

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

SERMON

In John Grisham's 2010 novel, *The Confession*, Lutheran pastor Keith Schroeder, who lives in Topeka, Kansas, receives a visit from a stranger on a Monday morning. The man, who introduces himself as Travis Boyette, born October 10, 1963, explains that he lives in a prison halfway house, and that he had been in church the day before. He also tells the pastor that he has been in and out of prison most of his life, and now has a malignant brain tumor which causes powerful headaches.

He came to talk about a young white cheerleader who disappeared nine years earlier in an East Texas town. Though her body had never been found a jury convicted a young black man of murder. Donte Drumm, a former high school football star, was scheduled for execution in four days. Travis told the pastor emphatically that he not only knew that Donte Drumm had nothing to do with the murder, but he also knew where the body was buried. When the pastor asked if he had murdered the girl he grew silent. Through his rambling conversation he spoke slowly, painfully, giving just enough information to convince the pastor that he probably was telling the truth.

When Travis left Pastor Schroeder asked his wife, Dana, who was the substitute receptionist that Monday, to help search the internet for additional information about Travis Boyette, the convicted killer Donte Drumm, and the victim whose name was Nicole Yarber. Dana was willing to

help her husband, but she wanted him to have nothing to do with Travis, whose very presence made her shutter.

Together, husband and wife found ample information confirming the story Travis had told. The girl, Nicole Yarber, was missing. No body had been found, though some records had been discovered near the Red River. Though Donte had confessed to killing the girl, he later testified that his confession was forced. Through their research the pastor became convinced that Travis had been involved and that Donte Drumm was innocent.

A day passed, Travis disappeared and reappeared, and the execution date was even closer. Finally, Travis confessed to the pastor, graphically describing the murder, and for proof showed him a class ring that had Nicole's initials engraved. The pastor tried in vain to get Travis to give himself up to the local police. He phoned the defense attorney in Texas, but the call was rejected. He soon learned that it was not uncommon in a murder case for many people to confess, particularly at the last minute. Finally Travis asked the pastor to drive him to Texas where he would confess and tell authorities where the body could be found.

Pastor Schroeder consulted a respected lawyer in the congregation who urged him not to go. He would be helping a criminal violate parole. His wife pleaded with him not to go because she was convinced that Travis was not safe. The pastor himself had serious reservations.

So, here is the scorecard: He is a married man, and the father of three children. He was not an activist. He had never been in a demonstration or a protest. His wife opposes his trip and the advice of a respected lawyer is that he not go. Finally, for heaven sakes, he was a Lutheran pastor, and we all know they are not the most daring species in the world.

In spite of all of this Keith gets in his car in the dead of night, and drives from Kansas to Texas with a criminal, knowing he could be arrested. Why did he do it? Why did he risk his own life, and possibly his career? He did it because it was the right thing. He did it because he was a disciple of Jesus, a follower of the Savior. A life was hung in the balance. Maybe, just maybe, he could make a difference. He heard no voices. No angels commanded him. Still, he had to go because of his faith in Jesus. He felt a divine imperative.

In 1968 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., against the advice of many, went to Memphis to support Sanitation workers who were on strike. Some argued that there was very little political capital to be gained by a trip to Memphis. Others were concerned that it was a dangerous journey. The enemies of the Civil Rights movement were becoming more bold. King himself had a premonition of death. He announced that he had been on the mountain top, but like Moses, he may not be able to enter the promised land. In another speech he said, "The cross we bear precedes the

crown we wear. To be a Christian one must take up his cross, with all of its difficulties and agonizing and tension-packed content and carry it until that very cross leaves its marks upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering.”

Thus, to Memphis he went where he met his death. At the time he knew it was the right thing to do. He was the leader of the Black freedom movement in the U.S. and the sanitation workers, who were primarily black, needed his support. Death is always a possibility for those who take up their cross and follow Jesus. He felt a divine imperative, a royal command.

On a clear fresh morning in the spring of the year, after the winter rains were over, a Jewish teacher, a rabbi, accompanied by a handful of disciples began the slow descent down the hill from the Mount of Olives toward the summit of Zion on the back of a donkey. As he rode down the gentle slope, across the Kidron Valley and into the holy city of Jerusalem, crowds of people greeted Jesus, the teacher, with shouts of, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” That is, they greeted him as the heir to the throne of Israel’s greatest king, welcoming him like we might welcome Gen. Colin Powell, or in earlier days before he became president, Gen. Dwight David Eisenhower. In what was the equivalent of a First Century ticker tape parade, they threw their coats on the ground before him or tore branches off the trees, thus giving the day its name, “Palm Sunday.”

We are never quite sure what to do with this day, a day filled with irony. Jesus was not the man they thought he was. He was not a military leader. His intention was not to restore Israel to its political greatness. He did not ride into Jerusalem on a White Charger, and rather than the victory salute we believe that he spoke not a word. Finally, there was no weapon at his side. The crowds did not understand his true identity.

If his descent down the slopes of the Mount of Olives was going to be misunderstood, if the crowds expected him to lead a revolt against the Romans and set Israel free, if he was really not Gen. Petreus, but rather the Prince of Peace, why ride in the first place? Why not teach and hopefully remove all doubt about his identity?

The answer is quite simple. He rode out of divine necessity. He was the king, and the king must ride even if most people failed to understand his mission. He had no choice. He was and is the King of Love, the King of Peace, the King of Hope. The divine imperative demanded that he ride.

Perhaps we are more like the crowd than we first realize. Not just because we are fickle, not just because one day we shout, “Hosanna to the King,” and the next day we ignore him. We are like the crowd in that we are still trying to figure out just who he is. Like the crowd we need to get under the veil, beneath the outer covering, and discover his real identity. We need to read his story, study his word to discover the nature of his kingdom. In so many ways his is an upside down kingdom.

Who he is shapes who we are. On the corporate level, Bethel Lutheran Church has been called to live and

serve in the heart of the city. We are a city-wide church, with a worldwide ministry. We are a church who feeds the poor, welcomes the homeless, visits the prisoners, and let the little children come. We are a church who proclaims the story of Jesus in this building and across the state of Wisconsin through a seven station TV network. This Lent and many other times we gather to read his words and to follow him.

Yesterday a new motion picture was released of a very old book, “Atlas Shrugged,” by Ayn Rand. Ms. Rand, who is deceased, was a great advocate of greed. She taught that the chief purpose of life was the pursuit of one’s own happiness or rational self-interest. She wore a dollar sign around her neck where others wear a cross. Ms. Rand detested the teachings of Jesus who taught that we are to deny ourselves, and take up our cross. Jesus taught that the greatest among us are servants, and that one of our goals in life is to be our brother’s keeper. Ayn Rand, an atheist, was headed in an entirely different direction. She was not into sharing, or giving. She taught something that she called, “The Ethics of Selfishness.”

In her book Anthem, the leading character, who seems to be the voice of Ayn Rand, declares that he is God. Read up dear friends. There is a war going on for your mind. The disciples of Ms. Rand are anxious to shape this nation in her image. The Greed is good movement would not get a lot of support from the Prince of Peace.

I live with a divine imperative to share my money, my time and my possessions. I am a follower of the man for others. He did not live for himself. He is my king, my leader. On that first Palm Sunday he rode into Jerusalem to meet his destiny, which was to give his life for the sins of the world. This week we will rehearse his story and his adventures. This week we will see the work of the King of Peace, while next Sunday, Easter, we will see how God raised Jesus from the dead, and brought hope to all of human kind. Get ready dear friends to celebrate the King of Kings. Amen. © 2011