

# How Are You Doing?

The fifth of five sermons in the Lenten series

***“A People of Salt and Light—Jesus’ Model for Community”***

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- Mark 11:1-11<sup>7</sup> They brought the colt to Jesus, threw their cloaks over the animal, and Jesus got on.
- Matthew 6:1-18 “Make certain you do not perform your religious duties in public so that people will see what you do. If you do these things publicly, you will not have any reward from your Father in heaven.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: In how he entered Jerusalem as in his manner of life, Jesus presents a model for humble service.

“How are you doing?” (Or if you were the character Joey Tribbiani on the old TV sitcom “Friends,” it would be said as “How *you* doin’?”) Of course, the way we Americans speak English the usual purpose of the question “How are you doing?” is to inquire about someone’s mood, their situation, whether they are stressed or calm, busy or available, happy or sad, full of zip or all worn out.

“How are you doing?” For a moment ignore the question’s idiomatic meanings of “What is your mood? What’s the state of your life right now?” When it asks “how,” a literal understanding of the question would be asking about a process for doing something, the style one uses for a particular activity. It’s the follow-up to the question “*Are* you doing such-and-such?” The next question could be “*How* are you doing such-and-such?”

That seems to be what Jesus is interested in as we hear him in Matthew’s gospel this morning. Today I conclude my Lenten sermon series focused on the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout Lent we’ve discovered how in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus presents his most direct teachings about what it means for us to share life together as his disciples.

- One week we listened to the Beatitudes and heard Jesus pronounce as blessed by God the very people who our power-hungry, money-loving, fame-thirsting world tosses aside as weak, useless, worthless.
- We’ve heard Jesus tell us that we are to be noticeable difference-makers in the world, just as salt adds flavor and light illumines.
- In those sayings that began “You have heard that it was said... but now I say to you...” we heard Jesus encouraging us that we don’t have to strive to win at the game of life, but instead we are to embody different, God-centered values in our life.

And today in Matthew Chapter 6 I propose that we hear Jesus asking, “How are you doing?” He asks not in the colloquial way we normally inquire about someone’s mood or busyness. No, Jesus truly is interested in “how” we do the things we do in our effort to honor and serve God.

In Matthew Chapter 6, verses 1-18 Jesus touches on three religious practices common in his day—giving, praying, and fasting:

- **giving** for the sake of people in need (we might think of it as “charitable giving;” in the Bible and elsewhere it’s sometimes referred to as “giving alms”);
- **praying**; and
- **fasting** (which is voluntarily refraining from eating or drinking for a certain period in order to achieve greater spiritual clarity).

In raising each of those subjects – giving alms, praying and fasting – Jesus cautions, “Don’t be like the hypocrites who do it such-and-such way.”

Jesus says that the way hypocrites give charitably for the sake of people in need is that they make a big deal of it. Different translations say that they “make a big show of it” or “call attention to [themselves]” or “announce it with trumpets.” Now, he was using that “trumpet” image for emphasis; there’s no evidence that gifts – even large gifts – were signaled by trumpet blasts. But Jesus used an equally unrealistic image to paint the picture of the humble approach we should take in our charity: he said “Your left hand should not know what your right hand is doing.”

A little insight might help us see what Jesus is driving at. For us, the word *hypocrite* has a negative connotation. We think of hypocrites as deceitful, false, two-faced, showy. None of us wants to be thought of as a hypocrite. But I learned that in the original Greek language of Matthew’s gospel, the word that’s translated as “hypocrite” is a neutral term without all that negative “baggage.” Hypocrites literally meant “stage actors.” Of course, as Owen and Aileen and Hugo and Kailee and Morgan and other thespians in our midst know well, actors play their role always conscious of the audience they’re playing for. So what Jesus is saying is that a person engaged in a religious act not for the sake of the act itself, but for how it will be perceived by those who happen to witness it, is like a hypocrite play-acting in order to impress an “audience.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus offers two other illustrations of religious hypocrisy: where people make a big deal of praying so as to be noticed by others, and where people engage in the act of fasting with such a fuss that it’s as though they’re crying out “Poor me, look how much I’m sacrificing because I’m so devoted to God.” In these examples Jesus, in effect, is asking of each of us, “How are you doing? It’s not only a matter of *what* you do but also *how* you do it. So how are you going about living out the consequences of your trust in God?”

Jesus himself modeled his concern for how his followers lived their faith. We heard it in today’s account of Jesus entering Jerusalem, a story that we commemorate with our Palm Sunday.

By his ministry and his very life Jesus announced God’s plan for saving humankind. All who accepted him as the embodiment of God’s love and mercy were saved. Solely by God’s grace – and not from any earned or deserved qualification – believers were saved from the consequence of their sinful nature. But salvation was not forced upon us as a conquering army forces its will upon a subjected people. Rather, with humility and grace Jesus offered God’s acceptance and forgiveness to any who would receive it. This humble, gracious, not forceful invitation was something Jesus embodied in how he chose to enter Jerusalem.

How would mighty figures have made their entrance? Sitting on an ornate saddle mounted on a mighty stallion, proceeded and followed by countless ranks of military forces, with flags and banners flapping in the breeze, accompanied by the blaring of trumpets, the crashing of cymbals, the pounding of drums.

The difference between Jesus taking charge of a colt (or, in John’s version, a donkey) for his triumph and a king or general adopting the same animal as a show of humility is that, for the great man, this would be a gesture. He could select the right animal from among his stores and spoils to make the desired impression. For Jesus, the colt is not even his, but borrowed. It is not a show of humility, it is humility in fact – humility as a condition.

This borrowing is consistent with the rest of Jesus’ life. He borrows his parade and his mount. In the next chapter he borrows a coin to illustrate a point about taxes. He borrows his lodgings and his earthly father. In Luke’s account he borrows his birthplace, and by all accounts he borrows his grave.<sup>2</sup>

So Jesus entered Jerusalem not on a bejeweled saddle atop a mighty steed. He plodded down the Mount of Olives on the cloak-covered back of a donkey’s colt. He entered accompanied by his twelve

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<sup>1</sup> *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VIII, “Matthew-Mark.”* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 200b

<sup>2</sup> “Humility isn’t a stunt for Jesus – it’s a condition of his life” by Benjamin J. Dueholm, February 21, 2018 at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/march-25-palm-sunday-b-mark-111-11>, accessed 3/20/2018

apostles and the crowd of disciples who had followed his recent journeys. No flags and banners, only olive or palm branches waved enthusiastically. No throngs pouring out of Jerusalem to welcome the conquering hero. Jesus passed through the city gates, just another stranger alongside merchants and pilgrims and beggars and scholars.

He went into the Temple – the seat of Jewish religious authority – looked around at people coming and going, tending to the day’s business probably oblivious of yet another country rabbi visiting the big city.

- After three years of walking and preaching and walking and teaching and walking and healing and walking and befriending and walking and now riding the final mile of his lifelong journey from Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth to Capernaum to Jericho to Jordan...
- After preparing to bring his message of grace to the common people, to those who were Jewish and those who were not...
- After preparing to bring his message to the religious authorities who had contested and combatted him all along the way...
- After gathering his nerve and accepting his call and making his way to the spiritual center of Judaism, Jesus looked around....

That’s it. He looked around the Temple and its grounds, and then he and the apostles went back to their home for the night, back up the steep and twisted paths of the Mount of Olives to the village of Bethany, back to rest from the physical and emotional rigors of that momentous day when he came face to face with the Temple and its religious establishment that challenged him and sought to trap him and eventually would enwrap him and ultimately extinguish him.

Or so they thought.

How was Jesus doing? *How* was Jesus doing? Notice what he did. In taking on the greatest challenge of his earthly life – in facing the challenge to his very life itself – Jesus modeled for his followers that while we are called to do what’s right, it’s more important to do things the right way. For Jesus making his presence known by entering Jerusalem, how he was doing it mattered as much as actually doing it.

How do we approach this Holy Week ahead of us? If we focus only on Easter, we miss appreciating how Jesus endured challenges, trials, testing, betrayal, abandonment, even torture and death... real death. Without an appreciation of what Jesus endured and sacrificed for the sake of the very people he loved, we see only a fraction of the gift of Easter. Easter not only celebrates his restoration to life. Easter celebrates the triumph of God’s love over our all-too-common and comfortable human sinfulness.

What if this year you humbly walked where Jesus walked and didn’t just consider Holy Week from the outside-looking-in? What if you didn’t just hold Holy Week at arm’s length, and instead prayed for true appreciation of Jesus’ faithfulness amid chaos and crisis? We will emerge at the joy of Easter, but along the way we will learn from Jesus and experience for ourselves how Jesus faced life’s challenges: with humbleness of spirit, with faith in God’s mercy, and with trust in God’s power to overcome the powers that would overwhelm us.