

## An Unbronzed Athlete

Matthew 21:1-11

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on March 16, 2008, Palm Sunday, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

*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 fulfill 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."*

As spring begins, we are perhaps more aware of human competition than we are during other seasons of the year.

- March Madness is upon us, and soon we will know which of 65 teams will enter the NCAA basketball tournament, and who will be the top four seeds.
- Our own T. C. Williams Titans have experienced the joy of competition (especially when we win) this very week.
- We are in one of the most intense and interesting presidential primaries in memory, with the highest voter participation in history, its competitiveness described on cable news networks using the language of sports: "Horserace"; "season"; "finish line."

Personally, I love competition.

- If, as I expect, my boyhood team – the Memphis Tigers – make it to the Final Four – and if, as I expect, they face Duke or UNC or both (darlings of so many in this congregation) you will see either what an obnoxious winner or terrible loser I can really be.
- I love competing against the strong and worthy opponents, apathy and ignorance, to seek to build a strong church that speaks a clear and welcoming word for the Christian faith.
- In the international area, I am supportive when our nation (or other nations of the world) seek to defeat the darkest forces in human history; and I applaud voices in our own country who call us to task when we begin to embody some of the darkness we oppose.

The apostle Paul writes: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."<sup>1</sup> I would be honored if these words were chiseled into my headstone.

I love competition.

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For one who loves competition, the events of Holy Week – betrayal and arrest, trial and crucifixion – can be problematic.

When Jesus rides into Jerusalem to the large crowds who have spread their cloaks on the road, who have taken branches from trees, and who are shouting

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<sup>1</sup> II Timothy 4:7.

“Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

my competitive juices flow, and I want to cheer Jesus on to victory.

But then when I notice that this Son of David is riding on a colt and a donkey, and when Matthew – who puts this event in literary form – connects these two small pack animals with words from Isaiah and Zechariah:

“Look, your king is coming to you,  
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
And on a colt, the foal of a donkey”<sup>2</sup> --

I realize that whatever is going on in this particular parade is different than the kind of victory march that normally gets my adrenaline to flow.

“Humble.  
Mounted on a donkey.  
And on a colt.”

What gives here?

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John de Gruchy, a South African theologian to whose writings I have been recently drawn, writes:

The Christian icon...is not primarily embodied in the bronzed athletes of the ancient Greek or modern Olympics, nor in the lives of the rich, the powerful and famous, and the beautiful people that grace the catwalk, nor typified by the humanist ‘man of letters’...

Rather, de Gruchy argues, the model of who the Christian is “embodied in Jesus, the crucified Jew, who gave his life for others.”<sup>3</sup>

To stretch de Gruchy’s image, it is not the bronzed athlete who exemplifies the Christian; it is the *unbronzed* athlete, humble, riding on a donkey, riding to the cross.

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On the one hand, we know that de Gruchy is onto something with this imagery of humility and its implied critique of competition. All of us are aware of the downsides of competition.

- We see it in sports, as terrific athletes appear willing to defy the law and to harm their own bodies with performance enhancing drugs, so as to win and win, even beyond an age when they might be normally expected to compete.
- We see the downsides of competition in its most deadly form, as warfare among nations so often leads to more death and destruction, greater numbers of exiles and refugees, than is absolutely necessary, even in a fallen world in which force is sometimes the lesser evil.
- We even see the downsides of our competitive culture in the tragedy of scandal. Commenting in *The Washington Post* on the matter of the governor New York, Hank Stuey says:

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9.

<sup>3</sup> John W. de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 135.

A man on a business trip checks into a hotel by himself and picks up the television remote and clicks ON even as the handle of his [rolling] suitcase is still gripped by his other hand. The screen immediately offers him the pay-per-view movie menu, from which he is not going to watch "Atonement" or "Ratatouille." The [X-rated menu] begins. He sets down the bag, stares at the choices and then thinks, no, *wait*, later -- after the client dinner meeting. He then makes sure the television gets [ESPN](#).<sup>4</sup>

Stueyer portrays what is often true and tragic for men in our culture: the reality that business, sports, and illicit intimacy – are all linked together in one competitive package, involving money, power, acquisition, trade, conquest. An X-rated movie; a client meeting; a sporting event. All part of a destructive mix.

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In light of the destruction competitiveness can bring, de Gruchy writes:

...in as much as we follow Jesus Christ,  
we follow him to the cross,  
and we give up *any* pretense of victory  
in *any* way that the world defines it.

These words imply that the march of Jesus Christ to the cross renders every competitive aspect of the human spirit forbidden to faith, relegated to the world of sin and evil, perhaps even rightly classified as demonic. “We give up *any* pretense of victory as the world defines it,” he says.

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As much as I like de Gruchy, and as little as I think Christian victory has in common with bronzed athletes and glittering celebrities, I do not fully agree with this implication I believe he draws. I believe there is *one* way in which competition and Christian faith are consistent with one another. That way is *focus*.

In nearly all aspects of his life, Jesus displays intense focus.

- He knows what he is doing.
- He is intentional about his actions and his words.
- “No one takes *my* life from me;” he says. “*I* lay it down of *my own accord*.”<sup>5</sup>

As I have read and re-read the Gospels, I have come to believe that Jesus Christ shuts out all distractions that might lead him astray from his purpose. He puts all his energy – intellectual, spiritual, physical, emotional – into facing Jerusalem, stepping into the eye of the storm of death and evil, carrying the cross, so that through his heroic action all the powers of death and evil will begin their retreat from this world.

- His is the concentration of the glassblower,
- The focus of the neurosurgeon,
- The intensity of the builder of a Stradivarius.

He competes against all that threatens to distract him from his purpose, his call, his divine anointment.

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I see such focus in the opening verbs in our passage:

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<sup>4</sup> Hank Stueyer, “Hotel Babylon: For Men, A Promise of Impunity,” *The Washington Post* 3/11/08.

<sup>5</sup> John 10:18.

Jesus *sends* two disciples:

“You will find a donkey and a colt [he says];  
*Untie* them and *bring* them to me.  
If anyone says anything to you,  
Just say, ‘*The Lord needs them.*’”

The Christ who then makes his way to Jerusalem, seated on a donkey and a colt, is not a victim.

- He is human being, the Messiah, focused on the one thing that is his purpose.
- Nothing will cause his mind to wonder or his will to break, including the momentary adulation of the crowd.
- He competes against every force of evil, and he prevails.
- As our children sang, “Ride on, King Jesus...no one can hinder me.”
- And as de Gruchy says: “He gives – gives – *his* life for others.”

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My friends,  
we are just coming out of the most reflective season  
of the Christian year.  
I hope that you have been reflective:  
through worship, through the booklet that Casey and Patrick prepared,  
through prayer.  
If you have come to feel  
that Jesus Christ is nudging you  
about a particular situation in your life,  
I urge you to allow  
whatever competitive juices and energy you have to focus  
on doing what you believe  
Christ is calling you to do.  
Clarifying your purpose,  
keeping your focus  
will bring you victory  
in this greatest and most noble competition  
of your life.

Yours may not be the victory of the bronzed athlete;  
yours may not be a victory anyone notices  
but the God who resides in heaven.  
But it will be a victory.  
The king,  
Humble,  
Riding on a donkey.  
The unbronzed athlete.  
Victory.  
Victory.  
Victory.