

In the Spirit of Palm Sunday
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As I think about Palm Sunday, I picture it as a joyous time, when Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Crowds of people waved palm branches, shouting "Hosanna!" as a term of adoration and acclamation to greet their hero, or *Messiah*. One might compare it to a crowd of fans greeting a rock star or Pope today. But there was a lot going on in what has been termed "The Triumphal Entry", much of it beneath the surface. While the scene is described in all four gospels, I have chosen to read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 21. After the reading, we will unpack some of the meanings of Palm Sunday for us today.

Matthew 21 (New International Version)

1As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, **2**saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. **3**If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

4This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

5"Say to the Daughter of Zion,
'See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.' "

6The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. **7**They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. **8**A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. **9**The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest!"

10When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

11The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

The gospel continues:

12Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. **13**"It is written," he said to them, " 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.'"

14The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. **15**But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant.

Thus ends the reading of the Gospel.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, he was riding on a donkey. Not only was this in keeping with the prophecy, but a donkey is also symbolic of humility and peace. A king, or someone going forth to war, would typically ride on a horse; but not so a person of peace.

I have a few images of donkeys in my mind. One is of the donkeys who are used for transport in very hilly places like the Grand Canyon. There is also an image of Juan Valdez riding though the mountains on a donkey, with his heavy packs of coffee beans. These donkeys are sturdy and sure-footed.

I also have an image of donkeys being ridden in *Donkey Basketball*, a popular fundraiser which pits high school students against their teachers. In my observation, those donkeys can be very stubborn, and even mean. But then again, donkeys, like other creatures, are influenced by their training and environment.

For Jesus to successfully ride on a borrowed donkey, one he was not used to riding, suggests that he and the donkey had good feelings for each other. The image of Harry Potter bowing low to the Hippogriff comes to mind. Once Harry had demonstrated his humility, the Hippogriff, a creature which was fierce and proud by temperament, happily let Harry mount and ride him. Likewise, I can envision Jesus' humility disarming the donkey and allowing him to ride it peacefully.

It may be helpful to consider what the disciples and the crowd were thinking and feeling as Jesus approached Jerusalem. Throughout the Gospels, it is amazing that the disciples don't seem to "get it" that Jesus is about social justice, love, and peace, rather than about political power and change in that sphere. Jesus is often referred to as the *Messiah*, but that term has different meanings to different people. The dictionary defines *Messiah* as "the expected king and deliverer of the Jews; a professed or accepted leader of some hope or cause". Many of the disciples and other members of the crowd saw Jesus as the expected King of the Jews, who would deliver them from the Roman state. Certainly the guardians of the Temple perceived Jesus that way, especially when he turned over the moneychangers' tables in the Temple and healed the blind and lame. Jesus was seen as one who was turning more than the tables upside down, but was also threatening the whole status quo and its Temple-based economy.

So, while many in the crowd were seeing Jesus as one who would usher in a new political age, they had various different feelings about that. The disciples and those in the crowd who supported the new direction were excited and happy at the prospect of change. . . change they could believe in. The blind and lame were delighted to be freed from their disabilities; even though it meant they would have to work for a living instead of being supported through the sympathies and kindnesses of others, at least they could see and walk again. They celebrated the light which had come among them, a light of healing and hope.

But the guardians of the Temple felt threatened by the prospect of change. They had prospered under the status quo. While they might have disliked the Roman government, they had found ways to work with it. What would happen if the Temple-based economy was no more? Would they lose their wealth and their position in society? And who *was* this Jesus of Nazareth, to threaten their power? He was just some unknown prophet from Galilee. The nerve he had to come riding into Jerusalem, *their* city, to overturn the tables in the Temple, to heal the low-lives who hung about the Temple, and to threaten their *own* comfortable way of life!

The stories surrounding Palm Sunday, like so many stories in the Bible, may not be literally true, but they continue to hold truth and meaning for us in our lives today. I like to think that I would have been one of the more enlightened disciples, and would have understood what Jesus was really about. I would like to think that I would have been supportive of his mission, even when others misunderstood him and persecuted him; I would have remained loyal to him.

But that is unlikely. It seems more likely that I would have been a product of my society at the time. This would have included an assumption that the Temple-based economy was good, and that the guardians of the Temple were held in high regard. It would have been commonplace for ordinary citizens to experience oppression at the hands of the Roman government. It was well-known that the tax collectors skimmed profit off the taxes that were paid to them on behalf of the State. They were detested for that, but what could one do?

In comparison to the Roman government and the tax collectors, the Temple seemed to provide a bit of respite. It was noisy and smelly inside, with the selling of sacrificial animals. But I understand there was an inner sanctum that was peaceful; not that I ever got to go there.

When I entered the Temple, there were blind and lame beggars sitting outside. If they tried to enter the Temple they were shooed outside again. That was their designated place. Was their role only to receive handouts from others? Or did they have spiritual needs which might be met by entering the Temple? Did the guardians of the Temple ever consider that? Did they even care? They seemed to be most interested in the wealthy people who were able to put silver, or even gold, into the donation boxes. Why would they want to let the beggars come in?

We often judge the tax collectors and the Pharisees and Sadducees harshly, seeing them as oppressors of the common people. But if we look more closely, from their points of view, we see that there were ample reasons for them to behave in the ways they did. It is my experience that this is true of anyone we jump to blame or condemn. Jesus is reported to have said to those who would stone an alleged adulteress, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." We need to look at our own behavior as well as the circumstances surrounding the alleged perpetrator. When we are willing to walk a mile in another person's moccasins, it allows us to truly understand that person. Even then, we might not fully understand, but we will at least have *more* understanding, and be less ready to jump to judgment.

We have considered many points of view in the story of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. One other viewpoint I would like us to consider is that of Jesus himself. Jesus seemed to be aware of what his triumphal entry into Jerusalem would mean. According to the Gospel, he knew exactly where the donkey and colt would be for him to ride. I don't think he was surprised by the crowds which greeted him with enthusiasm. He doesn't seem to have been surprised by the reaction of those in power in Jerusalem either. But he didn't let that awareness prevent him from doing what he needed to do. While he might have experienced some foreboding and trepidation, he didn't "walk on egg shells" in order to be accepted. In fact, he went ahead and healed those who needed healing, even though he

knew it would get him in trouble with the "authorities". He did so, because that was part of his mission, and he was being true to himself and his God. His work was to heal and give sight. It was not to discriminate against the poor and the infirm, but if anything, to show a preference for them.

Also, in the scene in the Temple in which Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers and the benches holding the doves, he displayed what can be called "righteous anger". Again, he was being true to himself and to his mission, continuing to teach about the importance of the sacred in our lives. It seems to me that he was acting angry, like an actor playing a certain role that is called for, rather than letting that anger disturb his inner peace.

Righteous anger, or righteous indignation, is something that seems to be shared by many great spiritual teachers who have lived in this world. Teachers who have espoused nonviolence, such as Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr, and the Dalai Lama, have all worked not only for personal peace, but also for social justice in the world. Although not of this world, and not affected by the world, their mission has been *in* this world. They have taught that it is not enough to find personal peace through prayer and meditation, but that one also has to bring that peace into the world. They have taught that we need to work to change the very structures of society in order to promote justice and advance peace.

So, what are we called to do as Unitarian Universalists who are living in this world today?

- * This is a time for *righteous anger, or righteous indignation*, in which we identify and overturn the structures of injustice which permeate our society.

- * This is a time to build a Beloved Community, in which all are respected as brothers and sisters.

- * This is a time to recognize that we are all connected on a fragile web of life, and to actively work to protect our beautiful planet earth.

I recently received a pastoral letter from Rev. William G. Sinkford, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, to mark the spring religious holidays. In it, he addresses the complicated times in which we live, marked by both fear and hope. I would like to close with some of Rev. Sinkford's words:

"I believe we are living in a Kairos moment. Kairos is the term used by the ancient Greeks to describe a critical moment, an opportunity for change. It is an opening in the ordinary stream of events when anything becomes possible." "In this Kairos moment, we know that the old ways will not carry us into the future. We know that the politics of divisiveness, the politics of horse trading, the politics of name calling- in other words, politics as usual- can't save us in these unusual times."

Sinkford suggests that "as religious people, our job- our calling- is to challenge the possible, to hold up a vision of the Beloved Community, to help stretch the public imagination of what can be...By envisioning new possibilities and urging our leaders to reach further and dare more, religious people can spur history. If we do our job, then when the line of compromise is drawn, as it inevitably will be, it will fall closer to the ideal."

Sinkford suggests that as one people, we can be reconciled to one another: "The beloved community requires hard work, patience, and making room at our table for everyone. Can we do it? In the words of our hard-working sisters and brothers, "Si, se puede!" "Yes, we can!"

May it be so.