

## About Donkeys and True Greatness

Philippians 2:1-11 & Mark 11:1-10

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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### Philippians 2:1-11 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! <sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

### Mark 11:1-10 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of His disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. <sup>3</sup> If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ tell him, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”

<sup>4</sup> They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, <sup>5</sup> some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” <sup>6</sup> They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. <sup>7</sup> When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, He sat on it. <sup>8</sup> Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. <sup>9</sup> Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” <sup>10</sup> “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” “Hosanna in the highest!”

## About Donkeys and True Greatness

A few years ago, the devotional guide, **Our Daily Bread**, carried the story of a pastor who was also a traveling evangelist who rode a donkey as he traveled from village to village in Brazil preaching the gospel. One day the evangelist fell asleep in the saddle as he made his way home after a tiring day. A couple of hours later he was rudely awakened by the roughness of the ride. His donkey had left the trail

and was walking through a rocky field. At first the pastor was angry, but he calmed down when he saw that they were almost back to his village.

When he arrived at his church, the pastor learned that friends had gathered to pray for his safety. A rancher who was opposed to the Christian faith had sent some men to attack the evangelist at a bend in the trail. They thanked God for causing the donkey to take a shortcut home.

Was that God's prompting, or simply the donkey's desire to get home the shortest route possible that caused it to veer off the regular trail? We cannot answer that except to affirm that "all things work to the good for those who love the Lord (Rom. 8:28)."

Donkeys are interesting. They have a colorful history and a dubious reputation. Their reputation, of course, is for stubbornness. It is said that it is considerably more difficult to force or frighten a donkey into doing something it perceives to be dangerous than, say, a horse. Some say that is because the donkey doesn't feel a connection to its owner that a horse does.

Of course the stubbornness of a donkey is said to have saved the life of one of the Old Testament's less glorious prophets. His name was Balaam. His donkey is said to have miraculously spoken to Balaam, a disobedient, money-hungry prophet, on God's behalf (Num. 22:21-35).

The Lord was angry at Balaam for not obeying Him. When Balaam tried to go with some Moabite officials against the Lord's wishes the Lord had an angel stand in Balaam's way. Balaam's donkey saw the angel standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, so it turned off the road into a field. This made Balaam furious. He beat the poor donkey to get it back on the road.

Again, the angel stood in Balaam's way on a narrow path with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So clueless Balaam beat the donkey again.

Then the angel moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel, it lay down under Balaam, and again Balaam was angry and beat the donkey with his staff. Then, according to the story, the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me three times?"

Balaam doesn't seem to be surprised at all to hear his donkey talk. In fact, he answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

The incredulous donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," Balaam had to admit.

Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. The angel of the Lord asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because you are on a reckless path. The donkey saw me and fortunately for you, it turned off the path each time. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it."

Balaam said to the angel, “I have sinned. I did not realize you were blocking me. If you are displeased, I will go back.” The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you.” And that is what Balaam did.

I don’t always know what to make of some of the stories of the Old Testament. I guess this one proves to us that even a prophet can be dumber than a donkey — especially if that prophet is disobeying God.

I’ve done a little research on donkeys. Did you know that more people are killed by donkeys each year than are killed in plane crashes? I don’t know what you do with such information, but I thought it was interesting.

The donkey has been used as a working animal for at least 5000 years. There are more than 40 million donkeys in the world, mostly in underdeveloped countries, where they are used principally as work or pack animals. Working donkeys are often found in the service of people near the poverty level. Small numbers of donkeys are kept for breeding or as pets in developed countries. In spite of their reputation donkeys appear to be quite intelligent, cautious, friendly, playful, and eager to learn. And, of course, comedian Eddie Murphy provided the voice for the donkey in the movie, Shrek. And now you know everything I know about donkeys.

Of course, the reason I’m focusing on donkeys this morning is that the Old Testament Prophet Zechariah prophesied that one day the Messiah would arrive on a donkey. Zechariah 9:9 says, “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” And that is exactly what happened.

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of His disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”

They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them take the colt. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, He sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread leafy branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” It is a beautiful story.

#### IT IS A STORY OF GREAT HUMILITY.

On the other side of the city, Pilate was entering the city on a great stallion, while Jesus was riding into the city on a young and unbroken donkey. Pilate was surrounded by a security force of Roman soldiers bearing swords and shields and heavy armor. Jesus entered the city surrounded by unarmed peasants waving palm branches. Pilate’s soldiers sneered; Jesus’ followers sang, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” No greater contrast can be made between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. Brute force versus gentle peace.

And yet, more than 2,000 years later the only reason we even know Pontius Pilate's name is that each time we say the Apostle's Creed, we say about Christ, "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried..." Ultimately gentle peace won out over brute force, as it will one day when the final chapter of humanity is written.

True humility is a beautiful thing to see in any human being. The Indian evangelist Sundar Singh had just completed a tour around the world. God used and blessed his ministry everywhere he went. While in Europe someone, evidently wanting to bring him down a peg, asked Singh, "Doesn't getting so much honor do you harm?"

Sundar's answer was: "No. The donkey went into Jerusalem, and they put garments on the ground in front of the donkey. The donkey was not proud. He knew it was not done to honor him, but for Jesus, who was sitting on his back. When people honor me, I know it is not me, but the Lord, who does the job."

Sundar Singh was a humble man just as his Lord came with humility that first Palm Sunday. True humility is a beautiful thing to see in any human being.

Pastor Dan Bentz tells of vacationing in Florida a few years ago when President Bill Clinton flew into Orlando to see the devastation of tornados that had struck the area. It just so happened that his airplane flew, at a very low altitude, right over the home Bentz and his family were renting. Everyone in the neighborhood was outside watching as this huge airplane with the words United States of America emblazoned on the side flew over. Two smaller fighter jets escorted the huge airplane, and you knew immediately that somebody important was on that plane.

Bentz comments, "When Jesus came to Jerusalem there was no such preparation made for His coming. There was no royal chariot, just a borrowed donkey to ride on." Jesus came with humility.

YET IT IS CLEAR, JESUS WAS ANNOUNCING TO THE WORLD THAT HE WAS THE MESSIAH.

This is why the religious authorities were stirred up with hatred toward Him. They knew Zechariah's prophesy. They knew that some of the people who were welcoming Jesus that day in Jerusalem were hoping that He was the one who would deliver them. Not only was that a threat to the religious establishment, but they knew if Jesus gathered much of a following He would bring the might of Rome down upon them. Jesus was a threat to the established order. So they plotted what to do with Him. But it probably could have been avoided except for Palm Sunday.

Someone has noted that the problem with palms is that once you cut the branches from the tree, they don't live long. The problem with Palm Sunday is that the excitement of the crowds didn't last very long either, and a few short days later when Good Friday came, many of the same voices who shouted "Hosanna!" were now shouting "Crucify Him!" That's the way popular opinion often goes — fickle and unpredictable.

Brian La Croix tells about a scene in the movie Red River. John Wayne and his men are moving cattle along the Chisolm trail when the cattle are spooked by howling coyotes and such.

Then one of the men, trying to get some sugar, knocks down all the pans off the chuck wagon, and the cattle stampede, killing one of the wranglers watching over them. Just before they stampeded, the cattle were tense, and the men knew it wouldn't take much to set them off.

“Mobs are like that,” writes La Croix. “They’re tense, waiting for the slightest provocation to begin destroying whatever and whoever they want. A crowd might be defined as a ‘pre-mob’ bunch. They may never turn into a mob, but they can be fickle, wandering around like a bunch of sheep looking for direction. The crowd of people who cheer Jesus at the Triumphal Entry soon turns into a mob that would later crucify Him.”

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey, signaling that He was the Messiah and He set into motion events that He knew were irreversible. Some of the crowd who had sung His praises would be the same persons who would participate in His execution. This humble man who sought to bring only love and compassion into the world would die the cruelest of deaths on the cross of Golgotha, a death He refused to avoid.

AND, OF COURSE, THE MOST AMAZING THING IS THAT JESUS DID IT ALL FOR YOU AND ME.

Only a God of absolute infinite love could accept us just as we are. But do you know what is sad to me? There are a lot of people who feel that they deserve God's grace poured out in Christ's passion. That robs the cross of its power. The only way we will ever feel the saving power of the cross is when we realize that we could never be worthy of Christ's sacrifice any more than that little donkey He rode on could be worthy of Christ's grace.

A university president of one of our Ivy League schools faced the unpleasant task of disciplining some students who had been apprehended in acts of vandalism on their college campus. One of the young men, a spokesman for the group, was the son of a very wealthy family. In the midst of the scolding by the president of the college, this student jauntily reached into his pocket for his checkbook and said with a haughty expression, “What's all the hassle about? Why the fuss? Just tell us the cost of it, and I'll pay the bill.”

The president of this university said in great anger, “Put your checkbook back. This week in the assembly, you men will make a public acknowledgment of your offense or you'll be expelled. Do you think a few miserable dollars can ever repay your debt to the founders of this university and the sacrifices they made to build this place and endow it with such great care and cost?” Then his closing statement is one that really gets to you. He said to those young men from privileged homes: “Every one of you here is a charity student.”

And that is true of you and me. When it comes to the grace of God in Jesus Christ we are all charity students. Jesus was a man of great humility. When He rode into Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey, Jesus set into motion events that He knew were irreversible. They resulted in His crucifixion and death. But here's the good news: He did it out of love for you and me. “Greater love has no one than this,” says John 15:13, “to lay down one's life for one's friends.” We are Christ's friends. Not because of any virtue that we have, but through His amazing love for all God's children.

