Palm Sunday, March 27, 1994
POWER: ITS USE AND MISUSE
Mark 11:1-11

The story of Palm Sunday has always captured people's imaginations. It is partly because of its contrast with the tragic events that followed later that week, but also because parades and celebrations attract people from all walks of life.

A colorful ceremony in connection with a holiday or festival is always appealing. It's a change of pace from the usual order of things. The city of Jerusalem was preparing itself for the Passover, one of the most important, if not the most significant, holidays for the people of Israel. Many people had already arrived, and many more were still coming to the holy city from near and far.

Jerusalem was no stranger to celebrations and processions. King Solomon's reign had been inaugurated in that city. The Queen of Sheba had come to visit. There had been many parades welcoming Jewish military leaders from their successful wars. On the other hand, there were no doubt some in the city who could remember how King Herod the Great had come riding into the city at the head of an army of Romans to occupy it.

But today, another kind of king with another kind of power was entering the city. He was not riding on a large white or black horse. He was not accompanied by hundreds of soldiers marching in strict cadence. There were no disciplined ranks, no glittering helmets, no shiny swords, no battle chariots, no mounted trumpeters to announce his entrance.

It was a different kind of parade. A humble teacher, riding on a donkey, an animal of lowliness and peace, plodded along quite in contrast to a dashing war horse. Gathered around this figure on a donkey was a small group of disciples.

Enthusiasm is contagious, especially on a holiday, and within a short time, hymns and shouts passed from mouth to mouth as religious fervor and patriotic zeal took hold of the crowd. Running ahead, some of the people threw down their cloaks and spread them before him. Others waved branches from trees, and some in the crowd began to shout, "Hosanna, blessed is the one that comes in the name of God."

The spontaneity of such devotion and praise is attractive and tempting, but Jesus was not fooled by the crowd's enthusiasm. He knew that much of it was misguided and would be short-lived. Ordinarily, Jesus avoided the spectacular. Although the news of his healings drew large crowds, they were a source of embarrassment to him. Crowds can be fickle, and crowds also try to exert pressure and use power.

Above all else, Jesus knew about the use and misuse of power. He also knew that power can have a number of different definitions. There is the kind of power that relies on being the strongest — the largest army or the best-equipped armed forces. There is also the power of a strong leader who can rally large numbers of people to follow him or her. Undoubtedly, that's what the Palm Sunday crowd was thinking of that day. They wanted a new earthly ruler who would lead them to victory over the Roman forces that occupied their homeland, a new King David who could restore their nation to its former glory.

Jesus accepted the crowd's enthusiastic devotion, but he did not attempt to misuse it or exploit it. That had been true of his ministry all along. He knew when to use his power, how to use it, and when to hold it back.

For example, Jesus was by no means above using his power to rescue people when he found them caught in circumstances from which they could not extricate themselves. In other words, he would help them when they could not help themselves, and he would frequently use his power to help people begin to help themselves. There were times when he directly intervened in the lives of people as he healed them of their diseases.

He also made it clear in his examples and teachings that we are to follow his example in how we use our power. For example, who can hear his parable of the last judgment and not realize that what we choose to do with the power that has been given to us is one of the most important decisions we have to make?

In that parable, those on the right hand who were invited to enter into God's eternal joy were those who had seen people in desperate and needy circumstances and had been willing to use their power the way Jesus used his — to help those who cannot help themselves: "I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick and in prison, and you visited me."

Jesus showed us that we are made in the image of a generous God who blesses and helps us and who expects us to do the same with the power and blessings God continually gives us.

On the other hand, while Jesus was willing to use his power to help others, he was very careful not to misuse it in a way that perpetuated a relationship of permanent dependency. Whenever he encountered the broken and the helpless, he did not gather them up in his arms and say, "Let me carry you around for the rest of your life." On the contrary, having released the paralytic who had been brought into his presence by four of his friends from his immobilizing guilt, Jesus immediately said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." In other words, now it's time for you to begin to use your own power to carry yourself and to help carry others.

In a similar way, after Jesus had healed another man, that individual wanted to tag along after Jesus and, in that way, remain dependent on him. But Jesus gently and lovingly refused that person's request and told him: "You need to go back to your own home and your own people and let them know the good thing that God has done for you, how mercy has broken in and blessed your life. You need to pass on the kind of blessing and healing you have received."

The 12th step in Alcoholics Anonymous carries forth the same theme. It reads, "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs." When you have been helped, use the new power that has been released in you to help others.

At the same time, Jesus knew it was a misuse of power to help someone and then, through that help, establish a permanent relationship of dependency. Here's why. First of all, no human being is good enough or strong enough or permanent enough to be a father or mother figure or to provide for us totally forever. Only the living and eternal God is capable of that, and we make a grave mistake if we put another human being on that kind of pedestal and expect that one to be everything for us.

Furthermore, whenever we rely too much on someone else's power, we at the same time discount our own, and we can become permanently dependent on someone else. Jesus taught that God has given each one of us power on our own. When we see ourselves as helpless victims, we are not being true to all that is within us. After all, God has created each one of us in God's image. Permanent dependency does not work. It is a misuse of power.

What Jesus did was take hundreds of ordinary people who had seen themselves as powerless and worthless and awaken them to the marvelous power that was within them.

Sheldon Kopp, a Jewish psychotherapist, has written a book entitled If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him. His point is that if you encounter anyone who claims they can do everything for you and solve all your problems, the wisest thing you can do is to kill that illusion immediately. Kopp points out that many times patients come to him the way a little child takes a broken toy to a parent and says, "Please, fix this for me," implying that the doctor has strength and the patient has none. The request is to do something about my problem without it costing me any pain or effort at all.

Kopp's book challenges this form of helping. Jesus also challenged this form of helping or using power. It is a misuse of power. As I said before, Jesus was again and again willing to use his power to help rescue individuals, and he calls us to do the same. But he was also careful not to take what is appropriate under certain circumstances and elevate it into a permanent way of life.

In the same way that Jesus was not willing to misuse his power with individuals, he was also not willing to misuse his power on a larger scale. At the beginning of his ministry, he rejected this use of power when he was tempted to turn stones into bread. On that first Palm Sunday, he refused to become the worldly leader, the second King David — a role that many in the crowd hoped he would fulfill. He refused to let the crowd be lulled into the lie that the right hero could save them.

Jesus was then and still is a different kind of savior. He did not come into the world to be the leader of one nation or one people. On the contrary, he came for everyone, everywhere, including especially the outcasts and the non-religious. "God so loved the world that God gave the only Son." No one is excluded from God's love.

When Jesus spoke of enlarged borders and a greater destiny, he was not speaking of conquest and more territory; rather, he was talking of broader sympathies and breaking down the barriers that separate race, class, and nations.

God's power, as seen in Jesus, works in ways that often seem to contradict the kind of power we usually support and worship.

Let us not, however, make the mistake so frequently made by people that because Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and refused to be a political leader, he was above politics.

Later in the week, he was not nailed to the cross for being too spiritual but for being too political. When he taught that the barriers between race and class are to come down, that's a political issue.

As is often the case, his enemies understood him better than many of his closest followers. He was executed for his politics, which were labeled as treasonous. Jesus never retreated from

the crucial social issues of his day into a world of private piety. As firmly as any before him in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, he stood for the oppressed and against the oppressor, and in the true prophetic tradition, he saw that the real troublemakers of this world are not the ignorant, not the people on the margins of life, but the intelligent and the highly gifted who become corrupt.

The common people heard him gladly because he spoke against the evils of corruption in high places, but the common people did not hear him gladly when he spoke against the temptations and evils of violence to accomplish their goals. As Jesus saw it, the problem with violent revolution is not that it changes too much, but that it changes too little. One form of oppression is replaced with another form of oppression. Non-violence is more radical than violence. The power of love is always stronger than the power of hate.

Thus Jesus prayed, not for the second coming of the Kingdom of David, which is what the crowds wanted on that Palm Sunday. That kind of kingdom is never eternal and, in the end, fails. Rather, Jesus prayed that God's Kingdom would come to be recognized as being among them and within them. That kingdom is eternal. It is among us and within each one of us.

And with this kind of power among us and within us, we are able to live our lives in this world in a new way. That's what Palm Sunday is all about — not Jesus coming as a worldly conqueror or hero into Jerusalem. It is not about the power of nations or armies. It is rather about God coming into this world where we live, empowering the weak, healing the hurt, and taking on the suffering.

And we know something on this Palm Sunday that those people in Jerusalem did not know on that day. We know that Jesus died but was raised on Easter. We know that God is ever among us and in us. We know that this loving energy lives on and can never be snuffed out. It is the power above all powers, and it is available to you and to me. Amen.