

## **BORROWERS AND GIVERS BE**

**Isaiah 50:4-9a**

**Psalms 118:1-2, 19029**

**Philippians 2:5-11**

**Mark 11:1-11**

Today we begin the journey from Galilee to Golgotha in earnest and it starts with a parade. How counter-intuitive is that? But Jesus knew where he was headed and arranged for this bit of street theater to initiate the final leg of the journey. Those of us looking on from the distance of a couple of millennia might miss the symbolism, the underlying meaning of this parade, so before we get too far along, maybe we should unpack it a bit. Here Jesus is fulfilling, living out in real time, some of the prophecies from the Hebrew scriptures, prophecies associated with the coming of Messiah and, for the folks of Jesus' day, prophecies they associated with the God's hoped-for triumph over their Roman overlords. The parade began at the Mount of Olives, the place where the prophet Zechariah said God would initiate divine war against the enemies of Jerusalem.<sup>i</sup> The waving of leafy branches recalled past processions when Israel celebrated its king and again when Jerusalem had been reclaimed from the Persians.<sup>ii</sup> The spreading of cloaks was reminiscent of a time in Israel's history when a divinely ordained *court d'état* replaced an evil king with a righteous one.<sup>iii</sup> All of these spoke of military conquest, restoration of past glory and liberation from military-political oppressors. A friend of mine described it as a MIGA celebration, Make Israel Great Again.<sup>iv</sup>

But then there is that donkey. You may remember from films about World War II that when the Allies liberated towns in Italy and France, they entered, riding in their tanks and armored vehicles. They arrived with a show of force. If Jesus were, indeed, the kind of liberator that the other symbols suggested, he would have come in on a warhorse or a chariot, not a donkey. It would be like General George Patton riding into Messina in Sicily on a scooter. Oh, there was a place for a donkey but only after the battle had been won and the enemy conquered.<sup>v</sup> Then the king would ride in on a donkey as a sign that peace had been achieved and there was no longer need for the implements of war.

Jesus was giving all kinds of mixed signals in this display—war and peace, power and humility, triumph and defeat. Whatever reign Jesus was ushering in, it was not one whose authority rested on military might or one, which was the restoration of Israel's political privilege and power. And that donkey might give us a clue about what kind of reign he had in mind.

Remember Jesus' instructions regarding the donkey. "Go into town and take the donkey, and if anyone catches you or demands an explanation, just say that I have need it." He didn't tell them to buy the donkey or even steal the donkey. Rather he had them borrow it. Jesus had a long history of borrowing things, starting with his birth, when he was laid in a borrowed manger. He borrowed the water that he turned into wine at the wedding feast and then borrowed the stone jars from which the wine was poured. He borrowed people's houses in which to sleep and eat and heal. He borrowed sons and husbands and fathers to form his inner circle of followers and he was supported by the money given by the women who followed him. He borrowed a boat to use as his teaching dais and he borrowed a child's lunch to feed 5,000 hungry people. He borrowed the upper room where he hosted his last supper with his borrowed friends. Even the cross belonged to the Romans. And when he died, his body was laid in a borrowed tomb. That donkey was just one thing in a long line of things and people that Jesus borrowed.

Maybe Jesus was a borrower because he was an itinerant teacher. In Matthew we are told he didn't have a place to lay his head.<sup>vi</sup> But maybe his borrowing was meant to be illustrative. Maybe through this practice, he was teaching us something. Maybe he was demonstrating, that we are all borrowers.

Now, I need to be clear, Jesus was also a giver. He was generous with his time and attention. He gave away his power to heal, both when he actually healed people, and also when he sent his disciples out into the world with power over unclean spirits. He gave forgiveness and the promise of new life. He gave encouragement when his disciples were afraid. He gave his love and ultimately, he gave his life. Yes, Jesus was a giver, but he was also a borrower.

Jesus' borrowing was a sign of his dependence on God. He lived in the reality of God's grace. He was confident that what was needed would be provided. Jesus knew in the most basic way that God was good, that God loved him, that God would care for him. His whole life stands in contrast to our system of keeping score and our belief that, if we just have enough—enough friends, enough money, enough accomplishments—if we just have enough, then life will be good. In 2021, one of the rockets belonging to Elon Musk's company, SpaceX, exploded shortly after takeoff, raining down shrapnel on the county in Texas where SpaceX is located. Fortunately, no one was injured. However, in less than 90 minutes, Mr. Musk posted on social media that he was giving \$20 million to the county school system and \$10 million to revitalize downtown Brownsville, the largest town in the county.<sup>vii</sup> Our world says that with enough money, it is possible to improve a company's and a person's public image.

But Jesus stands over against this accounting approach to life and calls his followers to do so, too. After all, we, too, are borrowers even when we think and act otherwise. All that we point to as ours—money in the bank, houses, recognition, families, even our attempts to be good people—none of it is enough to get us an extra day of life. None of it is enough to get us into heaven. None of it is enough to earn God's love. Our very lives are borrowed. The reality is that we live under the God's grace. God is good to us, God provides for us, not because we can somehow earn it, but because God is good. It is in God's DNA to love us. When we see ourselves as borrowers, it is in recognition of our reliance on the grace of God.

Sometimes something happens that reminds us that we are needy borrowers. Two weeks ago, this sanctuary was filled to overflowing by those who came for Toby Woods' memorial service. Some people came to support his family. Some came because they knew Toby and wanted to celebrate his life. But, I suspect, that some came because they were faced with a deep and terrifying need—young people who had never before experienced the death of someone they knew, especially someone their own age; parents who were terrified for the sake of their own children; others whose idea of living in a safe, protected community had been stolen. They came hungry for some comfort, some reassurance, some hope. They came because the need and the hurt were so great that they suspected only God could possibly meet them. They came as borrowers, looking to borrow just enough of God's grace to get through the day.

Jesus told his followers to borrow a donkey for him. He wasn't afraid to borrow, to be indebted because he knew that we all are indebted, even the owner of the donkey. We acknowledge that every time we pray the prayer he taught us. "Forgive us our debts," we ask, because there is no way we can repay God, no way we can work off our debts, no way to repay all we owe. And we dare to ask, because Jesus has shown us that the One whom we owe, knows and understands we can never repay in full. There is but one thing we can do and that is to forgive those who owe us. In so doing we acknowledge the common reality that we all share—we all are borrowers, all living under the reality of God's grace.

And this points to our call to be givers as well as borrowers. Jesus wants to borrow us, too; to use us as his hands and feet and voice; to use us to offer the healing, to do the feeding, to forgive, to comfort and to offer hope. When all those grieving, scared, disillusioned, needy people came into this space two weeks ago, you were here to do just that—to give to them what you have borrowed from God.

Yesterday, someone asked me, after reading the sermon title, if the sermon was about Polonius. Not catching the allusion, I asked in turn if Polonius was the name of donkey. Turns out Polonius is the character in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* who delivers the oft quoted line, “Neither a lender of a borrower be.”<sup>viii</sup>

So, no. This is not about Polonius. This is about Jesus, who borrowed everything from God and gave it all away for our sakes. When he rode to Jerusalem on that borrowed donkey, sending all those confusing signals about what kind of messiah he was, he wanted the cheering people then and us now to know that we can borrow from him, borrow the things that make for life and then give it to others.

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<sup>i</sup> Zechariah 14:4.

<sup>ii</sup> I Maccabees 13:51

<sup>iii</sup> II Kings 9:13.

<sup>iv</sup> Kate Heichler, *Water Daily* blog, March 21, 2024.

<sup>v</sup> Zechariah 9:9.

<sup>vi</sup> Matthew 8:20.

<sup>vii</sup> David A. Fahrenthold and Ryan Mac, “Musk Charity Keeps Money Close to Home,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 2024, p.A1.

<sup>viii</sup> <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/hamlet.1.3.html>