

Not Like the Others

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Mark II:I-II

There are times when I'm not much of a grownup.

Just ask Tammi.

And there are times when I don't *want* to be a grownup, when I feel deeply what I've seen on the Internet: "I can't adult today. Please don't make me adult."

But whether I like it or not (and usually I do), I *am* a grownup. And in the particular season of grownuphood that I now find myself, more and more I catch myself thinking about things from my childhood.

I think of family and friends.

I recall neighbors and neighborhood places.

I turn over in my head some song from way back.

And I remember TV shows.

There were a number of shows that I liked to watch.

The Brady Bunch.

The Partridge Family.

Hogan's Heroes.

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. (I'm looking forward to the documentary on Fred Rogers coming out soon!)

I recall being so frustrated for weeks when I would come home from Veeder Elementary School to find that my favorite TV programs had been preempted (yet again!) by those dumb Watergate hearings.

What third grader wants to watch that?

For a time, one of my top favorite TV programs was *Sesame Street*. Even in black and white (as we couldn't afford a color TV), the show was entertaining, educational, and even formative.

It was *Sesame Street* that showcased talented musicians and artists in ways accessible to a clumsy and sensitive kid who was just beginning to reach uncertainly into creativity.

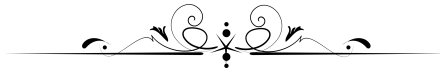
It was *Sesame Street* that supported my parents' quiet values of fairness and kindness, as it subtly but firmly worked against racism and prejudice and classism by including people of color and ethnic people and poor people as beloved cast members and welcome guests.

And it was *Sesame Street* that kindled an enduring love for the Muppets (including those who weren't on *Sesame Street* but who had their own show): Kermit and Grover and Bert and Ernie and Miss Piggy and Fozzie Bear and the Swedish Chef and all the rest.

And of course it was *Sesame Street* that gave me and others of my generation a number of songs that became somewhat part of us. Songs like this:

One of these things is not like the others

*One of these things just doesn't belong
Can you tell which thing is not like the others
By the time I finish my song?*



On a day that we now call “Palm Sunday,” Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt. Often this is called “The Triumphal Entry.” But if we really pay attention to Jesus,

what he says and doesn't say,
how he acts and doesn't act,
particularly as he is portrayed here in the Gospel of Mark,

then we may just have to question that phrase.

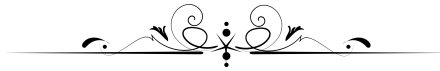
Because his entry doesn't seem triumphant. His entry is restrained. It's subtle. It *hints* at deep meaning rather than shouts it, just as he never says a word once he sits on that colt.

Ah, the colt. That's important. Because kings would enter the cities they ruled riding on impressive stallions, which were, lest we miss the point, horses of *war*. Rulers rule, and they show their rule with symbols of their power and reminders of their capacity for force.

But Jesus is not like them. If he is to rule, it will be different.

It must be different.

One of these things is not like the others.



Sure, some rulers would occasionally enter their city riding not on war horses but on humble animals, like colts and foals and donkeys. They would do this to assure the people that they came in peace.

Yes, that's what Jesus was conveying: that he was there

not to crush but to save,
not to punish but to deliver.

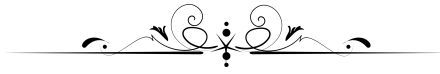
Yet even here there is a difference:

a real difference,
a subtle difference,
a usually overlooked difference.

Because the rulers of this world deliver their message of peace (should they have one) backed up by weapons and force and political cunning and an unrelenting concern for their own self-preservation. They cloak themselves in displays of humility and with shows of care for the lowly. Yet everyone knows that the sacrifices to be made will *never* be made by the king, but always, as ever, by the people.

But the message of peace brought by Jesus is supported not by the tools of violence but by his own body. The sacrifice will be himself on behalf of the people. *He* will die for *them*.

Here, too, one of these things is not like the others.



Whatever animal a ruler would choose for transportation, the point again and again was that the entry into the city meant victory. It meant winning. The end of the trip was the ruler taking his (usually his, of course, in that absolutely patriarchal culture) his rightful place of power. And in all that, the assumption reinforced, and the calculus enforced, is the one that equates

strength with virtue,
power with force,
coercion with worth,
suffering with losing,
powerlessness with irrelevance,
weakness with failure.

But on that day, Jesus sure seems to have a different end in mind. He knows that he is entering Jerusalem to die. He knows that what lies directly ahead is not his throne but instead his cross. He sees the path before him, he sees his work, he sees his role. And it turns away from self-interest. It rejects the common, universal, false equivalencies that benefit the strong, and destroy the weak, yet enslave all.

Again, one of these things is not like the others.



In all this, of course, were the disciples...
who should have gotten it...
but who didn't.

One of the recurring themes in the Gospel of Mark, a theme that I find both hilarious and sobering, is this one: "The disciples, bless their stupid hearts, just don't get it."

Again and again, they don't understand Jesus. They actively *mis*understand him. They put on him expectations that he shakes off, that he rejects, that he corrects. And still, they fail to understand.

Bless their stupid hearts, they just don't get it.

We see another hint of this as they go into the city. Jesus is silent as he rides on this donkey he told them to get. Ahead of him and behind him are his disciples, not just the twelve, but a larger group

of followers
and students
and fans
and hangers-on,

hopeful and believing but not necessarily understanding.

They're kind of a rag-tag group: disorganized and noisy. And in their raggy-taggy way, they came along, in front of Jesus and behind, shouting out

their hope in Jesus that he was special,
their hope that he would change
the power structures under which they suffered,
their hope that he would bring back
the kingdom of David,
their hope that he would be the messiah.

This was their hope.

And it's often overlooked:

This hope could have been, should have been, would have been a threat to those in Jerusalem who were in charge.

This hope could have been, should have been, would have been a threat to the *Romans*, who *really* ruled Jerusalem.

Had anyone noticed.

Had anyone paid attention.

And yet no one seems to notice this group entering the city.

No arrests are made, not now.

No confrontation ensues that would lead to their hope being fulfilled, with Jesus now taking charge.

No soldiers come to break up their demonstration.

Because they were just a rag-tag band of pilgrims entering a city already used to pilgrims. They were just a noisy bunch of guys (and maybe some gals) shouting out in a city that was already plenty noisy.

One of these things is not like the others.



The action, then, is focused on the disciples of Jesus, with Jesus himself at the center, like the calm within the storm, the eye of a hurricane.

What a contrast: between these followers of Jesus, and Jesus himself.

They shout. He remains silent.

They dance around. He sits still.

They agitate for change. He quietly waits for the change to come with his impending suffering and death.

They are hopeful, expectant. As well they should. But Jesus knows that their hopes would be fulfilled not as they *expect*, but *beyond* their expectation.

One of these things is not like the others.



Again, the disciples don't really get Jesus. They don't get his work. They don't get his mission. They don't get what his rule and salvation truly must mean.

They thought it was about power.

They thought it was about winning.

They thought it was about security.
They thought it was about being right.
And in all that, they are not much different ... from us.
Or we from them.

So often, we, the modern-day disciples of Jesus, fail to understand Jesus, and actively misunderstand him.

So often, *we* think it's about power.

We think it's about winning.

We think it's about security.

We think it's about being right.

We think it's about political influence.

We think it's about cultural dominance.

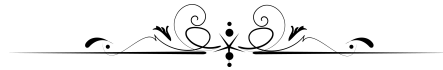
We act as if being a Christian were the same thing as looking good and being kind.

We treat Christian faith as little more than fire insurance.

We look to Jesus to confirm our comfort and to bless our biases, with his forgiveness understood as requiring

no change,
no repentance,
no conversion,
no striving for holiness.

All of that might very well show us that with the faith Christ seeks and the faith we actually show, one of these things is not like the others.



Yet Jesus does not save only the perfect.
He does not befriend only those who already know him completely.
He doesn't forgive only those who have made no mistakes.
He does not parcel out his love only to the completely loving and the altogether lovely.
To disciples ancient and modern who just don't get him, who fail to understand him, he shows patience, and grace, and kindness.
His suffering and death are effective even for them.
Even for us.
Because Jesus, who died and rose, is not like the others.
And because of that, he can make us less like the others, and more like him.

*Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.
—Revelation 7:12, NRSV*