

I did a little research last week on gifts that have been given to American presidents. Queen Victoria, of course, gave the Resolute Desk to Rutherford B. Hayes. It was built out of timber salvaged from the HMS Resolute, which the US had helped England rescue from the Arctic Ocean in 1855. In 1862 the King of Siam tried to give James Buchanan two elephants, but the president at the time was actually Abraham Lincoln, and he politely declined the elephants in a letter. Nikita Khrushchev gave President Kennedy an adorable puppy named Pushinka, but there was a little edge to that gift because Pushinka was the offspring of a dog the Soviets had sent into space, which was something we hadn't figured out how to do yet. My favorite gift, though, is one that ten year-old Shirley Temple gave to President Truman: a badge with a note attached to it that said, "Dear Mr. President, Here is your badge to my police force. Love, Chief Shirley Temple."

I was thinking about this because of the story about the woman anointing Jesus with costly nard, and the earlier story about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus' entry, as I think I've said before, is a satire of the way Pontius Pilate would enter Jerusalem every Passover. Passover celebrates the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery, led by a man sent from God, so every year at Passover there tended to be uprisings and riots as the Jews thought about the parallels between ancient Egypt and contemporary Rome, slavery under the pharaoh and serfdom under the emperor. So Pilate would rouse himself up from his pleasant seaside home in Caesarea Maritima and make a grand entrance into Jerusalem through one of the city gates, bringing with him troops of soldiers and a good healthy exhibit of Roman wealth and military might. He didn't have to say a word; he could just appear with all those soldiers and weapons, and people got the message.

So Jesus, this rabbi from Galilee, shows up at Passover time, and he satirizes Pilate. Mark makes sure we get the joke, telling us that Jesus requested a colt to ride in on, which is an echo of Zechariah's proclamation of the Davidic king riding into Jerusalem on a donkey's foal. Jesus can ride into the city like a king too. But instead of an entourage of burly soldiers with glittering weapons, Jesus has an entourage of women, men and children, and the stage set is leafy branches and poor people's clothing. Jesus rides into Jerusalem like the King of the Hoboes, actually.

But it *is* an enthusiastic crowd, and this is what made me think about gifts to presidents. Nobody was crowding around Pilate to give him gifts; they weren't happy to see him. He had to bring his own stage set. People were so happy to see Jesus that they were throwing their cloaks on the ground for his donkey to walk on, and they would have only had one cloak apiece, which they had to hand-wash. *That* is a welcome. *That* is real gift-giving. And even if the mayor did greet Pilate and give him the keys to the city, it was just a diplomatic gesture. Who among us would not rather be given a badge to a ten year-old's personal police force? It really is the thought that counts.

In the next part of the reading, Jesus is eating dinner at the house of Simon the leper, because Jesus will eat with literally anybody. And once again he receives a gift, this time the unbelievably, maybe inappropriately, expensive gift of a 300-denarii jar of nard, which an unnamed woman pours onto his head. People jump all over her, pointing out that she could have used the money to feed the poor and made a real difference to human suffering. But Jesus defends her, saying, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

This story is a little bit puzzling. Normally you would expect Jesus to take the side of feeding the poor. Part of his response may be a rebuke to those who aren't generous to the poor *or* to him; he says, "You always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish." Maybe he's implying that the scolders are perfectly capable of giving to the poor if they really want to, and since they're not, they shouldn't be pointing fingers at this woman. But he really responds to the heartfeltness of the gift. He says, "She has **done what she could**; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial." Maybe the gift was unreasonably extravagant, and maybe it was kind of a faux pas, but it came from a place of love, and what Jesus is saying to this woman is, "I see you, and from now on, everybody will know you for your generosity and love."

I think that the reason people greeted Jesus enthusiastically and were not ashamed to welcome him with patched clothes and branches torn out of the ditch was that they knew that he saw them. That is, he got them, he valued and cherished them, and when they gave him a gift from the heart, he appreciated it. Just as the phalanxes of Roman soldiers were evidence of Pilate's power, so the crowds of ragged Jews were evidence of Jesus' power, not a coercive power but the nutritive (?) power of love. It draws us toward him because it offers us growth and deepening.

The dark side of Palm Sunday is that Jesus knows our dark side, too. He knows that a crowd crying "Hosanna" on Sunday can turn to a mob yelling "Crucify him" on Friday. Jesus didn't have some kind of romantic, sentimental view of human nature; he knew what people are capable of. It's just that he didn't believe that was our truest nature—that wasn't what would prevail, because we are created by God. I think Jesus knew that people had projected

their wishful thinking for a Davidic king onto them, and that they would be angry and disappointed when he didn't perform like a Davidic king. But he performed that satirical street theater anyway, to make his point about the Romans. And he walked with his eyes open into the trap created by their messianic expectations, so that the people in the crowd, the people in Simon the leper's house, would understand that even the darkest of humanity's dark side is not stronger than love. Jesus attracted people because he "got" them, he saw them and cherished them. **Then** he demonstrated that he also "got" how evil and destructive we can be, but that evil does not get to make the rules. It just isn't as strong or as human as love.

We're in this pandemic right now because a few people with a lot of power have not been incentivized to be their best selves. What I mean is, political structures are complicated, and they've developed to be less accountable to ordinary people as ordinary people have become discouraged and alienated from the political process. The pandemic should not have taken over the way it has. But it has, and failures of leadership notwithstanding, we're seeing unnumbered demonstrations of how persistent and ingenious love is, in individuals. You can't help but be awed by the medical professionals risking their lives and often living apart from their families in order to take care of sick strangers. But people are also offering exercise classes on video, free homeschooling curricula, and some Canadian First Nations dancers are videoing themselves doing dances for healing. The regular attendees of open mic night at the café of one of my div school friends are taking turns posting videos of themselves singing. I was personally uplifted and spiritually nourished by a montage of baby elephants playing, offered by my brother's girlfriend.

What did Jesus say about that woman's gift? *"She has done what she could."* Not, "she

has solved my problem,” not “she has been a hero” not “she has prevented my execution and reformed the Roman Empire.” Just “*she has done what she could.*” In no way do I want to minimize the suffering going on now and the losses to come, but doing what we can for one another is not nothing. Even if it’s just patched clothes and weeds out of the ditch, by the grace of God our gifts **are** important and useful, even splendid. For the redemptive power of love in ordinary people, thanks be to God.

Giver of the most expensive gift of all, help us to trust your grace.
May we who are so vulnerable to fear and cynicism awake to your endless resourcefulness.
Let us live with hope and with joy, that we may spread love’s fragrance
wherever the odor of cynicism and despair hangs in the air.
Through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.