

**PALM SUNDAY**  
**PRAYER TEACHES US THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WANTS AND NEEDS**

(04/10/2022)

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.’”* (Mark 14:36)

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 Jesus’ crucifixion; and the empty or resurrection cross, a reminder of the empty tomb, God’s power over death. On the left side wall of our sanctuary as you face the altar, you will see the familiar painting of Jesus praying alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. On the right side is a painting that Darlene and I found in an antique shop in Lawrence, a picture of Mary and the other women leaving Golgotha in great distress following the crucifixion. On the right side, just a little further down is the painting of the Last Supper. Our sanctuary is truly bounded or surrounded by reminders of Holy Week!

This morning, I would like us to think about one of the themes that arise out of the events of Holy Week. It is also one of the great lessons of the spiritual gift of prayer. Prayer, if it is true prayer, should help us discern the difference between wants and needs.

We all know the story as recorded in the four gospels. Jesus and his disciples enter Jerusalem to observe Passover, the celebration of the Exodus from Egypt, 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, becomes 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 sharing in this sacrament this coming Thursday, Maundy Thursday.

What a wide 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 over our hearts. He has no aspirations to a princely lifestyle; he chooses to live as a humble servant, helping people to discover the kingdom of God that is already present within them.

In keeping with the theme that we have been exploring this Lenten season, the theme of prayer: how our understanding of God shapes our expectations of life; how we respond when the

schema that has shaped our expectations is challenged; how our faith or belief system is challenged when our expectations of life, others, or ourselves are not met, we will look at Palm Sunday and the events following Palm Sunday through this lens. In simple terms, this will hopefully teach us something of the difference between wants and needs.

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 his behavior does not match their expectations, 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 air, food, and water. Without these we would die very quickly. We would be unable to move on to what Maslow called higher survival and eventually even growth needs.

According to Maslow, 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 next higher level in the pyramid addresses our need for self-esteem. (For some reason, Maslow places the need for self-esteem higher than the need to give and receive love; I would put it the other way around). In any event, at the top of Maslow's pyramid is the need for self-actualization, the innate desire or need to become ourselves fully, to become all that we can be, all that we are called to be.

As a Christian, I would add one more level to Maslow's hierarchy. Either included in or just above the level of self-actualization, I would place one's spiritual journey, one's relationship with God as the highest and most important need of all.

These are needs. If our survival and safety needs are not met, as is the case with the people in Ukraine, Haiti, and Ethiopia, and, as is the case with women and children who are the victims of domestic violence, 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. Please note that our church addresses several of these needs: the need to feel safe, *just as you are*; the need to belong; the need to experience community; the need to give and receive love; the need to make a constructive contribution to life, and the need to embark upon a lifelong spiritual journey. In addition, when our fellowship is not proscribed by pandemic restrictions, we address Maslow's level one--we really like to feed you!

Wants are different from needs. Wants are matters of preference. When I say that I hope the weather will be good next Sunday for the United Parishes of Southborough Easter sunrise service at Hopkinton State Park, I am telling you what I prefer. I prefer that it be a warm and sunny day so we can see the sunrise. To be honest, I don't *need* it to be warm and sunny. If it rains or snows, instead of meeting by the side of the lake, we will meet here in this church sanctuary, which would also be nice. I like it when people from other churches come to our church.

Speaking of the Easter sunrise service next Sunday, on the way to church this morning Darlene checked the weather forecast and informed me that there is a 40% chance of rain next Sunday. I confess that I have no idea what this means—a 40% chance that it will rain--unless you are thinking of making a bet on the weather. Darlene then suggested that we might think of setting a rain date. I told her that wasn't really one of her better ideas, that you can't do that for an Easter sunrise service. She said, "Why not? We do it for yard sales." I then tried to explain to her that Easter is different from a yard sale. I'm not sure she was convinced. And to think—her husband is a minister!

But that's not the point. What was my point? Oh yes; my point was that wants that are not met don't limit my growth into fullness of life to the same extent as needs that are not met.

One of the core dynamics in human suffering is the inability to distinguish between wants and needs. If we are honest, unless we have devoted ourselves to a simple, to a contemplative life, we have a lot of wants. However, when we visualize and articulate our wants as needs, we believe that they are necessary to our wellbeing. Wants masquerading as needs invariably become expectations; then they become demands. They become demands upon life, upon God, upon others, and even upon us.

At the risk of oversimplifying, when other people do not live up to our expectations (and this happens quite often), when their behavior does not match what we expect of them, we tend to feel angry. When we do not live up to our own expectations, even if they are unrealistic (which they often are for some of us), we tend to feel guilty.

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 frame or 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 uniqueness of what we encounter in these people. They become a means to the end of our happiness, not an end in themselves. Buddhists consider this to be a major factor in our suffering and, consequently, the suffering we inflict upon others.

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 the desire to be healthy is a want, for my life will go on if I become sick and, if I have the right attitude, I may even be able to grow spiritually through my struggle with my sickness or disability. 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, 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.

I believe Jesus *freely chose* to fulfill his destiny, a destiny to which he was called by God. Jesus felt he needed to fulfill this destiny even when it meant that he had to walk a difficult and painful road. There are times when we, too, need to fulfill our destiny by walking a difficult and painful road. Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem when I am sure that 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 to exist in our lives or in the world. We verbalize our wants. In the deepest kind of prayer, however, we ask for guidance to accept the life that God has given us, and then the strength and wisdom to do what God wants us to do with the life that we have been given.

The New England Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us 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!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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