

Matthew 21:1-11

Driving along the interstate highways around St. Louis, I'm seeing more and more billboards with very nice, elaborate pictures of donkeys on them. The donkeys are always smiling. Their hair is perfect, not a strand out of place. They wear clothing--a nice suit and tie--never a clergy collar; always a suit and tie. By now you must know which donkeys I'm referring to. Not the animal; the individual...the pastor. But the whole thing is confusing to me. When Jesus rode on a donkey going into Jerusalem, the name of the donkey was not up in lights. The people were not praising the donkey. They did not come out that day to see a donkey. The donkey was not the center of attention; Jesus was. Then why is it that on these great big billboards today, Jesus is not even on the sign? The donkey's image is there...the donkey's name; but no Jesus. Has the donkey come to replace Jesus?

If you're here today because of the donkey in the pulpit, then you're here for the wrong reason. I've been told before, "I'm not here for you." What they said was good, even though it was meant as criticism. Too many people get hung up about the donkey. They can fall into either ditch. Either they love the donkey too much, even more than the Christ he is carrying, or they get so annoyed at the donkey, at his sins and weaknesses, that they turn away from the donkey and thus turn away from Jesus whom he is carrying.

If only Jesus had not commanded His disciples to go into the city and fetch a donkey for Him. Why didn't He just walk? He walked everywhere He went, throughout Judea, Samaria, Galilee. Why did He, when it was time to come to His people, send His disciples after a donkey to say, "The Lord has need of it"? Because that set the pattern for the future. From now on Jesus would come to His people only riding on a donkey, and not everyone is thrilled with the donkey.

Zwingli argued with Luther about the donkey of bread and wine. "Jesus does not come to us within bread and wine," argued Zwingli, "He doesn't ride, He just walks." Luther pointed to the Scriptures and said, "You are wrong. Today Jesus comes to His people only riding on a donkey, and the bread and wine is one such donkey." The Anabaptists argued that Jesus did not ride the donkey of water in Baptism. Again Luther pointed to the Scriptures. "He does ride on the donkey of Holy Baptism, and He always will!" And when Jesus sent out His disciples with the words, "He who listens to you, listens to Me; and whoever rejects you, rejects Me," He was making it clear that His church was never to look for Jesus walking alone somewhere, but He would always be riding on the backs of His donkeys who preach His Word in truth.

There might have been someone on that day as Jesus rode the donkey into Jerusalem who took personal offense at the donkey. "Well, I'm not shouting any 'Hosannas' to Jesus because that donkey smells! And he's stubborn! I'm going home." If he had a good friend, that friend might have said to him, "Get over the donkey already! He's bringing Christ to you, so go there to where the donkey is, because that is where Jesus is for you."

Now I think we can safely assume that donkey did his job that day. We're not told that the donkey refused to go into the city. We're not told that he stumbled and fell, causing a big commotion. He carried Jesus into Jerusalem. That was his purpose for being there. He didn't take any bows afterwards. There was no picture of the donkey in the Jerusalem Tribune the next day with the headline: "Donkey Performs Well in Palm Sunday Processional." He did what Jesus wanted him to do...carried Him to His people.

Nothing has changed in 2,000 years. That donkey wasn't perfect, and neither are Jesus' donkeys today. But He expects His donkeys today to do the same thing that took place in Jerusalem...carry Him to His people. A rider-less donkey is of no value at all. The pastor's preaching and teaching must be Christ. A donkey with a great personality, a super handshake, and a winning smile is nothing unless Jesus is the one being brought to His people. It's nice when people like the donkey, but that's not the issue. Sometimes the donkey has to bring Jesus as Judge. He has to rebuke with God's Law. That's never a happy time for the hearers or for the donkey. But a faithful donkey does not bring half-a-Jesus. He brings the whole Jesus. And Jesus was a preacher of the Law and He commanded His donkeys to do the same.

So, dear members, do not close your ears as this donkey tells you the truth. You are not living the way God expects you to live. I can speak this as truth because God's Word says it, and because you are, like me, a sinner always falling short, always stumbling when it comes to obeying God. The people came out that day in Jerusalem to welcome and receive Jesus. But many days we don't even show up. Jesus is here riding to us in bread and wine, and in His words preached upstairs and taught downstairs, and sometimes we cannot meet Him because of sickness or whatever. But other times we just pass Him off as no big deal. "Jesus is coming to Christ Lutheran Church again? Oh well, I've got better things to do."

Jesus desires greatly to come to us in the pages of His Word in our homes, but days go by and we never even let the donkey out of the gate. We're too busy for Jesus, too busy for His Word. And friends, when that happens, we're too busy. Jesus desires to come to us again and again so He can strengthen us in His love, help us through troubles, and be there for us in time of temptation. But at times we don't want Him to be there with us. We want to do what we want to do, even though it is not right and we know it, and so Jesus is not welcome to come along.

The truth hurts, doesn't it? We're all guilty, you and me both. But friends, I am here today to bring the whole Jesus to you, and that includes His Law. Listen now to His Gospel. You are...everyone of you--is loved by Jesus. He came riding into Jerusalem for you even though you were not there that day. He rode into the city to be judged in your place, to carry your cross, to die your death, to endure hell so you will never know that pain. And on the third day He rose from the dead for you, so that today He comes riding to you with every good gift of God. He rides to you on the waters of Baptism to raise you out of the death of your sins, to give you a place in His family. He rides on bread and wine to nourish your faith, to join you with all the saints in heaven and on earth. He rides to you through the mouth of this donkey so that you repent of your sins when the Law is given, so He can give you a conscience free from guilt. He rides to you right now with His forgiveness. All of you He forgives. Jesus is coming to you in His words and cleansing you of every sin.

As hard as it is for Jesus' donkeys to preach His Law, what a joy it is to proclaim the good news of His mercy. Have you been neglecting to meet Jesus when He comes riding to you with His gifts? He forgives you. And here in His forgiveness today He gives you strength to meet Him tomorrow. Have you been going your own way in life without Him? Have you been shutting the gate on Him so you can live as you please without His interference? Repent! And hear His words of grace. He washes your sins away, no matter how grievous they have been. He rides to you now only in mercy and love to draw you back to Himself and help you live for Him and with Him.

And as you live like this--in the strength of Christ, going forth in His love and forgiveness--friends, He makes you His donkey, so that in your marriage, your home, your workplace, your school, when you are with friends and neighbors, Jesus who lives within you, is carried by you to others. Rather

than carry anger and hurtful words to others, what a privilege we have. As Jesus is being carried to us with all His love, mercy, and forgiveness, we can carry the same Jesus to others.

Normally it would be an insult to hear words like these: "Those members at Christ Lutheran Church...they're a bunch of donkeys!" But when your pastor is a donkey for you with Christ on his back, and as you are in the daily habit of carrying Christ to each other as His donkeys, those words are not insulting in the least. Rather, they are words we want to live up to, and may Jesus always help us do that. Amen.