

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

(04/02/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29  
Mark 11:1-10; 14:32-36

*“Jesus 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)

*"Spirituality is a matter of less, not more."* (Meister Eckhart)

Today is Palm Sunday! Palm Sunday, the sixth Sunday in Lent, marks the beginning of Holy Week, the most sacred week of the Christian year. Many of the symbols of our faith arise from the events of this week: the palms that remind us of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem; the bread and wine of the Last Supper; the painting hanging on the wall of our sanctuary that depicts Jesus alone in the Garden of Gethsemane; the crucifix with Jesus' body hanging on a cross; and the empty cross, what is called the Resurrection Cross, a reminder of resurrection, God's power over death through the Easter experience.

This morning, in addition to welcoming back our choir after a three year hiatus and celebrating what they bring to us, what they share with us in worship, and in addition to expressing my hope that two specific people in the choir (whose names I will not mention lest I embarrass them) will kindly refrain from whipping each other with their palms or tickling the ears of other choir members on Palm Sunday), I would like to single out one of the themes suggested in our scripture readings, a theme we touched on last week: the difference between wants and needs.

We all know the story. Jesus and his disciples were entering Jerusalem to observe Passover, the celebration of the Exodus from Egypt, the time when the angel of death “passed over” the houses of the Israelites, sparing their sons but killing the first born of the Egyptians. The time in the Upper Room was scheduled as a Passover meal, but it was not a Passover meal. It was something different: Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples, the consecration of the Lord's Supper, the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the Sacrament of Presence.

What a range of feelings must have been present on Palm Sunday as Jesus and his disciples entered Jerusalem! The disciples were thrilled by the size of the crowds! Judas Iscariot and the disciple known as Simon the Zealot must have realized that in this enthusiastic following there was a revolutionary potential just waiting to be tapped.

Some scholars have speculated that the motivation behind Judas's betrayal of Jesus was political. By turning Jesus over to the authorities, Judas would force Jesus' hand. With his back

to the wall, Jesus might call in a legion of angels to rid their country of the hated Roman oppressors. Judas failed to realize that Jesus wasn't interested in political power; he was interested in spiritual power. He had no intention of ruling his nation or the world; he preferred to rule over our hearts.

On Palm Sunday, the crowd hailed Jesus as a conquering hero. By spreading palm branches, a symbol of revolution in his path, the crowd revealed their expectation that Jesus would become the religious-political leader of the long-awaited revolt. They expected him to lead their people from bondage to freedom, as Moses had done so many years before. When Jesus did not meet their perceived need, they became angry, turned on him, and crucified him. The dynamics of Holy Week challenges us to examine the difference between wants and needs.

A need is something that is essential to our well-being. The humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow is known for his formulation of a hierarchy of needs. At the bottom of the pyramid, the most basic level of need is physiological: the need for air, food, and water. The next level is our need for bodily safety and security. Then comes the need to belong, the need to be part of a family or a community (like our church, for example!), and the need to experience, to give and receive love. At the top of the pyramid is the need for self-actualization, which Maslow describes as living according to our full potential, or becoming who we fully are.

These are needs. If our survival needs are not met, our life is endangered. If we are not safe, or if we were not safe in our homes when we were children, all our energies will be directed to this end, and our life will be centered in the pursuit of control. If the need to belong, the need to love and be loved, the need to discover who we are as unique human beings and become that to the best of our ability are not met, we will experience difficulty with our attachments, our relationships, and our life will not be lived to our fullest potential.

Wants are matters of preference. When I say I need my car to start in the morning, I am actually stating a preference. I would prefer that my car start so the schedule of my day will not be disrupted but, to be honest, I don't *need* my car to start. If it doesn't start, I will call AAA and find another way to get to work. *One of the core issues behind human suffering is the inability to distinguish between wants and needs.* We have a lot of wants or preferences in life. When we visualize or state them as needs, we come to believe that they are necessary to our well-being. *Wants masquerading as needs become demands upon others. They become demands upon life. They can also become demands upon God.*

At the time of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem did the crowds *need* a revolutionary messiah, or did they just *want* this? To be sure, they would have *preferred* to be free of the oppressive yoke of the Romans, but was this really a need? *Perhaps what they really needed was a new*

*experience of God.* And this is what they got! Remember, when we confuse wants with needs, when we regard our wants as needs, they become demands upon the outer world, upon others. When this happens, 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 other people. They become a means to the end of our happiness, not an end in themselves.

Let me give you an example. Some time ago, before I discovered that fast food restaurants were created by Satan to help us kill ourselves, I was standing in line at a Burger King. I was staring at the menu board, as if I didn't already have it memorized. I knew what I wanted: a double Whopper with bacon and cheese, a large serving of fries, and a medium diet Pepsi. (The diet Pepsi was my nod to a healthy diet.)

My line was moving slowly. Have you ever noticed this—that the line you select is seldom the fastest moving line? I briefly considered that it might be a God-punishment for being in a fast-food restaurant, but I quickly set this thought aside. The line to my right was moving faster. Instead of taking the time to breathe deeply and meditate, as Buddhists advise us to do when we encounter a speed bump on the road of life, I became annoyed. I had probably been standing in line no more than one or two minutes, but I apparently had certain expectations regarding the speed of service. In addition, I was in a hurry to get somewhere.

As I approached the front of the line, I thought of making a sarcastic remark to the person at the register about how I thought this was supposed to be a fast-food restaurant. When I got to the counter, I discovered that the lovely young woman at the register had Down Syndrome. She was doing the very best she could to fill our orders, but she just wasn't as fast as the person at the register beside her.

You can probably imagine how I felt. The word "small" doesn't capture it! Burger King had been enlightened enough, had been gracious enough, had been caring enough to hire this young woman, train her, and give her the opportunity to earn a living helping people, which she obviously loved to do. Her manager and the other customers were patient with her. They were accepting of her limitations. I was the one who was annoyed because it took me three minutes to get my artery-clogging junk food instead of two. I couldn't believe that I had been in that much of a hurry or that my expectations of service at a fast-food establishment was so narrow that I had almost been cruel and hurtful to someone who was doing her very best to serve me. This experience was a lesson not only in the difference between wants and needs; it was also a lesson in humility.

Much of our life is comprised of wants which we confuse with needs. I may want to be happy. I may want to be wealthy. I may want to be healthy. Yes, even this is a want, for my life

will go on if I become sick or handicapped, and I may actually grow spiritually through my illness *if I face it in the right way*. 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.

Jesus needed to fulfill his destiny, a destiny to which he was called 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, when we must walk a difficult and painful road. Jesus entered Jerusalem when he would have preferred to walk away.

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

The second half of Jesus' prayer in the garden is the most powerful prayer in the Bible. Jesus ends his prayer, his honest expression 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. We verbalize our wants. In the deepest kind of prayer, however, we ask for guidance and strength to do what God wants us to do. If we were to live our lives as Christians, God's wants or wishes would become our needs.

The American transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson said the needs of life are fewer than most people realize. He said we need to love and be loved. We need someone with whom we can share our joys and sorrows. We need to make our contribution to life. We need to do something worthwhile with the time entrusted to us. We also need a faith in God or a relationship with God that will guide the unfolding of our life.

The great religious leaders – Lao Tzu, Jesus, the Buddha, Francis of Assisi, Albert Schweitzer, Mahatma Gandhi, and Mother Theresa knew that we need little in the way of material 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.

When we look at the events of Holy Week, 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 what they wanted, but 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 be spit upon, to have a crown of thorns smashed down upon his head. He preferred not to have nails driven through his hands and feet, to be nailed to the cross and hang there until he died. Yet Jesus ended his prayer by saying that what was most important was what God wanted. Jesus was able to view the events of Holy Week through the eyes of God. This is what we try to do in prayer; to see ourselves and others 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, and how this would affect, would shape our stewardship. We need to think about what it means to be fed the Bread of Life, which we share with each other during the Sacrament of Holy Communion. And we need to think about what God wants from us as individuals and as a church, the ways in which God's wants should become our needs.

If we can do this, 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  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
April 2, 2023*

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

## **PRAYER FOLLOWING THE SERMON**

Almighty God, we thank you for your many gifts to us. We thank you especially for the gift of Jesus. Remind us that you are with us as we travel along the difficult road of life just as you were with him. Help us to take on his heart and his mind that we might see the world, other people, and ourselves through his eyes. Guide us in the reordering of our priorities, that we might distinguish the central from the peripheral, the essential from the superfluous, that your wants might become our needs both in thought and in action. We ask this in the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.