

FOOLS RUSH IN
LAKEHEAD UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP
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Reading: Mark 11: 1-10 (NRSV)

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it.

If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."

They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?"

They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna!"

And so the story goes...many of us have heard it many times...perhaps without much consideration or reflection. Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem for what will be the final week of his life. Along the way he is showered with palm branches in both obeisance and celebration. As the story evolved in Christianity, Jesus is seen as the consummate hero...the savior of the people...hailed as the Son of God and the King of the Jews. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

We Unitarian Universalists have a long history of embracing Jesus, not as the Son of God, but as a human being, albeit a particularly enlightened one. A statement prepared in 1887 for the Unitarian Western Conference entitled "The Things Most Commonly Believed Among Us" contained these words: "We revere Jesus and all holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion." Using this perspective, we might see our

“lord” as that which teaches us in the way of truth, righteousness and love...that which we honour. Seen that way, the chant purportedly spoken by those welcoming Jesus at the entrance to Jerusalem are words that we can also speak...Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is that which leads us to justice and peace and healing.

For many Unitarian Universalists, Jesus is a great exemplar of the divinity that lies within each of us. Looking at our list of sources for religious authority, (and hopefully our visitors received a little card at the door this morning that lists our principles and sources) ...looking at those sources, Jesus would be included in at least two them...as central to Christian teachings and as a prophetic man whose words and deeds challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. How can the Palm Sunday story act as a source in our religious exploration? In what way can this story challenge us?

I ask you to suspend your concern about whether this is a true story or not; we're not going to be able to answer that question today. Let's simply look at it and see what it might teach us. You heard me suggest to the children earlier that they might try to identify with the pig who wouldn't go¹. This is a powerful way to work with stories...to look at them from the point of view of different characters in them. We might learn a lot by trying to imagine being one of the bystanders who joined in the laying down of palm branches, or one of the disciples that is asked to go and 'borrow' a donkey, or one of the soldiers presumably standing at the gates to the city, or even the workers, untold in this story, who had to cut all the palm branches. Today we're going to look at what it might be like to be Jesus as he made this journey...a journey that required a lot of courage.

This journey required a lot of courage because, as the story is often told, Jesus knew what was coming for him...he knew he would have to drink that bitter cup...he knew that he was going to have to die. According to the Gospels, he had foretold his death three times to his disciples.

So if he knew that he was going to be killed, why take this journey at all? Seems rather foolish, doesn't it? Well, it's possible that Jesus, as a practicing Jew, was simply going to the Temple in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. He had to know, however, that his very presence

¹ Aunt Pitty Patty's Piggy is the story of a pig who won't go through a gate and the little girl who asks others to help her get the pig to go through.

was 'stirring up the people' and that the Romans were not happy with this. So, even making the choice to practice his religion was a visible act that put him in danger. But whether he went with full knowledge of his impending crucifixion, or whether he went to partake in Passover, either way, he made a choice to place his personal safety in jeopardy in order to share his message and to publicly claim his religion.

What led him to do this? How had his life prepared him for this? Shaye I.D. Cohen, professor of Judaic Studies at Brown University gives the following description:

"From a strictly historical perspective, we don't really know all that much about the ministry of Jesus. It might have been very brief, depending on which gospel you read, it might have been as short as only a few months or as long as three years. ... Jesus seems to have started preaching in the Galilee. He's associated with cities, smallish cities like Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, market towns, fishing centers and so on... he deals with some farmers and some city folks....

His public ministry seems to have focused especially around the working of miracles, casting out demons, healing people...He travels around some but mostly in the Galilee. And, at least in Mark's gospel, he never even thinks of going to Jerusalem until the very last week of his life. ... In the final analysis, we don't know much about the life of Jesus: We know he was a public figure, we know he gathered some kind of a following, we know he eventually went to Jerusalem and there he was arrested and executed. The rest of the story is filled by the gospels by talking about his life as a significant life. But the minimalist perspective of the historian has to say, it's a life that we don't know in detail until his death."

It's a life we don't know until his death. It's a life that may not have been significant at all if he hadn't risked it. The end of his life on earth is the focus of the whole story; in fact, the happenings of the one week leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection comprise about 1/3 of all of the Gospel put together. This is not particularly helpful in trying to understand what led up to the Palm Sunday event. So let's start with what we do know. Jesus was a public figure who was known as a miracle worker and who gathered some kind of a following. We know he had a radical message to share. We also know that this was a time of great unrest in that part of the world...the Roman empire had moved in and was becoming increasingly less tolerant of the practices and customs of the Jewish people. Jewish leadership was struggling to hold the community together in whatever way they could, which primarily meant maintaining

tradition and staying as low profile as possible. Jesus was a rabble-rouser... creating excitement in the people that undermined the agendas of both the Jewish leadership and the Romans.

But Jesus had a vision that stirred within him and moved him. He preached, he taught, he did good deeds, miracles even, and spoke to what he saw as the truth. He did all of this in order to bring the "Kingdom of God" into being. This was his vision and his truth. This was what touched his heart and moved him to speak and act.

For Jesus, the "Kingdom of God" was a very real possibility...something that could come to fruition here on earth. It meant the presence of love and right relations. It was justice and peace. It was a world that operated on the principle of 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' And, he was able to articulate and share this vision in a way that was life-changing for those with whom he came into contact. Indeed, his insistence on telling his truth changed the course of history.

As many of you know, last week I was in Chicago where I had the opportunity to sit with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee as they interviewed potential candidates for the Unitarian Universalist ministry. It was a powerful experience for me, one that renewed my commitment to my ministry...it reminded me why I chose this path. One of the candidates told a story that I'd like to share with you. He was asked, as part of the anti-racism, anti-oppression part of the interview, how he understood wholeness in the context of the Unitarian Universalist Association's anti-racism program called *Journey Toward Wholeness*. The candidate paused for a moment and then spoke. "Imagine," he said, "that wholeness is a stunningly beautiful stained glass window... one of many colors and shapes that represents the rich diversity of creation existing in beautiful harmony ... one that refracts the light in such a way that standing before it one is transfixed...one that shines a light of understanding on the interconnectedness of all things. Then," he went on, "imagine that this window is shattered and that shards of glass are scattered all over the world...and that, as we walk through this world we occasionally find pieces within ourselves, or we pick up pieces, and they compel us to work on putting that window back together. That would be wholeness," he said. "Wholeness would be being able to join all of the pieces together again."

Isn't this a beautiful picture of the Kingdom of God? We find bits of it, pieces of the truth, glimpses of wholeness and justice. Admittedly, it takes a bit of courage just to hold onto the little shards we find. In and of themselves they are dangerous because they call us toward radical action...each bit creates in us an urging to put it all together. That search for truth and meaning requires focus, and implementation!, that distracts us from the usual business of our lives. So sometimes, we see a piece of glass on the path and we walk right on past, because we're too busy, because we're too scared, or because, as was true for Jesus, we'd just as soon let that cup pass.

But here's the trouble with that. The picture that is the Kingdom of God can never be complete unless we all participate. We need each other in order to do this... we need what others have found in order to make the whole complete. Again, like the children's story today, it takes a whole lot of diverse participation to help us to move through that gate. This, to me, is the beauty and blessing of a religious community. It requires us to do the work of finding our piece of the truth and then to check it out with others in order to see how it fits together. We offer what we have found, and others offer the same to us. We turn our pieces this way and that, putting together a picture of wholeness and justice.

So here's the premise of my talk this morning...each of us carries this divinity in us, this shard of truth. But it is not enough just to carry it. There is an action required of us...an entry into Jerusalem, so to speak. There are times in life that are ripe for such an entry,² and only you can know when the time is right. Remember that Jesus was around for around thirty years before we know much of anything about his life. But once he entered his public 'ministry,' things were set into motion...a momentum that couldn't be stopped. Just so, for each of us there comes a moment (actually many moments) when we have to make a decision... are we going to speak out and do the right thing, or are we going to remain quiet and safe? Are we going to follow our hearts and step off the comfortable path, or are we going to ignore that voice, in favour of not upsetting the status quo? Will we contribute our truth, our vision, and our very existence to the possibility of life and life ever more abundant, even if it means that we must move out of our comfort zone?

² Jane Rzepka, <http://clf.uua.org/quest/2003-04.html>
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The first thing that most everyone who comes into contact with Unitarian Universalism notices is the freedom of this faith. It is often said that Unitarians can believe whatever they want. I find this to be a phrase, as my mom used to say, that has the emphasis on the wrong syllable. Yes, we are free to find our own truths, it doesn't stop there. We are impelled to believe what we must believe based on our experience of the world and our relationship with our god, our higher power, our inner knowing. In this way, we are fools for hope, fools for possibility, fools for the journey. The Unitarian Universalist journey requires us to respond to our personal beliefs with behaviours and words and actions that are sometimes radical and heretical...publicly showing who we are to the world. This may be a path of freedom, but it is no easy road. To freely choose to stand up for what one believes, without regard for personal consequences, could be likened to that difficult entrance into Jerusalem.

We have been talking at Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship this year about what it is that we Unitarian Universalists stand upon. What pieces of truth have we found and held up to the light and tested in community? What have we learned through experience to be the 'bottom lines' of our faith...places where we are willing to go the hard road? I'd like to share with you a short list of things upon which we stand, most of it created by the Rev. Jane Rzepka of the Church of the Larger Fellowship.³ Here's what she has to say about Unitarian Universalists:

- If we believe in a god at all, we believe in a benevolent god, not a frightening or punishing one, or one who intervenes in human affairs.
- We believe in the humanity of Jesus, who we view as a wise and wonderful teacher.
- We reject the doctrine of innate depravity. We carry the theology of potential goodness with us on our journey.
- We believe in free will, not predestination. We have the power to act in the world.
- We believe in the freedom of conscience as the ultimate locus of religious authority, and that creeds do not serve us well.

³ Ibid.

- We believe that being part of an inclusive and covenantal religious community is vitally important to the formation of the healthy religious self.
- And, we believe that living our principles makes a difference.

I know that this list is incomplete...in part because you have not added your own truths to it. But it's a start. It's a start on the path of understanding the journey of a Unitarian Universalist.

You gotta be something of a fool to be a Unitarian Universalist. As the saying goes, fools rush in where angels fear to tread. This is a rocky and sometimes dangerous road. But if you know that song,⁴ made famous by Frank Sinatra, fools rush in because they know that without entering into it, a person cannot know the fullness of love and life. Fools rush in because, in spite of danger, entering into it fully offers the only chance for actualizing the Kingdom of God.

As you take the next steps in your spiritual journey, sometimes making difficult and risky choices, know that many have gone before you. Know that in honour and celebration of your journey, palm branches are laid before you. May you, may I, may we, at least once in a while, be the fool who chooses the path where angels fear to tread. Blessed is the one who walks in the name of truth, and righteousness, and love.

Amen.

⁴ Written by Johnny Mercer and Rube Bloom
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