It’s that time again: March Madness, I mean. For our international mission partners or anyone uninitiated to this uniquely American phenomenon, let me explain.

Every March, 68 college basketball teams compete in a single elimination tournament to crown a national champion.

Millions of Americans have dutifully filled out their brackets to predict the outcome. People come up with all sorts of ways to pick a winner. One creative way to complete your brackets is to choose a champion by team mascot.

Every team in the tourney has a mascot. This year, the tournament has an abundance of cats: BYU Cougars, Cincinnati Bearcats, Ohio Bobcats and Vermont Catamounts. Two teams utilize a tiger as mascot, and three teams are called wildcats. Birds are also plentiful: Creighton Bluejays, Kansas Jayhawks, Lehigh Mountain Hawks, Long Island Blackbirds, Louisville Cardinals, Marquette Golden Eagles and Temple Owls.

Most of these mascots are chosen to convey a certain image. We want our mascots to be furry, yet formidable. Evidence the Baylor Bears, Colorado Buffalos, California Golden Bears, Florida Gators, Montana Grizzlies, North Carolina State Wolfpack and South Florida Bulls. There’s a reason why we prefer bulldogs to poodles and tigers to pussy-cats.

If it were up to me, I’d award St. Louis University for the most intriguing mascot. Its mascot is a Billiken. What is it?

A lamb served as a type of mascot in the early church. Lambs were often depicted in early church artwork. John the Baptist announced, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). Angels in the book of Revelation heralded the lamb upon the throne. We sing the hymn, “Crown him with many crowns, the lamb upon the throne.” It’s a rather incongruous image. Diminutive lambs don’t occupy thrones. Kings sit on thrones. In our Scripture lesson, Jesus Christ enters the world as a servant Lord.

Philippians 2:6-11 is believed to be an early church hymn. That’s why it is set off in your Bibles in Psalm-like fashion. This hymn neatly divides into two balanced stanzas of three verses each.
The first section, verses 6-8, centers on Christ’s humiliation. “Even though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave….” In a single sentence, Paul moves from acknowledging Jesus Christ in the form of God to taking the form of a slave. He lays aside equality with God and divests himself of his God-given rights. He doesn’t grasp at divinity, nor does he exploit it for self-serving ends. He pours out his life in the service of others.

The second half of this compound sentence reads: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.” This one, in the form of God, takes human form and assumes the lowest place. Death on the cross is about as low as one can go. In Jesus’ day, the cross was a means of execution reserved for slaves and insurrectionists. Cicero spoke of the cross as “the most cruel and abominable form of punishment.”

You would never find early Christians wearing gold crosses or displaying them in churches. The cross wasn’t a fashionable piece of jewelry. It was a hideous instrument of death. C.S. Lewis wrote, “The cross is so shameful the early Christians refused to put it into their places of worship, or wear a cross as a symbol of the faith, until the last person who had witnessed a crucifixion had died. For them to display crosses would be tantamount to erecting gallows in church or wearing miniature electric chairs on gold chains.”

Christ’s humility, in the first half of the hymn, gives way to his exaltation in the second section: “Therefore God also highly exalted him.” This humbled one now becomes “the super exalted one.” “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (2:9-11).

This name above every name isn’t Jesus. Plenty of people in the first century bear this name. The name above every name is Lord. God has given to Jesus the name that is reserved for God alone: Lord.

This spring we are preaching our way through the Apostles’ Creed. Today, we’re focusing on the words, “I believe…in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.” The first creed of the Christian church is the simple, yet profound declaration that Jesus Christ is Lord. These words frame the central affirmation of the New Testament. Jesus is Lord represents the first core belief in our church.

If Jesus Christ is Lord, then no one else, no king or
If Jesus Christ is Lord, then Caesar is not.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ is not merely contained in a creed we recite. It’s our sovereign, is worthy of this honor. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then Caesar is not. In the first century, Roman citizens were required annually to burn incense before the image of the Roman Emperor and declare Caesar to be Lord. Christians who refused to do so paid for it with their lives.

Polycarp was a bishop in the early church from 69-155 AD. He was also a pupil of the Apostle John, one of Jesus’ original 12 disciples. He was summoned to appear before a representative of Caesar. This official took pity on this elderly man and told Polycarp he could believe whatever he wanted if he would only bow to Caesar as Lord. Polycarp refused. He said moments before he was burned at the stake, “Eighty and six years I have served him and he never did me any wrong: how then can I blaspheme my Lord and Savior.”

Martin Niemoller was a much celebrated U-boat captain in Germany during WWI. He was awarded Germany’s Iron Cross Medal. After the war, Martin became a pastor in the German Evangelical Church. He supported Hitler’s rise to power, believing his homeland needed a strong leader. When Hitler reorganized the German Church, Niemoller resisted. Hitler banned “non Aryans” from leadership in the church and declared Germany as the Promised Land, thereby excluding the Old Testament from Christian theology.

Niemoller banded together with others to write the Barmen Declaration of Faith. Although Hitler is not mentioned by name, their intent is obvious, “We reject the false doctrine as though there are areas of our life in which we do not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords….” Niemoller preached a controversial sermon entitled “Jesus is my Fuhrer.” The word Fuhrer was hardly inadvertent, since everybody in Germany referred to Hitler this way.

Niemoller was arrested in 1937 for “treasonable utterances” and brought before Hitler’s subordinates. He was asked to submit to Hitler as Fuhrer. Niemoller replied, “Not you, Herr Hitler, but the Lord is my Fuhrer.” He was imprisoned for seven years at the Dachau concentration camp. Those of us on the Reformation Tour in 2009 visited his prison cell in Dachau. He is best known for the verse, “First they came for the Socialists and I did not speak out, because I wasn’t a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists and I did not speak out because I wasn’t a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak up, because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

The Lordship of Jesus Christ is not merely contained in a creed we recite. It’s our
Christian pledge of allegiance. “We reject as false doctrine as though there are areas of our lives which do not belong to Jesus as Lord, but to lesser lords.” As Paul writes in Romans, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39).

Louis CK is a stand-up comedian. There is one point in his monologue where he talks about his beliefs. He’s trying to get a laugh, but I find his words rather believable. “I have a lot of beliefs…and I live by none of them. That’s just the way I am. They’re just my beliefs. I just like believing them—I like that part. They’re just my little ‘believies.’ They make me feel good about who I am. But if they get in the way of a thing I want, I sure as heck just do what I want to do.”

St. Augustine said, “Jesus is not valued at all until he is valued above all.” A husband who is faithful to his wife 85 percent of the time is not faithful at all. He can’t claim to value his wife above all other women by practicing fidelity 85 percent of the time. He is either faithful or he is not.

If Jesus is Lord of Sunday morning, but not what we do Monday through Saturday, is he really Lord? Either he is Lord of all or none at all. Jesus pleaded with his followers, “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, but do not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46).

Ask yourself whether Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Is he Lord of your thought life, your emotional life and your interpersonal relationships? Are there areas you are holding back from God? I said last Sunday although we profess Jesus Christ to be our Savior, we run to other saviors. We run to other lords, also.

We do not make Jesus Christ Lord by an act of the will. We cannot make Jesus Christ Lord by sheer willpower. Any attempt to make Jesus Christ Lord by our own strength will leave us discouraged. We don’t make Jesus Christ Lord. He is already Lord. We submit to him as Lord. We consciously yield our thoughts and surrender our emotions to him.

Maybe you don’t like the thought of relinquishing control to anyone, including God. Ultimately, we are not ultimately in control. There is only the illusion of control.

We do not live in a culture that values humility. We prize self-assertiveness. People grab at self-interest.

“I believe…in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.” He is not merely my private Lord. He is our Lord together. Paul introduces this Philippians passage with the words, “Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus....” He did not grab at self-serving ambition. He doesn’t look to his own needs but to the needs of others. “Let this same mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus....”