



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - April 9, 2017 Sermon

Wherein True Greatness Lies: When Picked Up Their Palm Branches, Jesus Found a Young Donkey

John 12:12-19, John 18:28-19:16 Selected Verses

The crowd shouts for Jesus as King of Israel. But the only anointing that Jesus receives is an anointing for death; the only crown he will wear is a crown of thorns; the only robe he will wear is the cloak of mockery; and when thus anointed and robed, he stands before his people and is presented as their king, the crowd will shout, "Crucify him!" Thus they will lift him up to draw all human beings to himself.--Raymond E. Brown, The Anchor Bible, The Gospel According to John, Introduction, Translation and Notes.

"Here is your King!"—John 19:14

Introduction to John 12:12-19:

Waving palm branches for them was like playing *Hail to the Chief* is for us. It's a way of saying: "Here is our chosen political and military leader; here is our commander-in-chief. All hail him!" And remember they haven't had a king, a real king—a king of their own—for at least 100 years. They've been under Roman domination that long. And of course the greatest of great kings was King David, and that was over 1000 years ago, but even so, there's still a longing for that day, along with an expectation that there will yet arise another king, a great king, from the line of David.

So when they wave those palm branches, the crowd is saying: "You are our king; you are great, and you will make us great again." And you can understand why they're saying that: Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead, and that bespeaks great power.

In response, Jesus goes and gets a donkey. Even if you don't know that this gesture harkens back to the prophet Zechariah, you still get the point: this is no way for a great king to come into town. By the way, the relevant passage from Zechariah reads:

Lo, your king comes to you;
humble and riding on a donkey,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea, to the ends of the earth.

By riding the donkey, Jesus is saying that he's not just their king, the king of Israel; he's the king of all nations to the ends of the earth. And he's saying that his power is not in commanding armies, but in commanding peace. By riding into town on a donkey, Jesus is saying that he's a different kind of king with a different kind of kingdom; he's challenging their conception of greatness.

Even if Jesus did come into Jerusalem riding a donkey, it's still enough to give his enemies an opening. In our Second Scripture Lesson, from chapters 18 and 19 of John's Gospel, Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, charged with sedition, which in his case, means setting himself up as king, which means setting himself up as a rival to Tiberius Caesar, the emperor in Rome. That's the charge because that's what really matters to Rome, and therefore that's what's most likely to force Pilate's hand. You can tell because it's the first question Pilate asks. John chapter 18 beginning with verse 33:

Then Pilate entered the headquarters, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the authorities. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Indifferent to the nuances of Jesus' answer—what does it mean to have a kingdom not of this world?—Pilate goes back to the one question he does care about. Picking up with verse 37:

Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

But Pilate's not listening. He tosses that last question over his shoulder as he walks away from Jesus, not waiting for his answer. But Pilate walks away from Jesus to propose a deal to the crowd: "What if, according to your custom, I give you the bandit, Barabbas, to crucify instead?" But the crowd will have none of it: they want not just blood, but Jesus' blood.

So next Pilate tries to satisfy their bloodlust in a way that falls short of crucifixion. Chapter 19 verse 1: Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face.

It's all mockery of course. All the signs of kingship—the purple robe, the crown, the bowing down—have been turned upside down: not for reverence, but for ridicule. Once the soldiers are finished, Pilate brings Jesus out before the crowd, proclaiming (verse 5), "Behold the Man!" In other words, "Look! . . . look at him. Isn't this enough—enough for an innocent man?"

It's not. Sensing Pilate's reluctance, the authorities play their trump card. Verse 12: "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

Pilate doesn't want to go along with this; doesn't want to kill an innocent man. What he wants, more than anything else, is for this whole thing to go away. No, check that: what he wants more than anything else is for no report of this to get back to Rome. Pilate knows how Rome works; knows what his enemies could do with one bad report; and knows the Emperor Tiberius Caesar to be capricious, unprincipled, oblivious, and easily manipulated—all too ready, for whatever reasons, to sacrifice one provincial governor to the perceived political expediencies of the moment. What is truth? So Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified.

But not without one final, parting shot: Not liking to be played like this, frustrated and angry that an otherwise quiet morning has been interrupted once again by their petty, religious politicking, Pilate brings Jesus out one more time before the crowd. With dismissive sarcasm, he says to them (verse 14), "Behold your king." In other words, "What does it say about you, as a people, that this man—this man, in this condition—is your king? Get him out of here—and all of you, get out of here, too."

Behold your king.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Behold the man. Behold your king. There he stands, or rather, there he sways, because if the guards weren't holding him up, he'd fall over. He's been beaten within an inch of his life—flogged 39 times because 40 was thought to kill a man. His lip is split; one eye is swollen shut. The blood from the crown of thorns has dried, but the blood from their blows still runs fresh, mixing with the soldiers' spittle.

What does it say about us that this man—this man, in this condition—is our king? Because he is our king, you know. Now I know: we, as Americans, aren't accustomed to thinking much about kings, and when we do think of Jesus as our king, we usually think of him in his heavenly exaltation, not his earthly humiliation. We sing hymns like: *All hail the power of Jesus' name, let angels prostrate fall, and crown him lord of all.* Or we hear the strains of Handel's Messiah: *He is the king of glory; King of Kings and Lord of Lords, he is the king of glory.*

But for a moment let's think of him not in heaven but on his way into Jerusalem, coming into town, riding on a donkey; let's think of him on his last legs next to Pontius Pilate. What does it say about us that he is our king?

It says, for one thing, that we have to challenge our conception of greatness.

It's been called the greatest generation, the American generation that grew up during the Great Depression of the 1930's and then won World War II in the 1940's. I've been thinking about the greatest generation because I've been reading *The Boys in the Boat*, a book that came out in 2014, that tells the story of the Univer-

sity of Washington nine-man rowing team (eight oarsman plus the coxswain) that won the gold medal at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games—the Olympic Games that Adolf Hitler tried to subvert into propaganda to showcase the supposed greatness of Nazi Germany. Despite having the lane assignments and the start of the race rigged against them, the Washington boys won, coming from far behind to beat the German and Italian crews by the narrowest of margins, thereby preventing a German sweep of the rowing events, and thereby poking a thumb squarely in Der Führer's eye.

As the book goes on, however, it's clear that the author, Daniel James Brown, is telling not just their story, but the story of an entire generation. The boys in the boat come to represent their generation, the greatest generation. And it's worth noting what constituted the greatness of the greatest generation. At the end of the book, as Brown reflects on the passing of that generation that "saved the world in the years just before I was born," he writes:

I was swept with gratitude for their goodness and their grace, their humility and their honor, their simple civility and all the the things they taught us. It was their essential natures—decent and unassuming, not privileged or favored by anything in particular, just loyal, committed and perseverant. They were representative of something much larger than themselves—a way of life, a shared set of values. Liberty was perhaps the most fundamental of those values. But the things that held them together—trust in one another, mutual respect, humility, fair play, watching out for one another—those were also part of what America meant to all of them.

That's beautiful, and those things are a great part of what has made America great. But it goes deeper than that.

In telling the story of the Washington Crew, Brown focuses on one rower in particular, a boy named, Joe Rantz. Joe's mother dies when he is six, and thereafter, as his father struggles to find work, he's shunted back and forth between various relatives and his father. Eventually, his father remarries, but that only makes matters worse. As Joe lives with his father, stepmother, and a growing brood of half-siblings, it becomes clear that his parents see him as a burden and a bother: just one more mouth to feed and an unwanted one at that. One afternoon in November, when Joe is 15 years old and his father is out of work again, Joe comes home from school to find the old Franklin packed, his stepmother in the front seat and the younger kids in the back.

"Where are we going?" he asks his father.

"I'm not sure . . . Seattle for now, then California maybe. But, Son, the thing is, the little kids are going to need a father more than you are. You're pretty much all grown up now anyway."

"But can't I just come along?"

"No. That won't work. Look, Son, if there's one thing I figured out about life, it's that if you want to be happy, you have to learn how to be happy on your own."

And with that, Joe's father walks to the car, gets in, and drives away, leaving 15-year old Joe standing on the front steps of the half-finished house in rural Sequim Washington, in the rain—on his own.

But beginning the next day, and with time, Joe finds his determination and his resolution. He will live in the house by himself; he will fend for himself; he will survive; and he will do it on his own. He will forage mushrooms in the woods, peddle salmon (salmon that he spears illegally) from back door to back door in Sequim, and find work cutting and hauling timber. He will work hard and keep going to school, and somehow he will go to college, because Joe wants to prove himself and live a better life—and this is America, after all.

The boy has tremendous heart—but his heart has been broken, and it bears the scars. Joe is a good-looking, bright, sociable boy, well-liked by his teachers and classmates. But deep inside him, something in him, stays deep inside him. He's always holding something—namely, himself—back a little. In fact, that's his resolution, his vow to himself: never again to let himself depend on anyone for a sense of who he was, never to trust in, never to give himself to—at least not completely—anyone or anything.

But the problem for Joe, once he gets on the rowing team, is that eight-man rowing is the ultimate team sport. You can have the eight strongest oarsman in the world, but if they do not pull together, they are nothing. The challenge and the beauty (and Brown describes both in exquisite detail) is to pull each stroke

with the greatest possible power, stroke at the greatest possible rate, and do so in perfect eight-part harmony—stroke, after stroke, after stroke, after stroke—all under the coxswain's direction. In rowing, it's true at every level, from the literal/physical level to the spiritual/metaphysical level: you have to pull together and you have to have each other's back; the many have to become one.

And that proves to be the challenge for both Joe and the University of Washington varsity crew. At times, they are in perfect sync and seem unbeatable; at other times it all falls apart: they can't even beat the freshman team. The high priest of Washington rowing—not the coach, but the high priest—is a man named George Yeoman Pocock, an Englishman, a great oarsman in his own right, and a boat builder who works upstairs in the UWASH shell house. One day, as he and Joe are having one of their talks up there, he tells Joe, “Joe, when you really start trusting those other boys, you will feel a power at work within you that is far beyond anything you've ever imagined. Sometimes, you will feel as if you rowed right off the planet and are rowing among the stars.”

Years later Pocock would make much the same comment to his biographer, “Rowing is a symphony of motion . . . when you're rowing well, why it's nearing perfection, you're touching the Divine. It touches the you of yours. Which is your soul.”

And so in the months leading up the Olympics, slowly at first, and then with breathtaking speed, the boys in the boat become one, culminating with their Olympic victory in the face of the greatest obstacles. That night, after that victory, after the medal ceremony, the boys go out on the town, singing “Bow Down to Washington” through the streets of Berlin into the wee hours of the morning—they are, after all, still boys. But not Joe. Joe stays back in his room, lying on his bed, staring at the gold medal, thinking about the race and his life. It's then that it came to him that:

In the last desperate few hundred meters of the race, in the searing pain and bewildering noise of that final furious sprint, there had come a singular moment when Joe realized with startling clarity that there was nothing more he could do to win the race, beyond what he was already doing. Except for one thing. He could finally abandon all doubt, trust absolutely without reservation that he and the boy in front of him and the boys behind him would all do precisely what they needed to do at precisely the instant they needed to do it. He had known in that instant that there could be no hesitation, no shred of indecision. He had had no choice but to throw himself into each stroke as if he were throwing himself off of a cliff into a void, with unquestioned faith that the others would be there to save him from catching the whole weight of the shell on his blade. And he had done it. Over and over, forty-four times per minute, he had hurled himself blindly into his future, not just believing but knowing that the other boys would be there for him, all of them, moment by precious moment. In the white-hot emotional furnace of those final meters, Joe and the boys had finally forged the prize they had sought all season, the prize Joe had sought nearly all his life. Now he felt whole.

Wherein does true greatness lie? Not in the roar of the crowd, not in the medal, nor even in the playing of the national anthem. In its peculiarly American form, it lies in goodness and grace, humility and honor, and simple civility. It is decent and unassuming, not privileged or favored by anything in particular, just loyal, committed and perseverant. It lies in trusting in one another, in mutual respect, humility, fair play, and watching out for one another.

But it goes deeper than that. Wherein does true greatness lie? Not in worldly acclaim or recognition, not in the aggrandizement of the self, and certainly not in the vainglorious posturing and preening of self-aggrandizing tyrants. No: In its universally human form, it lies in giving yourself—all of yourself—to something greater than yourself so that you might become your whole self. It lies in abandoning all doubt, in trusting absolutely without reservation, with no hesitation, no shred of indecision, in throwing yourself off of a cliff into a void, with unquestioned faith that another will be there to save you from catching the whole weight of the world. In not just believing but knowing that that other will be there for you, moment by precious moment.

That's what Jesus is saying to the crowd when he goes and gets that donkey; that's what Jesus is saying to Pilate when he says his kingdom is not of this world; that's what is being said to us when Pilate says, “Behold the man, behold your king.”

Here is true greatness.

Amen.