

Donkey One

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, March 28, 2010, Luke 19:28-40

When you see a man in his fifties driving a bright red convertible with a young blonde in the passenger seat, what do you think? Here is what a lot of people think: mid-life crisis. But it could also be that the blonde is his daughter and the car is hers she's just letting her dad drive it.

On a case by case basis, we shouldn't assume too much about people just because of the car they drive. But statistically, some cars and car colors are associated with people of a particular age, income or attitude. Let's start with the obvious, people who drive gas-electric hybrids tend to be more concerned about the environment. The driver of a Ford F-150 pickup is likely to be a male who works at a job requiring physical exertion. Those who drive a Toyota Camry tend to be practical, reliable and efficient. The same goes for most Honda drivers. A Lexus or a Cadillac owner is often an older, highly educated male with a higher income. And the owner of the new Dodge Challenger, made to look the original from the 70's, has surprising appeal among younger drivers who want to be seen as cool and sporty.

It is going too far to say we are what we drive, but our mode of transportation can send a message. When the U. S. President travels by air, he often takes the famous Air Force One. Air Force One is quite a plane. It's powerful -- it has eight jet engines and can travel at 630 knots just 130 knots less than the speed of sound. It is also well equipped. It has eighty telephones, a medical room with a full pharmacy, an x-ray machine and an operating table staffed by a surgeon. It has two galleys staffed by five chefs. And on the outside in large letters are the words, United States of America and a large presidential seal. Wherever Air Force One goes throughout the world, people know as soon as they see it that somebody important has arrived.

Compare that to how Jesus arrived in Jerusalem in the text we read today. He rides into town on a young donkey, and by doing so was sending a message. But to understand the message we need to understand the world Jesus lived in the expectations of his fellow Jews.

Before we get to that, however, I wanted to say that I think I realized for the first time ever this year that this is a miracle story as well as a symbolic sermon by Jesus. I grew up with horses, not donkeys, but I can't imagine there is that much difference when it comes to trying to ride one that has never been ridden before. They don't take kindly to it. Yet Jesus specifically requests a colt that has never been ridden for his ride into Jerusalem, and there is no indication that the colt gives him any problems. It is a sign of his divine power and authority, much like his calming of the sea or his multiplication of the loaves and fish.

But now, back to the message Jesus was sending by making his official entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. First, we should note that it was an upgrade from his usual form of transportation. Ordinarily, Jesus and his disciples traveled around on foot, as everyone but the wealthiest and most powerful did. Occasionally he took a boat, especially in the region of the sea of Galilee. But we shouldn't imagine anything very grand. It wasn't a yacht or a speedboat. Most often, it was probably a fishing boat, considering that several of his disciples were originally fisherman.

So riding a donkey was an improvement on Jesus' normal means of getting around, but it wasn't the grand gesture others were expecting. In fact, it was almost the opposite. You see, great leaders in those days, kings, conquerors, generals and such, traditionally made their formal entrances on horseback. Decked out in all their finery, sitting erect on a war horse was the way to show that you were somebody to be reckoned with, a man of power. It was the first century version of Air Force One. Jesus chose to show up instead on a young donkey, the first century equivalent of a ten-year-old Toyota Camry. Why?

Quite simply, to send a message. The first thing Jesus wanted to do was dispel false expectations. Riding a donkey was a way of saying, "If you are expecting an ordinary king or conqueror, I'm not it. I'm something else."

Jesus had a knack for this kind of thing. He was always confounding people's expectations and refusing to give them what they thought they wanted. Remember the Sermon on the Mount? Jesus turned everything upside-down: "Blessed are the poor, the meek, those who mourn." To his disciples he said, "The greatest of all is the servant of all." And in his parable, it was the despised Samaritan who stopped to help rather than the holy priest or righteous Levite.

The reason Jesus was always confounding people's expectations and turning things upside-down is that it was the best way to get across the point that the solutions we want aren't the solutions we need because the probably we have isn't the problem we *think* we have. For instance, most of the time we think our problem is that we don't have all the things we want; if we could get the things we want, we would be happy. But Jesus tells us that our problem is not that we don't have the things we want; our problem is we want the wrong things. The solution isn't for us to figure out how to get what we want but to discover the life that we were created and redeemed to live, and from there figure out what we need to flourish.

In short, Jesus was trying to get people to change—really change—not just their methods but their motives, their whole outlook, their perspective, their value system. And that is probably what got him in so much trouble. People don't like to change, and they especially don't like to be told they need to change.

A counselor I respect has spoken about what it is like to work with his clients. People come to him with marital problems, work troubles, addictions, and all kinds of issues. But in one sense, he says, they are almost all the same. He says most of his clients have to deal with one big problem at the outset, and that problem is that they don't want to change.

That may not sound right to you. I didn't sound right to me at first, either. You would think people would go to a counselor *because* they want to change. But this counselor says no. He says, "Most people don't go to a counselor because they want to change. They go because they want to learn how to make other people change so they can feel better. The first and most important breakthrough I make with a client is to get them to see that change has to start with them."

Riding into Jerusalem on a donkey was Jesus' way of telling all those who were looking for a mighty conquering hero as the messiah that they needed to change their way of thinking. They thought a successful war against the Romans would solve their problems, but Jesus knew better. The Romans were just a convenient target on which the Jews could project all their problems. In fact, their deepest problems were spiritual, not political.

Our deepest problems still are. Like many others, I watched with interest this past week as the drama unfolded in Washington over health care reform. Those on one side seemed to

think it signaled the collapse of civilization, while some on the other extreme appeared to think it heralded the coming of the kingdom. I think both groups are wrong. It may turn out to be a good thing, and it may turn out to be a bad thing, but what it turns out to be depends less on what is or isn't in the bill than on how we use this opportunity to change our own ways of thinking, especially about the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the weak and the dying. If we can learn to see in all of them one of the last, the lost and the least Jesus called his disciples to care for, then we are on the right road. If compassion replaces our fear, and we learn to stop thinking first and only of what is in it for us, we will be on our way to where we really need to go.

The crowds who sang hosanna on Palm Sunday decided by the end of the week that Jesus wasn't the messiah they wanted after all. They didn't want someone who would make them take a hard look at themselves and change; they wanted someone who would fight their battles for them and run off their enemies. When they realized that Jesus wasn't going to do it, they turned against him. And given one last opportunity to change their minds and spare him the cross, they asked for Barabbas, a man of violence, rather than the Prince of Peace.

When we think of Jesus riding in on the colt of a donkey, it is an opportunity to think about all the ways we try to make Jesus into the messiah we want, the one who can solve all our problems for us, without us having to change. And it is an opportunity to repent and seek instead to be changed ourselves, changed by his grace and mercy, till our hearts are one with his.

Amen.