



“The Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary”

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Matthew 21:1–11 (NRSV)***

Contemporary theologian and Eden Church organist Loris Coburn made an important observation and asked a significant theological question this past week regarding the Palm Sunday story in the gospel of Matthew. Loris’ observation was this: according to Matthew, Jesus sat on a donkey *and* a colt. “How could that be,” she asked; “how could Jesus ride on two animals at the same time?”

My initial reaction was to explain that people who work with draft animals all their lives can perform a number of amazing stunts—the kind which people like us usually only see at a circus or when visiting a third-world country.

For example, I once saw an Amish farmer at the Heifer International Ranch in Massachusetts mount a team of two Belgian horses. He put one foot in the middle of the back of each of the horses, and then drove the team around the field, in order to prepare for the planting of a monster vegetable garden that would feed the ranch staff all year and serve as a demonstration plot for organic farming practices.

My experience at the Heifer Ranch taught me that it is possible, even in modern times, even in the United States, to perform feats like riding two beasts of burden at once, even though this skill has nearly vanished from our culture.

II

Mystery solved. Right?

Wrong.

Even after I thought of a plausible answer to Loris’ question about how Jesus could ride a donkey and a colt, the “Coburn question” continued to pester me all week. This was because I knew, from having grown up around draft animals, that even though a skilled handler could ride two beasts of burden at the same time—*and* that Jesus would have been very familiar with draft animals—I also knew that nobody who knows anything about animal husbandry puts weight on the back of a colt—not if they ever want that colt

to be of service when it reaches maturity.

So, all week my brain wrestled with Loris' question: what really happened on that first Palm Sunday? Was Jesus riding on a donkey *and* a colt, or what?

Friday morning, I awoke with the answer. Eureka! The answer is: "No! Jesus didn't ride on a donkey *and* a colt. He only rode on a donkey. An experienced handler, in Jesus' day or now, would not have put any weight on the back of a colt. The guy who wrote Matthew's Palm Sunday story or the guy who translated it (or both) must not have understood this principle of animal husbandry. The scribe and/or interpreter must have been the first century equivalent of 'an urban cowboy!'"

You all know what an "urban cowboy" is, right?

An urban cowboy is a person who dresses like a cowboy and enjoys associating with cowboy culture, but he (or she) typically does not know how to handle livestock.

III

So you may ask, "How would a conventional cowpoke handle a colt on a parade route? Moreover, what was really going on in Matthew's Palm Sunday parade?"

My answers to these questions are based on childhood memories. My immediate family did not raise draft animals or pleasure horses, but several of my cousins did, and I had ample opportunity to learn from their examples.

My cousin Roger's family, for example, has been raising and showing Clydesdales on their farm outside of Lincoln, Iowa, for close to a century. Clydesdales are a Scottish breed of draft horse that has (in recent years) become associated with a certain beverage known as "Budweis," in Ceske Budejovice, Bohemia, where it was first crafted in the 13th century. (It may interest you to know that my cousin Roger has even been employed as the horseshoer and driver for this beverage company's famous Clydesdale team.)

Some of my favorite memories of childhood include going to local parades, like the Gladbrook Corn Carnival, and the Cattle Congress in Waterloo, and watching Roger's family drive their team of Clydesdales and show wagon in the parades and arenas.

Sometimes we would see them tie their colts to the back of the show wagon so that it would become familiar with the show wagon and being in parades, and sometimes we would see them tie a lead rope on a colt and take it around the arena with its mother during warm-up sessions, so that the colt would get used to being around unfamiliar livestock and the noise of the crowd and loud speaker. Through these sorts of experiences, draft and show animals, and even helping animals (like Shannon Whitney's service dog, Tuscano), learn how to cope with crowds, learn their role in a team, and mind their manners (especially in public) at a young age.

So based on my childhood learning, I am able to say with assurance that what was most likely going on in Matthew's version of the Palm Sunday Parade was this: the donkey was a mare, and she had a colt at her side. The colt was either still nursing and needed to stay with her, or, if it were a little older, the colt would have been ready—like Jesus' disciples—to learn how to follow the leader, handle the crowd, and do what was right and needed, even in difficult circumstances.

What better way to season a colt than to take it to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, and expose it to the commotion associated with a High Holy Day, so that it could learn how to better cope with the frenzy of a crowd and stay on task?

IV

Think about that image for a moment. Think about the image of Jesus riding a donkey with a colt at her side. You don't typically see that image in Sunday School pictures or stained glass window depictions of Palm Sunday; yet according to Matthew, there were a mare and colt at the first Palm Sunday parade.

That mare and colt, in a powerful way, are a symbol of Palm Sunday, just like Jesus riding on a donkey with his followers at his side is a symbol of Palm Sunday. The mare and the colt, like Jesus and his followers, are a reminder that Palm Sunday was first and foremost about an invitation to follow God's lead and to learn from Jesus' example how to face the clamor and challenges that life presents to every pilgrim on the road. Palm Sunday was (and is) an invitation to follow the leader, and for Christians that leader was (and is) Jesus.

The leadership role that Jesus took with his disciples was one that he passed on to his first disciples, and is part of the legacy and opportunity that is passed on to every generation of followers, including us. This invitation is, by extension, an invitation to play a similar mentoring role in the lives of others, particularly young people in our families, congregation, and community.

Mentoring is not easy work. None of us can do it alone. We need to work together, because the mentoring of our young people (both in the congregation and wider community) is a vocation that belongs to the whole community and the whole people of God.

The clamor described at the first Palm Sunday is a perpetual reminder that there are many voices competing for our children's attention, especially by the time they reach adolescence.

This is one of the reasons that the work of the Deputy Sheriff's Activity League (DSAL) is so important here in Cherryland. The DSAL programs, like the very successful soccer program that just opened on April 2 with 900 registrants, and Dig Deep Farms, which we're featuring today at Fellowship Hour, are so important to our community. These program's leaders are among positive voices in our community that complement what

we're trying to do here at Eden Church. DSAL programs teach our youth teamwork, good sportsmanship, healthy habits, and a variety of skills that enable them to experience success and build on success in school, athletics, the arts, interpersonal relationships, work, and civic life.

As a church, we can bless and encourage our community leaders, like Sgt. Neideffer and Tammy Wakerling and their colleagues, including the young farmers who have signed on to learn the vocation of farming with Dig Deep. We can also bless and encourage all of the people who donate their time to serve as DSAL soccer coaches, and coaches for other sports, artistic programs, and the like, in the wider community. But that is not all.

As a religious community, we can also help the children within our congregation develop a meaningful identity as followers of Christ, as persons born and endowed with a special purpose—a vocation. We can teach them our faith stories and faith values, so that when the cacophony of voices—some of them not so good—beckon for their attention, the children know who they are and they have a sense of how to handle themselves, and who they can go to for guidance if they feel confused or frightened about what's happening to them or around them.

One way we build this sense of identity and competency in our children is to encourage and support their participation in church school and church camps, retreats, and conferences. In a couple of weeks, you can join the Religious Education and Spiritual Life Team and all of our church school families for a delicious camp lunch. Camp-style food and fun will be served up in Oliver Hall in order to raise friends and funds for summer camps and trips through our NCNC UCC Conference. Tickets are \$5 each. Come enjoy some of Jenifer, Mary, and Paul's homemade food and help send our kids to camp. It's the best deal in town!

Another way we can support the young parents and guardians in our congregation is through the nurture of our church school. One colleague of mine back in New York regularly reminds parents in his congregation that his church is present in the community to support their children's spiritual and moral formation. My friend's invitation, which he puts in the mail box of church neighbors, says something like this:

Are your children familiar with stories about the Garden of Eden, Noah and the Ark, and the Tower of Babel?

Will they grow up knowing the names and narratives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph and their families?

Will the terms Exodus, Exile, and Return mean anything to them?

Will they be familiar with the 10 Commandments, and the Beatitudes?

Will they know the difference between the Christian Christmas story, and Santa Clause, and the difference between Jesus' resurrection and the Easter Bunny?

Will they know what a parable is, and recall the teachings of Jesus?

Will they know who Paul was, or what his letters were about?

Unless you are very unusual, you will not be able to teach these things to your children alone. We can help. See you Sunday.

My friend is a UCC pastor, so he puts his invitation in Judeo-Christian language, but the invitation to support children's spiritual formation might also come from another tradition—from an Islamic mosque, a Buddhist temple, or a Jewish synagogue, using faith language appropriate to each respective tradition.

Each of us can play an important mentoring role as individuals, too. What role we accept will vary. Perhaps that role has been or will be as a parent or grandparent or aunt or uncle. Perhaps we have or will make a career out of mentoring young people, or mentoring has been or will be more of an avocation for us through coaching, scouting, directing, teaching church school, or serving as a camp counselor.

Or perhaps, we don't or won't serve directly as an activity leader, but we have or can do other things behind the scenes to support children's programs, like bringing a child in our neighborhood to church, laundering the Christmas costumes, washing the nursery toys, bringing healthy snacks for the nursery or coffee hour, or accepting roles that free others to teach and lead. Or, we have or can learn the names of the children in our congregation and neighborhood and teach them our names, and we can demonstrate interest in their lives and in what matters to them.

What we do is less important than how we do it, and that we do it. The part we play in the Palm Sunday drama and the life of children may seem very small, very ordinary to us. But the result can be extraordinary. It could change a life, which is to say, it could change the world. Just like Jesus did. Amen.