

**Palm Sunday**  
**4/1/07**  
**Brentwood First Presbyterian Church**  
**Luke 19:28-40**  
**Philippians 2:1-8**  
**“The Donkey”**  
**Reverend Michael J Magee**

Introduction to scripture

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul is writing to a church on the plains of Philippi. A church in conflict. The members of this church do not love as Jesus loves. They do not love others unconditionally. When they hurt each other, they do not say, “I’m sorry.” When someone hurts their feelings, they do not forgive. And they give up on each other too easily. They are critical of each other. They judge each other. And then they write each other off. They used to be an assembly of friends. But no more. They are in conflict. So Paul writes them a letter.

There is a popular song you can hear on the Christian radio station FISH 94 FM. “We live.” It is sung by Superchick, and the refrain goes like this:

We live, we love, we forgive and never give up.  
Cuz the days we are given are gifts from above.  
And today we remember to live and to love

The lyrics certainly fit today’s message.

Philippians 2:1-8

Scene 1 We live in a culture which wants to organize our friendships

The members of the church on the plains of Philippi do not love as Jesus loves. Why does this happen? Why would someone be incapable of loving others unconditionally? Be incapable of saying, “I’m sorry”? Be incapable of forgiving? Be so quick to be critical? So quick to judge? So quick to write others off? I believe all these questions have but one answer. And that is the subject of today’s message.

If you are sitting there thinking I am talking about you, hold on. I will share a secret with you. Preachers always look for flaws within themselves, and preach to their own flaws. Many times you can figure out what is going on in the preacher’s life by listening to his message. But hopefully, what is going on in the preacher’s life also fits what is going on in the congregation’s life.

But back to why someone would be incapable of loving others unconditionally, of asking for forgiveness, of forgiving, for being so quick to be critical, to judge, and

to write others off. For one thing, this is what our culture tells us is the ideal. The norm. The organized way to friendship. After all, we read books about how to organize our closets and our travel bags. Why not organize our friendships? I read a book recently about friendship. It was basically a cookbook. I say that because it gives a cookbook approach to choosing your friends, to evaluating your friends, and even dumping your friends. This book says if a person who wants to be your friend is either a “gossip monger” or is an “injustice collector,” (that is, he or she complains too much), that you do not want to be their friend. The book does not specify what it means by gossip. It does not specify if by gossip it means that your friend is telling you hearsay, or if your friend is telling you their confidential frustrations and hurts. Of course, there is a difference between passing on hearsay and telling your friend confidentially about your joys and hurts. But the book does not specify the difference. So I looked up “gossip” in Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, the 11<sup>th</sup> edition. It says that gossip is unsubstantiated rumor or hearsay. A person who is a gossip-monger is someone who starts or spreads unsubstantiated rumor. Telling your good friend in confidence your joys and hurts, even if they involve another person, is not gossip. My dictionary says the definition of gossip in the book on friendship is a little fuzzy and off the mark.

The book also talks about “Spring-cleaning” your friendships. About evaluating your friends, and if the friendships are too one-sided or unhealthy, you should dump them. It uses the words “dialing down” unworthy friendships by not returning phone calls or e-mails. The cookbook approach to organizing friendships.

I also looked up the word “friend” in my dictionary. It says: one attached to another by affection or esteem. These are not my words. These are the words of the first definition of friend in Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11<sup>th</sup> edition. It says nothing about one-sidedness or conditional love. A friend is one attached to another by affection or esteem.

Our culture says we are right to feel self-important. Because we **are** a generation of self-important, self-made people. The church at Philippi did not have phones or e-mail. But the Philippians do not love each other unconditionally the way Jesus tells them to love each other. They do not say “I’m sorry” when they hurt each other’s feelings. They do not forgive. They are critical of each other. They judge each other. They write each other off. Their culture, and our culture, tells us this is how we should organize our friendships, by Spring-cleaning and dialing them down. They and we erase friendships like we clean the desk top of our computer by moving old files to the trashcan and deleting them. But besides our culture, there is another barrier to asking for and giving forgiveness, and to enjoying even one sided friendships, as the cookbook calls them.

Scene 2 We are born into narcissism

My favorite flower is the daffodil. I like because it self duplicates and spreads. It comes up year after year. Unlike tulips it is not eaten by squirrels. And to my eye and nose, it has both a very beautiful corolla and aroma. It gets its scientific name, narcissus, from a Greek myth. Narcissus was a handsome Greek youth who rejected the desperate advances of the nymph Echo. As punishment, he was doomed to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Unable to consummate his love, Narcissus pined away and changed into the flower that bears his name.

This Greek myth also gives its name to a personality disorder. Here are some of the features of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual IV.

- Grandiose sense of self-importance, exaggeration of talents.
- Sense of entitlement
- Takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends
- Is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others

My wife and I were talking two days ago about labeling people. I don't like labeling people, because I see brokenness within each of us. And I do not think any of us can be objectified and reduced like insects pinned to a board. Human beings are too complex for that. I believe even Sigmund Freud would agree with me. For he believed that some narcissism is an essential part of all of us from birth.

In a paper published in 1993, the authors concluded that narcissism, as measured by a standardized test, is a common inherited trait.

The study subjects were 175 volunteer twin pairs (90 identical, 85 fraternal) drawn from the general population. Each twin completed a questionnaire that assessed 18 dimensions of personality disorder. The authors estimated the heritability of each dimension of personality by standard methods, thus providing estimates of the relative contributions of genetic and environmental causation.

Of the 18 personality dimensions, narcissism was found to have the highest heritability (0.64), indicating that the concordance of this trait in the identical twins was significantly influenced by genetics. In other words, we are born narcissistic, and have to learn the virtue that is its antithesis. We have to learn humility.

I told you I am preaching to myself, hoping someone here can benefit. Medical narcissism is a term coined a few years ago, and discussed in a book entitled: "Medical Errors and Medical Narcissism." "Medical Narcissism" is defined as the need of health professionals to preserve their self esteem to the extent that they do not disclose medical errors.

The book explores the psychological, ethical and legal effects of medical errors. Capable, exceptional doctors who need to constantly assert their competence can fall into narcissistic traps.

The book claims that: "...most health professionals (in fact, professionals of all sorts) work on cultivating a self that exudes authority, control, knowledge, competence and respectability. It's the narcissist in us all—we dread appearing stupid or incompetent."

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes that he sees in that particular church little consolation from love, little compassion, and little sympathy. But he sees plenty of selfish ambition and conceit. Plenty of people looking out after their own interests. In other words, plenty of narcissism.

It is not only being American that puts pressure on us to be number one. It is also part of our human nature. You and I struggle with trying to elevate ourselves above the next person. We take our brains, our intelligence, our gifts that God has given to us and we often use these gifts to be better than other people around us. There is a human tendency to elevate ourselves above others, and we use our God given gifts to do this.

Our favorite pronoun is "I." Our pride and self-importance are a barrier to unconditional or agape love and to asking for and receiving forgiveness. Our pride and self-importance make us quick to be critical, quick to judge, and quick to write others off. And because we ourselves are stunted in our own ability to love unconditionally, when we are recipients of unconditional or agape love, we distrust it. Because we are self-important, we confuse agape love with eros love. We think the other person wants something from us. We think he or she has a crush on us. But in scripture we encounter a **different** example of self importance. And this new example opens the door for agape love, forgiveness, and acceptance of others.

### Scene 3 Jesus is the Lord of Humility

Humility doesn't have many buyers today. Humility doesn't have many takers. We live in our American culture that says, "We're number one. I'm number one. We have the number one basketball team; the number one baseball team; the number one musician; the number one choir; the number one artist." And so within our American culture and within our human nature, humility does not have a lot of buyers today.

A young carpenter, name of Jesus, rides into Jerusalem on a young donkey. A colt can be a horse or donkey, but Matthew 21 and John 12 specify a donkey — fulfilling Zechariah 9, which says: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

A donkey is a humble creature, and the colt of a donkey even more so. Donkeys are smaller than horses — not as fast or responsive — unsuitable as a ride into battle. The colt of a donkey could barely carry a full-grown man.

Kings ride neither colts nor donkeys, but full-grown horses — well-trained, responsive horses — horses chosen in part for strength and spirit and in part for appearance — beautiful horses — large, impressive mounts — in much the same way that presidents ride limousines or private jets. The size and beauty of the king's horse bear testimony to the king's importance. Furthermore, a man mounted on a large, spirited horse is an intimidating presence, and potential enemies will think twice before attacking a man so mounted.

Jesus is king of the Jews, but he is a different kind of king — the kind of king who rides a donkey colt — comes in peace — comes to serve — comes to die. Just as a king's huge, spirited war-horse sends a message about the man who rides it, so also Jesus' donkey colt sends a message about him — who he is — his purpose in coming.

In the upper room, his disciples compete for the best seats. He takes a towel and basin to wash their feet. On the cross he greets evil with a prayer of forgiveness. On Palm Sunday, and then again in the upper room, and then again on the cross, Jesus challenges the world's concept of self importance. Jesus challenges the narcissism in each of us and in our culture. He tells us we do not have to be a slave to nature and nurture. There are also the influences of God and our God-given free will to choose freedom from the shackles of nature and nurture. Jesus, the Lord of humility, tells us the way to break free of our narcissistic shackles of nature and nurture is to seek humility. To seek the way of Jesus entry into Jerusalem. To seek the way of the donkey.

#### Scene 4 We can love and forgive only out of humility

On Palm Sunday, we read the lectionary Scriptures. We read the Scripture from Philippians 2 during the service: “For Christ did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but he humbled himself, taking the form of a servant, being perfectly obedient until death. Therefore, God has exalted him above all others and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name. That at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow in heaven and earth. At the name of Jesus, every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Why? Why did God exalt Jesus?

The Biblical passage for today is very clear. The Bible says, “Christ did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but Christ humbled himself, taking the form of a servant and was perfectly obedient unto death. THEREFORE, God has exalted him above all others and has bestowed on him a name higher than any

other name. That at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

There is a saying of Jesus that occurs more than any other saying. “He who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” This teaching about humility is used some five or six times in the Bible. If Jesus’ teaching about humility is mentioned in the Bible some five or six times, don’t you think that the teaching is very important? I do. But there is still another teaching of Jesus that is repeated even more often: “The person who would be first will be last; and the last will be first.” That saying is found all over the New Testament. The person who is at the foot of the table will be moved up to the head of the table. He who humbles himself will be exalted; the person who exalts himself in this life will be humbled in the next. ... Jesus’ important teaching about humility is repeatedly laced throughout the whole New Testament.

At the mention of his name, every knee on earth and in heaven shall bow. Why? Because of his miracles? No. Because he was the Son of God? No. Because of his divine connections? No. But because he humbled himself and walked a life of humility and obedience.

God wants us to have that same humility as well, to have this same inner attitude that he does. It is not only Jesus, but we ourselves who are invited to possess this same humility.

Jesus does not ask us to Spring-clean our friendships. Instead, he asks us to Spring-clean our pride. Jesus asks us to come from a place of humility and say, “I am sorry.” And he asks us to say to each other, “I forgive you.”

It is only out of humility that we can believe that others can love us unconditionally. It is only out of humility that we in turn can love others unconditionally. It is only out of humility that we can admit we made a mistake and ask for forgiveness. It is only out of humility that we can forgive one another. It is only out of humility that we do not give up on other people, that we are not critical, that we do not judge. It is only out of humility that we do not write the other person off. It is only out of humility that we can be all that God wants us to be.

### Conclusion

Daffodils, spring-cleaning, medical errors, and donkeys.

We live, we love, we forgive and never give up.  
Cuz the days we are given are gifts from above.  
And today we remember to live and to love.

**Glory be to God. Hosanna. Amen.**

