

“Pony Power”

Matthew 21:1-11

²¹When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” ⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” ¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Let your Word, O God, break open our hearts this day through the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may enter into this Holy Week with the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem riding on a little donkey was a symbolic act that Jesus carefully planned. But if Jesus usually walked wherever he went, why would he, on this day, ride a donkey? Jesus was an itinerant preacher and healer; he traveled from place to place on foot. Why would he not also walk into Jerusalem?

Yet Matthew, it seems, takes great pains to describe Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem with reference to the prophet, Zechariah, which begins to explain why Jesus used a donkey for this symbolic act.

⁹ *Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
**humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.***

¹⁰ *He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the warhorse from Jerusalem;
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;*

I should point out that while Matthew makes it sound like Jesus rode on two beasts at once, Zechariah, was actually referring to one animal using poetic parallelism. The prophet was describing the entrance of a triumphant king as...

***humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.***

Zechariah was describing only one beast: it was a donkey. What kind of donkey? It was a young donkey; a colt, the foal of a donkey.

So why does Matthew seem to be saying there were two animals? I don’t know. But my suggestion is that Matthew was emphasizing the immaturity of the young donkey, by showing that it had not yet been separated from its mother. The two had to stay together. I think the point here was to set up a contrast between Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem as the king of heaven, with that of a conquering earthly king who would surely make his entrance on a seasoned and battle-tested stallion.

The contrast is quite stark. I believe Jesus was deliberately creating this distinction to juxtapose Godly power moving in opposition to worldly power and physical might. But let’s not mistake Jesus riding on a humble little donkey for a Jesus meek and mild, for this symbolic act was a clear mocking of state power and supremacy.

While I don’t believe the crowds really understood what Jesus was doing – for they were claiming him to be their Davidic king, the one to come with power and might to fight on their behalf – none the less, the crowd served Jesus’ purpose well as he sought to mock Roman rule, and show what the true power of God looked like.

There was another purpose, I believe, for Matthew referencing Zechariah. In the prophecy, the coming king would command peace; he would cut off the chariot – gone – he would cut off the war horse – gone – he would cut off the battle-bow – gone. He would be a humble man of peace.

In our Tuesday night Faith Formation group we coined a new term for what Jesus was demonstrating; we called it, *pony power*. “Pony” is our stand in for colt or foal, because *pony power* rolls off the tongue better, and it is easier to remember. So *pony power* stands for the complete opposite of worldly power and might. *Pony power* does

not, therefore, push, coerce, manipulate, terrorize, hurt, oppress, or punish.

And let us be clear, *pony power* is **not** suggesting that Jesus is meek and mild. Think of turning the other cheek; that's not a show of weakness or capitulation, it is rather a show of courageous resistance to a system of power-over. Jesus riding into Jerusalem with a crowd in tow, on a beast that could barely carry him, was a courageous act designed to ridicule the Roman system of oppression. Yes, it was also a highly political act.

Pony power is not weakness. In reality, it is more powerful than over-lording kings and imperialistic nation-states; it is the power of God made flesh in Jesus. **And** it is the power of God made flesh in you and me. Might makes right is the power of oppression. It causes fear and destroys people's lives; it takes life away. Ironically, worldly power must always be defended.

Pony power on the other hand, is the power to heal and make whole, and never needs to be defended. *Pony power* lifts others up, never pushes them down. *Pony power* is transformative because it is simply the power of God, the same power of God we see at work in Jesus.

Pony power is what the world ignores; it appears foolish. Yet this expression works for me because it reminds me of the power of humility, love, and compassion, which again, is not weakness or acquiescence, but indeed the very strength of God.

The Apostle Paul writes, *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ...For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength* (1 Corinthians 1:20, 25).

Pony power is at work when you smile at a stranger and they smile back. I was out walking yesterday morning. I was walking in the dirt shoulder off the pavement. I heard a car coming behind me and I could see another car coming toward me. The car facing me moved toward the center line and visibly slowed down. I believe that kind of courtesy is a form of *pony power*. The driver had acknowledged my presence. I smiled and waved; she did the same.

Little acts of courtesy, random acts of kindness, small acts of sacrifice for the sake of others are all simple examples of what I'm calling, *pony power*. They leave us lifted up and feeling grateful to be alive. But let me offer another example to show that *pony power* is not wimpy stuff.

Nelson Mandela was imprisoned in South Africa for 27 years. No one would blame him if he came out a bitter and broken man. But that was not the case. When Mandela was released he was a truly free man *because...* he was able to forgive those who put him behind bars. He said that if he had not forgiven his captors he would remain imprisoned by his own bitterness.

The power to forgive is the power of God at work in us. Thus I'm suggesting that this newly minted expression – *pony power* – stands for the power of God working through us to humbly manifest God's realm right here, right now. It is subtle, it is faithful, it is compassionate, it is steadfast, it is – above all – loving, and thus it brings life into the lives of others.

Pony power is just another way to talk about our Christian practice, or our Christian walk. It reminds us that we can do little things with great love, just like Mother Teresa, and it always makes a difference for others. Ultimately it says that love is stronger than hate; stronger even than death. Thus *pony power* is a force for life.

What's difficult about *pony power* as I have described it, is that it is generally seen as foolishness to the rest of the world which over-values (in my humble opinion) status and rank, prestige and power, money and material gain.

So here's a thought: When we're submerged in the world with all its glorification of strength and status and privilege and competition and ladder climbing, remember Jesus riding on a little donkey. To most of the world he just looked silly.

Yet those who receive him find strength to live as new people. Those who understand *pony power*, God's presence within us, bring hope and light into this world. As I read the poetry of St. Francis of Assisi I get the feeling he understood the humble way of *pony power* too. I'll close with his poem, "A Kind Face."

A KIND FACE

Joy is the greatest cleanser,
and it is the greatest testimony to our faith.

“Toil with happiness,”
my Lord once said to me.

God sent a servant on an errand
through a dangerous part of the world.

The servant, having received in hand
what God wanted delivered,

Turned to the Holy and said,
“My Beloved Master, do you have any final instructions?”
And God replied,

“A kind face is a precious gift.”