

**PALM SUNDAY**  
**THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WANTS AND NEEDS**

(03/25/18)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 11:1-10; 14:32-36

*“And going a little farther, Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.’”*

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, the most sacred week of the Christian year. Many of the symbols of our faith arise from the experiences of this week: the palms that remind us of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem; the bread and wine of the Last Supper; the crucifix, symbolic of Good Friday; and the empty or resurrection cross, a reminder of the empty tomb, God’s power over death.

This morning I would like us to think about one of the themes that arise out of the events of Holy Week: the difference between wants and needs.

Jesus and his disciples enter Jerusalem to observe Passover, the celebration of the Exodus and how the angel of death “passed over” the houses of the Israelites, sparing their sons but killing the first born of the Egyptians. The meal in the upper room, however, is more than a traditional Passover meal. It is Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples, the event that we celebrate in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We will be celebrating this sacrament this coming Thursday, Maundy Thursday, at our service of Tenebrae, and also next Sunday on Easter Sunday because Easter falls on the first Sunday of the month this year.

What a range of feelings must have been present on Palm Sunday as Jesus and his disciples enter Jerusalem! Judas Iscariot and the disciple known as Simon the Zealot realize that within the enthusiastic crowds lies a revolutionary potential just waiting to be tapped. What they fail to realize, however, is that Jesus isn’t interested in political power; he is interested in spiritual power. He has no intention of ruling his nation or the world; he prefers to rule our hearts. He has no aspirations to a princely life style; he chooses to live as a servant, helping people to discover the kingdom of God that is already present within them.

On Palm Sunday the crowd hails Jesus, who is of the house and lineage of King David, as a conquering hero. They spread palm branches, a symbol of the revolution, in his path. They think they know what they need. Out of their perceived need, they develop an expectation, the expectation that Jesus will lead their nation to freedom. When Jesus does not meet their

perceived need, when he does not match their expectation they became angry, turn on him, and crucify him. The crowd fails to grasp the difference between wants and needs.

A need is something that is essential to our life or wellbeing. The humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow is known for his formulation of a hierarchy of needs. At the bottom of the pyramid is our need for food and water. Without this we would die very quickly. We would be unable to move on to what Maslow called higher or growth needs.

The next level of the pyramid is our need for safety and security. Then comes the need to belong, the need to be part of a family or a community. Then comes the need to give and receive love. The level following that addresses our need for self-esteem (which for some reason he places higher than love). At the top of the pyramid is the need for self-actualization, the innate desire or need to become ourselves fully, to become all that we can be. I would add a level to Maslow's hierarchy. Either included in or following the level of self-actualization, I would place one's spiritual needs, one's spiritual journey as the highest and most important need of all.

These are needs. If our survival and safety needs are not met, our life is endangered. If our need to belong, to love and be loved, to develop healthy self-esteem, to discover who we are as unique human beings, and to become who we are meant to be are not met, our life will not be a fully human life.

Wants are different from needs. Wants are matters of preference. When I say that I want the weather to be good next Sunday for the Easter sunrise service at Hopkinton State Park, I am telling you what I prefer. I prefer that it be a warm and sunny day. To be honest, I don't *need* it to be sunny. If it rains or snows, we will meet here in this church, which would also be nice. Wants that are not met don't limit my growth into fullness of life to the same extent as needs.

I believe that one of the core dynamics behind human suffering is the inability to distinguish between wants and needs. We have a lot of wants. When we visualize and articulate them as needs, we may actually come to believe that they are necessary to our wellbeing. Wants masquerading as needs invariably become demands upon life, upon God, or upon others.

At the time of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem did the crowds *need* a revolutionary messiah, or was this what they *wanted*? I am sure they would have preferred to be free of the oppressive yoke of Roman rule, but was this really a need? Perhaps what they really needed was a new experience of God. This is what Jesus gave them.

Remember, when we regard our wants as needs they become demands upon the outer world, upon others. When this happens, when other people become a means to the fulfillment of our wants, we become blind to the reality, the uniqueness of what we encounter in these people. They become a means to the end of our happiness, not an end in themselves.

Much of our life is comprised of wants that masquerade as needs. I want to be happy. I want to be wealthy. I want to be healthy. Yes, even this is a want, for my life will go on if I become sick and I may actually grow spiritually through my struggle. Just because we feel something is important doesn't make that something a need. We need to be a little more circumspect about what we call needs, about what we describe as the necessities of life.

An Amish man in Pennsylvania Dutch country stopped his farming to watch a young couple move into the house across the road. Among the items that the delivery van unloaded were a computer, a state of the art stereo system, a plasma TV with DVD, an X-Box, and air conditioners for every room.

The following day, the Amish man and his wife welcomed the new residents into the neighborhood by bringing them a loaf of freshly baked bread and a jar of homemade jam. At the conclusion of the visit, the Amish man told his new neighbor, "If anything should go wrong with your new appliances, don't hesitate to call me."

"That's very neighborly of you," the young man responded. "I didn't realize you knew how to repair all these modern gadgets."

"I don't," replied the Amish man. "But if they happen to break down, maybe I can show you that it's possible to live without them."

What is the difference between a want and a need? How many times do we use the word "need" when what we really mean is "want?" Jesus knew the difference.

Jesus needed to fulfill his destiny, a destiny that was assigned to him by God. He needed to fulfill his destiny even when it was a difficult and painful road. There are times when we, too, need to fulfill our destiny by walking a difficult and painful road. Jesus entered Jerusalem when he would rather have walked in the other direction.

Later in the week, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus showed us how to distinguish wants from needs. He said, "Father, if it is possible, remove this cup of suffering from me." In this prayer Jesus was stating a want. He would prefer not to suffer. This was a very understandable, a very human want. Yet it was still a want, a preference. It was not a need.

Jesus was guided by a higher standard than his human wants. He was guided by God's wants. Jesus knew that when God asks us to do something or when God wants us to live a certain kind of life, God's want becomes our need.

The second half of Jesus' prayer in the garden is the most powerful prayer in the Bible. Jesus ends his prayer, his honest articulation of his wants, by saying, "Nevertheless, not what I want but what you want."

When we pray, we often express our preferences. We articulate our desire for a certain state of affairs in our lives or in the world. We verbalize our wants. In the deepest kind of prayer, however, we ask for guidance and strength to accept the life that God has given us, to do what God wants us to do. If we live our lives as Christians, God's wants become our needs.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said that the necessities of life are fewer than most people realize. The great religious leaders--Jesus, the Buddha, St. Francis, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa, and Albert Schweitzer knew that we need little in the way of possessions to live a happy and fulfilling life. They would take a skeptical view of what we call "the necessities of life." They would counsel us to live simply that we might share with others, to live simply that others might simply live. This is the heart of Christian stewardship.

As the events of Holy Week unfold, we can see that practically everyone confused these two categories. The disciples knew what they wanted to happen, but it wasn't what needed to happen. They wanted the week to end in a victory, not a crucifixion. The crowds on Palm Sunday knew what they wanted from Jesus. They wanted a military leader. This was what they wanted, but it was not what God wanted. It was not what they needed or what the world needed.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus knew what he wanted. He preferred not to be mocked and derided, to have a crown of thorns smashed down on his head, to be deserted by his disciples, to be nailed to the cross and hang there until he died. Yet Jesus ended his prayer by saying that what was most important to him was what God wanted.

Jesus was able to view himself and the events of Holy Week through the eyes of God. This is what we try to do in prayer, at least when we pray as we should. We try to see life, other people, and even ourselves through the eyes of God. In the last analysis, it is not our will but God's that should guide or direct the unfolding, the living of our life.

In Holy Week, as we reflect upon the last days of Jesus' life, we, like him, need to distinguish wants from needs. We need to think about what we have come to call the necessities

of life, how necessary some of them really are. We need to think about the matter of living simply, following the example that Jesus set for us. We need to think about what God wants from us as individuals and as a church, and how God's wants should become our needs.

Then we, like Jesus, will be able to pass through the highs and the lows of our life, the Palm Sundays and the Good Fridays, with the triumphant faith of Easter!

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