

Text: Philippians 2: 1-11
Title: Donkey Church
Date: 03.28.10
Roger Allen Nelson

Gordon Crosby served as a chaplain in World War II and when he came home he couldn't find a job. No churches wanted him. So, partly out of necessity, partly out of being changed by the war, and partly out of sense that there must be a different way to help people become Christ-followers ~ Gordon Crosby founded the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. in the 1940s. The church never became a mega-church, but it has created all sorts of other ministries, spun off other churches, and has had a substantial ecumenical impact that belies its size. Two years ago Gordon Crosby retired as pastor ~ at 91.

One of the remarkable things that the Church of the Savior has been doing is developing new leaders, in their vernacular, through Shepherd's Training. Remarkably, half of those in the training program are recovering from a chemical addiction, about a third spent some time incarcerated, and nearly half have been homeless. And, remarkably, when they finish the three year training program the title that they are given is not pastor, but "donkey."

Donkey is a reminder that they are called to be humble servants, followers of Jesus Christ ~ who didn't go up the ladder of success but who went down and who calls followers to follow.

It is a colorful title: Donkey Roger, Donkey Jeff, Donkey Dora, Donkey Kristy, Donkey Aaron, Donkey Kong..... Donkey Church.

During my not-so-recent trip to Israel we started one morning on the Mount of Olives, descended to the Garden of Gethsemane, and walked the *via dolorosa* to one of the tombs of Christ (It's a complicated story.....). By providence or coincidence a man and a donkey was in front of us as we made way our down into Jerusalem. The donkey was loaded with bags ~ probably religious trinkets. The man was walking, but the image was unmistakable.

Floppy eared, knobby kneed, sway backed, big rumped, awkwardly descending...

This was how Jesus came into Jerusalem. And, the only thing that looks more ridiculous than a donkey plodding along is a man sitting on a donkey plodding along.

There is nothing majestic,
nothing comfortable,
nothing kingly.

Legs dangling and body lurching; it is a picture of humility and an image of descent.

Dear friends on this Psalm Sunday morning, as we remember the arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem, I invite you to consider the "Christ Hymn" of Paul's letter to the Philippians as a template for that journey. I invite you to consider this text as a pattern for what it means to follow Christ. I invite you to consider this text as a framework for what it means to be the donkey church ~ awkwardly following Christ. This morning I invite you to consider the four legs of a donkey church.

Paul's language assumes community. He stacks up a series of dependent clauses that culminate in people being joined in spirit, mind, and humility. The words are rich and thick and complex and beautiful. He writes of unity and comfort and tenderness and a compassion that comes from the bowels ~ from deep within. He doesn't expect that they will all think alike, but he asks for
a common soul,
a common affection,
and a common commitment that sets aside vanity and self-interest
and pursues the interests of one another.

The first leg of the donkey church is community.

It is not just one person standing before God, nor is it a random collection of autonomous individuals, but the church is a web of mutual dependency. Now, that may not be new news or good news, and it may smack of the obvious, but by its very nature church is people together.

Some of you have found a community at Hope ~ for ten, twenty, or thirty years, this community has been your sustaining community. You have raised children together, weathered storms together, gone on trips together, and built a web together. You have some expectation that ham buns will be served at your funeral by those seated around you. You may have better friends in other places, you may have people you like better in other places, but you know finally that church is a web of mutually dependent people ~ united in Christ.

One image of that is immediate. Look around at this intergenerational community. There are very few places where those who are nine and those who are ninety are united of purpose, at least symbolically.

However, our future will not swing on the symbol, but on the experienced reality of community. We will be shaped not by preaching panache, musical styles, liturgical sensibilities, a smorgasbord of programs, or how we configure or reconfigure this building, but by how we love, welcome the stranger, enfold new people, journey with old people, forgive one another, practice hospitality, and make space for a variety of perspectives and orientations. This is a wonderful symbol ~ but may it also be a felt reality.

For, if there is a common encouragement from being united with Christ,
a common comfort from love,
a common fellowship with the Spirit,
a common tenderness and compassion,
a common joy, then it will be found in life together.
The first leg of a donkey church is community.

Paul writes that community, or our "bearing towards one another," would arise out of have the same "attitude of mind." It is an odd phrase because the translator is trying to pick up on the notion that "mind" is not just information and reason and thinking, but it is the fullness of human disposition, psyche, worldview, way of relating...

And it is a little bit of a stretch, but I would suggest that there is a habit of mind that is essential. Church has to do with your mind ~ with how you think.

While faith is not the substance of facts and ideas, there is unmistakably a content with which faith is engaged. We have a scripture, a story, a set of confessions, a relationship, a tradition and a way of thinking that we are responsible to and responsible for.

We soak in it and delight in it.

We wrestle with it and wrangle against it.

We question, doubt, and fight, and rest in it.

We explore it and proclaim it,

We uncover new ways of thinking and framing it.

But, finally there is an "it" with which we interact.

If there is an immediate symbol of community ~ there is also the symbol of the community gathered around Word and Sacrament. May there be hospitality and community, for under this tent we will be struggling with, and seeking after, the mind of Christ.

And, as we've been blessed with babies and baptisms, as we take great delight in watching all those little munchkins parade out to learn and listen and be trained of mind, may we be reminded that education is essential to being church.

I would offer that the donkey's second leg is education.

Historian Joseph Hellerman makes a case that within the Roman Empire there was a *cursus honorum*, or "course of honor." It was a formalized sequence of public offices that a young Roman aristocrat was to follow as he advanced in his career. At each stage the upwardly mobile gained new responsibilities and new privileges. Lower classes of people developed their own sequence of offices that mimicked the upper class pattern. Hellerman argues that the concern for such honor ratings and status was part of the warp and woof of Philippi.

The Christ hymn has taken the *cursus honorum* and turned it upside down. Instead of climbing the proverbial corporate ladder, Jesus descends it. What, Hellerman calls the *cursus pudorum* or "course of ignominy" or "course of shame." This is about riding a donkey and not a stallion.

There is a colorful little word in the middle of the Christ hymn from which a whole series of actions fall. *Harpagmos* is faithfully rendered as "exploited." Jesus...

*...did not consider equality with God something to be exploited,
but made himself nothing....*

The word has the sense of something that is snatched or seized for personal gain. Jesus had a unique vantage point.

He had a position of privilege.

He had a place of power.

He had the prerogative to exploit equality with God.

But, he let it go. He emptied himself. He became a servant. You know the lines...

It falls all the way to death ~ even death on a cross. It is a course of shame.

It is relatively easy to exploit church as a community of friends.

It is easy to exploit church as a tool to pass on meaning and morality to our children.

But, if the church is that community gathered in the mind of Christ than it exists to serve; it exists to empty itself.

The third leg of the donkey church is servant-hood or mission. We never know what to call it.

But, I can tell you ~ overflowing with deep gratitude ~ that the Deacons at Hope do a wonderful job of constantly asking how we can best let go of resources for the sake of others. I can tell you that the Council is always wrestling with how to keep turning our face outward in service to creation. I can tell you that the Deacons and Elders are trying to keep putting in front of us ways to give of time, gifts, and talents. I can tell you that almost a third of our annual budget goes out of here in service to others. I can tell you that we gather as a community in Christ, so that we can we can better “love God and love neighbor, serve God and serve neighbor.”

Kosuke Koyama ~ a Japanese theologian ~ frames the movement of Christ this way: He starts with Jesus Christ at the center of all things, pre-existent with God, but Jesus is always moving toward the periphery.

The life of Jesus is a motion away from the center. He doesn't snatch power, or seek place, or exploit position, but he moves toward the periphery.

He lets go of the splendor of heaven for the splinters and struggles of humanness.

He is born the bastard son of a teenage mom, in the back of a barn in a scrub-brush town.

He turns toward the cast-out, the tossed-aside, the vulnerable, the untouchable, and the sinner.

He is killed with criminals on a cross, leaving him outside of Jewish culture and inconsequential refuse to Roman culture.

He moves toward the margins, toward the fringe ~ until he can't move any further.

Empty, spent, separate from self and separate from God, he cries out on the cross of his abandonment and dies. But, from that life and death on the periphery Christ is found in the center.

The movement is from sovereignty to servanthood,

from deity to death,

from equality to emptying to exultation,

from power to periphery to praise!

The fourth and final leg of the donkey church is worship.

We join with what creation is already doing and will do in the future, we join in the motion of all knees bowing and all tongues confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

I am not sure that style matters. There are all sorts of churches for all sorts of people and all sorts of cultures and all sorts of tastes. We cobble something together here that seeks to do the best we can with the gifts we have. The essential thing is the worship.

The donkey church is community, education, service, and worship.
Floppy eared, knobby kneed, sway backed and awkward ~ but the church of Christ

Now, lately at the gym (danger, danger, sports metaphor!) I've been trying to do a series of exercises on a core stability gizmo. It is a platform on top of half of a ball. You stand on the top, move, and try to keep your balance. Lean too far in one direction, without some counterbalance or core strength and you're tumbling and stumbling over. (It is remarkably difficult. I can't do it. I look like a donkey trying.)

I would suggest that the church has that sense of equilibrium. It fluctuates and vacillates between: community, education, service, and worship. It may emphasize different themes at different times, but it keeps trying to hold a balance. When we tilt too far and neglect a leg, we cease being the full expression of church. We're a three legged donkey and that is pitiful thing. When we get too cluttered, and try to carry too much, and get too busy, and pile on too much ~ we easily become something other than donkey church. And maybe we lose track of what is essential.

About seven years ago we drafted a statement built around these four legs. It is still a guiding document. There are copies on the table in the narthex. Pick one up today ~ take it home, read it, put it on the fridge, let it be a kind of reminder to be a donkey. When we budget and make decisions in the future ~ these legs are what we try to walk on.

But, dear friends, this morning as we wave palm branches and turn toward the cross and the tomb and the bright glorious joy of Easter morn
 may we journey in community together,
 may we seek the mind of Christ together
 may we serve others together,
 may we worship together

And, in is so doing may we herald that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.