

Lend Me A Donkey

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, April 5, 2009 Mark 11:1-11

Just over a month ago, at the end of February, the world lost a man whose distinctive voice was familiar to millions for over fifty years. Paul Harvey, newsman and storyteller, died in Phoenix at the age of 90. A master of tone and timing, Harvey was an early practitioner of what came to be called “info-tainment,” a mixture of news, opinion and even advertising all delivered with a showman’s style.

Paul Harvey grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where his father – a policeman – was shot and killed when Paul was still a small child. In school, a teacher, Isabelle Ronan, was "impressed by his voice." On her recommendation, he started working at Tulsa radio station KVOO in 1933, when he was 14. His first job was helping clean up. Eventually he was allowed to fill in on the air, reading commercials and the news. After marrying and moving to Chicago, Harvey became a nationally known newsman – although it must be added that he never let the facts get in the way of a good story. But then, people didn’t listen to Harvey just to get the facts – they listened because he made listening to the news easy, with his resonant voice and friendly manner. His catchphrases practically became trademarks. Everyone knew them. To this day, most are recognized by the majority of Americans over 40 years of age: “Hello Americans. Page Two. For what it’s worth. Good day!”

Paul Harvey broadcast News and Comment on weekday mornings and mid-days, and at noon on Saturdays, but is most famous for a special segment that became a separate program in 1976 – The Rest of the Story. “Hello Americans, this is Paul Harvey,” he would begin. “You know what the news is, in a minute, you're going to hear ... the rest of the story.” And then he would proceed to spin a tale that always contained a twist, and ended with Harvey saying once more, “And now you know . . . the rest of the story.”

Paul Harvey never ran out of material because there is always more to the story. I think about that every time I hear one person’s version of events. I also always think about it when I read the scripture. There is always more we can ask about what we are told.

The author of John’s gospel admits it freely. At the very end of the gospel, he says, “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books.” And, of course, then there are other characters in the gospels – the disciples, the parents of Jesus, his

friends, his enemies, the people who come to him for help. They all have their stories, too, – but those stories aren't told in the gospels except for bits and pieces. Still, we can wonder.

And I do. For instance, in the story we read this morning, I find myself wondering about this borrowing of a donkey. It's strange, isn't it? "Go into the next town, and you'll find a donkey tied up. Untie it and bring it here. If anybody asks what you are doing, say, 'The Master needs it.'" Sure enough, people do ask, the disciples explain and take the donkey. But that's pretty much it, as far as the text goes. You can't help but wonder about the rest of the story.

Whose donkey was it? Did Jesus make some kind of pre-arrangements? And if Jesus did, why did the person lend the donkey? Did he know what Jesus wanted to use it for?

We may never know the answer to those questions. But there is something important that we do know. Mark says the people who asked the disciples what they were doing were bystanders, but other gospels identify at least one of them as the owner. So whether or not there was some kind of pre-arrangement, someone was generous. Someone decided to give a gift – the use of a donkey.

This story reminds us that there are many ways to give. What we may put in the offering plate is only a start. There are so many other ways we can contribute to what God is doing in the world. We can give our time and energy. We can give other resources – we can lend or give tools, transportation, produce from the garden, even advice. After spending over half my life in ministry, one thing is clear to me – people who want to give can always find a way. And generous people – people who want to express their gratitude to God for all the blessings they've received – are always looking for new ways to give.

This is an important part of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus, because the gifts we give can make such a difference. Paul Myers, who worked in Bangladesh for many years to improve the lives of the poor, says we can never be sure just how big of an impact our giving can have on others. He tells of being at an airport some years ago waiting for his plane. After a while, he decided to pass the time by reading a newspaper. So he went to the little shop nearby and was about to buy one when a man tapped him on the shoulder. Myers recognized his face but couldn't recall his name. The man who had tapped Myers on the shoulder looked at the two men behind the newsstand and told them, "This man saved my life." He explained: "Several years ago, I had lost two children because I couldn't feed them. This man gave me a job. Today,

all six of my children are in school, and we don't go hungry." Then he hugged Myers and began to cry.

When Myers had hired the man, he hadn't thought of it as charity. He needed the man to do some work. But from the perspective of the man he hired, Myers had given an incredible gift – the opportunity to support himself and his family. Years later, he was still so grateful that he could be moved to tears by the sight of his benefactor. That's the power of giving, of a generous spirit.

Of course, sometimes the person who is most changed by our giving is us. Listen to the story of Tricia Loewen of Winnipeg. Unlike many college graduates today, Tricia didn't have to worry about a job when she finished her studies -- a place was reserved for her in the family business. But Loewen, 21, decided not to take the obvious path right from school to manager in a pizza chain owned by her father. Instead, she went to Jordan for six months as a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) volunteer at a school for deaf children.

"It would have been an easy decision to stay in Winnipeg, but I needed some time to think about what I wanted to do with my life," says Loewen, who graduated last spring from the Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg. "My world was too small."

Loewen's world grew as she set up a physical education program at the Holy Land Institute for the Deaf in the town of Salt, located some 30 kilometers/19 miles west of the capital city of Amman. ... "They hadn't had a physical education program before," says Loewen, who played volleyball, soccer and basketball at Westgate Mennonite Collegiate in Winnipeg. "They wanted something to give the students some exercise and teach teamwork."

Loewen, who had studied sign language from 1992 to 1994, especially enjoyed the new friendships she made. "The students inspired me so much," she says, adding that the obstacles many of them have to overcome made her problems "seem petty in comparison." "I discovered I was concentrating too much on myself and my problems, but by thinking about other people and their challenges I was able to shift the focus. The best way to stop worrying about yourself is by helping someone else." Now that she's back home, Loewen has to make a hard decision. Her new friends at the school encouraged her to make working with deaf people her career. "Now that I've lived and worked in another country, I realize the world is a big place -- there are so many things to see and do," Loewen says. "I don't know if I want to go into the family business." Practicing generosity, searching for new and creative ways to give, can

be life altering. But it doesn't always mean a change in life plans. The important thing is just to keep our eyes open and our minds active. If we do, the opportunities to give will come to us – just like they came to the man with the donkey – the generous but anonymous soul who provided the ride for Jesus on this day we celebrate, Palm Sunday. No one remembers his name, but hundreds of millions remembered what he did. One more story about giving. This one comes from a man named Bruce Watson. He writes, “Four years ago, I was sitting in my cab in front of a Philadelphia hotel, thinking and praying. This particular Sunday, business had been extremely slow. I was wondering where I was going to get \$60 to pay for the daily rent of my cab. I could lose the cab - and my livelihood - if I didn't come up with the money immediately.” “Just then, a young woman got into my cab and said, ‘I know it will cost \$25 for this ride, but I can only afford to pay you \$15. I work for a charity, and that's all they gave me for cab fare.’ I thought about it for a minute. I am probably going to lose my cab anyway. Why not help someone else have a good day? I agreed to do it.”

Now that in itself is a good story about finding another way to give. In this case, the gift was a ride at a reduced price. Watson could have been a stickler for the rules. And being down on his luck and in need of cash himself, he could have thought of himself as someone without the means to give. But he didn't think that way. He saw an opportunity to be generous in spite of his lack of money.

But that isn't the whole story. I'll let Watson finish. He wrote, “At her destination, the woman paid her \$15 fare, then reached into her purse and laid a \$100 bill next to me on the seat! ‘The \$15 fare was the charity's money,’ she explained. ‘This is my own money. God told me you needed it.’ With that, she was gone.”

And that, my friends, is the rest of the story.

Amen.