolated to scouting or even the United States. Yet, Jesus' deliberate coordination of his entry into Jerusalem will not earn him a God and Country award; it sets up a competing allegiance of God over country and the false power of empire. It calls for a choice of where one finds one's security.

Jesus has purposely proposed a choice for his followers, who now include us. One place to consider this choosing is as we read of the disciples going to retrieve the tied up colt, and the colt being untied, which encompasses almost half of Mark's triumphal entry account. The terms tied and untied, in the Greek, have the sense of being bound, and being loosed from that which binds.

Now imagine two people coming up your driveway, with no visible uniform or ID, and they proceed to enter your parked car with the intent of driving it away. You will likely call 911 rather than confront them, but perhaps you feel bold enough to at least shout out the window, "Hey, what are you doing, that's my car?!" They turn, smiling, and with a look of expectation you will understand, they say, "The Lord needs it." Now, perhaps most of you will then say, "Oh, I am so sorry, I did not know, please take both our cars if you need them." I, on the other hand, would likely tell them, and their Lord, how to find the nearest bus stop or commuter rail station.

There are two actions involved in Jesus' directives about the colt, the donkey. The first is the sending of the two disciples and their obedience in going. They find the colt, the donkey, and they untie it, unbind it. They answer the question about their action as directed. So, this Palm Sunday account is first of all dependent on disciples willing to go, willing to find something Jesus has identified as needing to be unbound. The willingness involves the risk what Jesus believes needs to be unbound may be something to which we ourselves are closely tied, even something in which we have placed our security or pledged our allegiance. Disciples risk finding what Jesus identifies as needing unbinding, untying, is something of which we may hesitate letting loose.

I will admit the second action is a bit contrived since the colt, the donkey, does not really have a choice. Yet, if we consider the donkey being untied, we might envision our own selves being freed from any tethers that keep us from serving the one who calls us to lead a counter force to the empire's procession of power. In this way, the donkey symbolizes a competing allegiance. If it is risky to find what Jesus identifies as needing unbinding, it can be even riskier to actually allow ourselves to be unbound and go public.

The phrase, "fit to be tied," is usually used to explain the state of our emotions. I titled this sermon, "fit to be untied" not as the state of our emotion, but the status of our relationship with God, or more precisely, God's relationship with us. It is good news of grace that we are indeed fit, in God's eyes, to be untied. Jesus does not send disciples unable to accomplish the task, and Jesus does not send for a colt unequipped to answer the call. Each one of us has been declared fit to be untied for the work of Christ in this world. Yet, our ability to be unbound, to be set loose for that call may very well be less dependent on our willingness, than on how tied we remain to competing processions and promises of comfort, power and security.