

**“Donkey Duty”**  
**Mark 11:1-11**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**Palm Sunday**  
**March 25, 2018**

Once, in a church staff meeting, I suggested wouldn't it be cool if we borrowed a donkey for use on Palm Sunday? Support for my idea dropped like the NCCA tourney hopes of a Virginia fan on the night they faced UMBC.

One person started reeling off a list of names of people likely to be offended. It was a long list. “Would it be possible,” I ventured, “to substitute the word ‘excited’ for ‘offended?’”

The logistical problems piled up quickly. Where do we find a donkey? Who is going to pick up the donkey? Can a donkey fit in a minivan? Do donkeys carry communicable diseases? How would we protect the floor? Does our insurance carrier cover assault by donkey?

I countered with a more positive possibility. Just close your eyes and imagine the faces of the children of our church when I get to say, ‘Will the children please join me at the front for free pony rides!’

Finally, one of our more detail oriented staff members shut the whole thing down. “No way,” she said. “While you're parading around in your robe I'll be shoveling donkey crap out of the church.” I had to admit donkey duty wasn't in her job description.

It wasn't in the job descriptions of the disciples on this day either which might be one reason that Mark spends so much time – a full half of this text – on the details of disciple donkey duty. Two disciples are sent into a village just outside of Jerusalem to secure an unriden colt for Jesus' publicity stunt. The two disciples aren't named but Tom Long suggests that it could well be James and John who only recently asked Jesus to grant to them the honor of sitting on Jesus' left and right - the places of honor.<sup>1</sup> Now here they are stuck with a significantly lesser form of ministry than what they had imagined for themselves – donkey duty, not exactly what disciples angling for the power positions had in mind.

A lot of ministry in the church is like that. Committee meetings to plan an opioid action, or a global mission trip, organizing potluck logistics, baking casseroles, visiting people who may not even know who you are. By themselves that ministry can seem about as important as being on donkey duty, a marginal assignment in the grand drama that Jesus is about to undertake. But, truthfully, every form of ministry is like that to a certain extent. None of us is the main event. We are all supporting cast members in the work that God is doing.

That may be reassuring especially when what Jesus is doing on this day becomes clear. Ched Myers calls Jesus' ride into Jerusalem “street theater.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus is

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Long, “Donkey Fetchers,” *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2006, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, (New York: Orbis Books), 1998, 2002, p. 295.

lamprooning what counts for power in what Chuck Campbell calls “a carnivalesque parody of kingship.”<sup>3</sup> This is the beginning point of Jesus’ liberation of the people in the midst of Roman rule. Yet instead of armoring himself with the usual weapons of armed resistance, he rides in on a small donkey, perhaps with his feet dragging the ground. And the people all join in the joke shouting the equivalent of “God saves. Long live the King!” A laughable, treasonous parody.

Campbell calls the whole thing “comical, dramatic, and political.”<sup>4</sup> I’d add the phrase “dangerously enjoyable” as the imperial notions of power are turned upside down. With Jesus on the donkey the world sees the power of the System for what it is – hierarchical with some at the top and others at bottom, brutal – with the threat of violence always present, and cold. In this parade that invites all of our participation Jesus gives us a glimpse of what’s wrong with our world alongside an invitation to join with him in creating something different.

Whether they are fully aware or not, the disciples have a role to play in that drama. They make the arrangements for the real ministry that God is about. They organize the logistics. They prepare the venues. They make things ready so God can show up. And when God shows up, donkey duty starts to have more meaning than those disciples first understand. Donkey duty starts to look less like disjointed grunt work and more like an essential part of a dangerous, comical, political drama that God is pulling off in the presence of immense power; power that begins to look less and less powerful in the presence of God’s alternatives.

When the church is at our best, that’s the work that we’re a part of. Baking casseroles, tutoring children, keeping the church’s lights on, visiting Cuba or El Salvador – these nominal tasks both unmask what’s wrong with our world and simultaneously invite us into an alternative. They unmask the forgotten hungry, homeless, and poor, and invite us into an alternative economy where there is enough for everyone. They unmask the brutality of the Systems we inhabit that leave the very ones struggling for food and shelter the scapegoats that we must wall off, or cart off, or destroy in order to keep that system up and running. Marches for peace, and gun safety, and women, unmask the cultures of violence that infect our everyday realities and invite us into a different culture of relationship, of neighborliness, and the peace it generates.

Truthfully we do not always want to risk that alternative. We’re not sure we want to acknowledge that accepting that invitation means we are choosing a world that doesn’t have us at its center. And sometimes it’s hard not to put ourselves – our needs, our hopes, our wants at the center without regard to the needs of others.

I was thinking about my own needs as I was flipping burgers on a hot grill in South Dakota. The temperature was 110 degree and climbing. We were there as part of our partnership with the Dakota Presbytery – the Makasan learning camp. I was suffering there because Chrystie Adams had told me, “I need you to grill burgers.” As the heat ratcheted up I thought about pulling rank but these were my early years at Brown. I was young and less experienced at getting other people to

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<sup>3</sup> Chuck Campbell, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2008, p. 157.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

do work that doesn't appeal to me, and, besides, experience or not it's virtually impossible to pull rank on Chrystie Adams. So I dutifully flipped the burgers. When a terrible sickness descended on our group later in the week, I cleaned up body fluids and bathrooms, wondering how in the world my efforts would make a bit of difference to the mission of God being carried out in this part of the world.

But that's what's supposed to make the church different from the way the rest of the world works. People with fancy titles or honorific awards, big salaries or the highest education that can be bestowed are called to donkey duty alongside people without any title, no awards, with little money, little education. We're all supporting cast members in God's drama. You can ask to sit on God's right or God's left but when God grants it, chances are it's still going to involved donkey duty. That place where we come face to face with each other as the human beings we are – cherished, unique, and valued by God. So that God's comical, dramatic, and political drama occurs both in what the church is as well as what it does.

I saw a glimpse of that yesterday as the youth of our church led us down to DC. The adults had a significant role to play. We drove the cars. We made sure no one got lost. I carried water and snacks. But none of us was at the center of the drama. Even the pop stars who sang on the stage – people used to being the main event - were more like interlude music. They humbly thanked teenagers for inviting them to be a part of the work. Lin Manuel Miranda and Ben Platt. Jennifer Hudson and Miley Cyrus – all on donkey duty. At the center was a string of teenagers. Those from Parkland, but also Zion Kelly who lost his twin brother, Zaire, to gun violence in DC last year. And Edna Chavez who spoke about losing her brother, Ricardo, in south central LA and named the inequities that make gun violence a higher daily risk for people of color in urban communities. And 11 year-old Naomi Wadler who said she represented black women who have been victims of gun violence. “My friends and I might still be 11, and we might be in elementary school but we know.” They made their private pain public.

And when Emma Gonzales spoke the names of the 17 murdered in FL then stared at the crowd for a full six minute and 20 seconds – the time it took for a teenager armed with a military weapon to end 17 lives, I looked around at the crowd – hundreds of thousands strong - through the silence of our tears. I looked at the youth of our church holding their signs – “arms are for hugging,” “not one more,” “caps and gowns, not lockdowns.” For a moment it felt like we were all church, rejecting the violent ways we've been accustomed and the power structure that has supported it, rejecting the old lie that “one day you'll understand when you grow up” – a mantra to preserve the status quo by diminishing young people instead of listening to them, rejecting the gridlock that has contributed to the deaths of our children over the past decade, waiting instead, for as long as it takes for a different kind of leadership rooted in the wisdom of our pain, growing from the margins right into the center of our lives.

From the first day these Parkland students said, “we reject your prayers. We want you action” I have openly wondered how long their movement could last. Having been around the block a time or two I've seen too many movements start with catchy slogans and charismatic spokespeople who couldn't sustain the persistence that was needed. “I wonder if this will be different,” I've thought to

myself. But that's a question that fearful disciples ask. A better question needs to be asked of all of us - adults and teenagers alike - waving our palm branches on the side. "How far are we will to go?" What water and snacks are we willing to carry to usher in the main event - God's reign - into our world?

Because our God is going all the way into the center of power with all the cost that entails. And we've been called to donkey duty to get her there.