

A Faith to Live For
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Readings

Matthew 21:1-11 (translated by Eugene Peterson):

When they neared Jerusalem, having arrived at Bethphage on Mount Olives, Jesus sent two disciples with these instructions: "Go over to the village across from you. You'll find a donkey tethered there, her colt with her. Untie her and bring them to me. If anyone asks what you're doing, say, 'The Master needs them!' He will send them with you." This is the full story of what was sketched earlier by the prophet:

Tell Zion's daughter,
"Look, your king's on his way,
poised and ready, mounted
On a donkey, on a colt,
foal of a pack animal."

The disciples went and did exactly what Jesus told them to do. They led the donkey and colt out, laid some of their clothes on them, and Jesus mounted. Nearly all the people in the crowd threw their garments down on the road, giving him a royal welcome. Others cut branches from the trees and threw them down as a welcome mat. Crowds went ahead and crowds followed, all of them calling out, "Hosanna to David's son!" "Blessed is he who comes in God's name!" "Hosanna in highest heaven!" As he made his entrance into Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. Unnerved, people were asking, "What's going on here? Who is this?" The parade crowd answered, "This is the prophet Jesus, the one from Nazareth in Galilee."

"Stand By This Faith" by Rev. Olympia Brown

Our second reading is by the 19th century Universalist minister, Rev. Olympia Brown, who for a period of time served a Universalist church in Weymouth, Massachusetts:

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest of ideals, which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty, and made the world beautiful.

Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost.

Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves.

Sermon

All too easy to hear once again the gospel passages describing what Christians mark as Palm Sunday, and then recall further the events of Holy Week, from Jesus' overturning the tables of the money changers at the Temple to what came to be known as the Last Supper, then his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and, we are told, resurrection... as if we really know what actually may have happened.

It is, to be sure, a powerful story – whether history or myth or some mix of the two.

But perhaps it might be even more powerful, or at least a little fresher, if we take time to re-tell some of it, putting aside the Biblical language we've heard so often.

So, first bring to mind as best you can the landscape of Israel/Palestine as it was two thousand years ago: farms and villages and only the occasional larger settlement, the walled city of Jerusalem more or less at the center. And Jesus's home territory of Nazareth near the Sea of Galilee, now an easy morning's drive from Jerusalem, then a much longer journey on foot.

Jesus himself a young man who had become fired with a passion for social justice, who, famously or infamously, depending on one's perspective, hung out with ordinary folks, with the poor, with outcasts of one sort or another – tax collectors, prostitutes.

And by all the accounts that have come to us apparently gifted with a healing presence, such that we are told that one woman believed she would only have to touch the hem of his garment to be healed.

Further, a charismatic teacher and speaker, attracting crowds wherever he went, using the stories we now call parables as a way to awaken listeners through original metaphor or surprising twists: the despised Samaritan was the good neighbor? the father welcomed home with a lavish party the worthless son who had squandered his inheritance through high living? the worker who only worked the last couple of hours of the day but got paid the same as those who had worked all day long?

Now, Jesus was apparently not the only wandering healer and storyteller of his time and place, but he became well known enough to attract the attention of the powers that be, and he challenged those powers enough – calls for social justice, healing on the Sabbath... - to have put himself in danger.

Which he would have known.

But did he seek death? Was he *seeking* to be crucified, seeking to be a martyr, and somehow mystically knew that as the Son of God he would magically come back to life, resurrected to something called life eternal?

I don't believe so. Instead, I believe he was simply and powerfully striving to live his faith, and by extension to offer this faith to others through his example and his teaching.

And what was this faith of his?

It was the faith of his ancestors, the faith named in Hebrew scripture and named again by Jesus as love and care for neighbor, where neighbor is... well... because all are,

according to this faith, made in God's image... everyone: certainly those Jesus called (in the spirit of the Hebrew prophets before him) "the least of these," the poor, the imprisoned, the sick... and extended by Jesus to love even for enemies, all in the spirit of the simple prayer Jesus taught, that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven – to my mind metaphor for our highest aspirations and noblest ideals.

One further critically important note: Jesus lived his faith one person at a time. It's all there in the gospel accounts. He healed one person at a time. He encountered one person at a time. He loved, you might say, one person at a time.

Franciscan teacher Fr. Richard Rohr recently quoted the poet Christian Wiman in this regard: "If nature abhors a vacuum, Christ abhors a vagueness. If God is love, Christ is love for this one person, this one place, this one time-bound and time-ravaged self."

So, yes, Jesus *taught* love for all as a general principle. But, I'll say it again, he *lived* love one at a time, healing one at a time, touching one at a time, wherever he encountered someone in the need of love (and that would include, I guess, well, everyone). And as if to reinforce this he taught – as Dave Egan reminded me in conversation this week – in the open air, not in the synagogue separated from the messiness of daily life, but wandering among ordinary folks, talking to whomever would listen, healing anyone in need.

And I'll say this again, too, that though Jesus must have realized his teachings and behavior were provoking to the religious and political authorities, thereby putting his life in danger, I do not believe he sought crucifixion and martyrdom. I prefer to imagine that he would have preferred, like the Buddha for example, to continue to preach, teach, and heal throughout a long lifetime.

Now, in case stories of this teacher from so long ago still feel somehow far removed, think closer to home.

On April 4 we will mark the 50th anniversary of the murder of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr..

King, like Jesus, may have seemed to predict his own death in words spoken during the days and weeks before his assassination, saying that he might not live a long life, saying that though he had seen the promised land, he might not cross over to it, even though others would.

But these were, I believe, not the words of someone who could see into the future. Rather, King's words, like the words of Jesus, simply named a realistic assessment of the dangers he faced. Dangers he faced as a black man in the 1960s speaking truth to power, dangers he faced when he led marches in the heart of the old Confederacy of the segregated south, dangers he faced when he marched through segregated Chicago in the north, and when he marched with sanitation workers in Memphis.

After all, it was only four years earlier that three civil rights workers were murdered in Mississippi, only a year before that that four African American girls were slain in a cowardly church bombing in Birmingham. These only a few of the many beatings, bombings, and killings of that era (still all too frequent today).

So, yes, King was just being realistic, knowing that as a black man in America in the 1960s it was not safe to be saying what he was saying and doing what he was doing – this living his faith in that time and place, a faith like the faith of Jesus, rooted in love.

As the Baptist preacher Dr. King expressed this same faith:

“Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that.”

“Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

“Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”

So, no, King neither predicted nor sought his early death. He simply knew that his message and example of bringing his faith, his love, universal love, to the streets of a segregated south and racist nation made him a marked man in the eyes of all too many, as Jesus had been a marked man in his time and place.

And one more thought about Jesus. It is not incidental in this story of the Jewish prophet named Jesus that the events of what we now call Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Easter, took place at the time of the celebration of Passover. For Passover, too, is another example of people living their faith, a whole people living their faith through their dangerous journey from Egypt towards the promised land of Israel. The Hebrew people too had to know they were putting their lives in danger, but they too did not seek death. Quite the contrary, they were seeking a fuller life, a life of freedom in a “land of milk and honey,” a land in which, as the Hebrew prophet Amos was later to say and Martin Luther King would often repeat, justice would roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Okay then. What about us? Unitarian Universalists, Americans living on the South Shore of Massachusetts in these times, fifty years after the death of Martin Luther King, about two thousand years after the life and death of Jesus, yet more centuries after the prophet Amos, and further still from the time of the Exodus?

What about us?

My personal faith is that seeking to bring love into every encounter, every relationship, every situation, is the only way to live. Not a weak, sentimental love, but a love grounded in compassion, grounded in a realization that we are all in King’s words “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

Further, for me, our Unitarian Universalist faith as expressed in our generation through our seven Principles, offers a beautiful framework for this personal faith.

One of my UU colleagues in ministry describes himself as a first and seventh Principle Unitarian Universalist. This works well for me, too, for it seems to me that the first and seventh UU principles more or less imply the other five.

We begin by affirming, in our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person (do you hear an echo here of the earlier reminder that Jesus healed and loved one person at a time?); and then we conclude by affirming, in our seventh principle, our place in the interdependent web of existence. Traditional Christian language would name this the Kingdom of Heaven; Hindus and Buddhists might name it the jeweled net of Indra, each jewel at the intersection of strands of the net reflecting all

the others. I sometimes think of it as suggesting that we are each individual manifestations of one divine source.

But it's all, to my mind the same idea.

Then the other five principles? Affirming the importance of spiritual growth, the democratic process, seeking of justice and peace and world community, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning? All important to name, yet all embraced by and implied by the inherent worth and dignity of each person within this interdependent web of life we share.

All of this, by whatever name, within whatever tradition, from Christian and Buddhist, Jewish and Muslim, to Unitarian Universalist, humanist.... faith to live by, faith that calls us to a way of *being*, faith that calls us to a way of *doing* – one thing at a time, doing what we can where we are with what we've got, with the unique gifts that are ours.

And so... faith...

Manifest in a call or casserole to a friend in trouble or grieving a loss, one friend at a time.

Manifest in a helping hand, kind word, gentle touch.

Faith manifest in our outreach offering today to buy a new freezer to enable Wellspring to continue to offer a hand up one person at a time.

Manifest in one email or letter at a time on behalf of one issue at a time, whatever touches our heart, awakens our compassion... whether an issue of social justice, climate justice, peace.

Faith manifest this very weekend in all those, especially the young, but all ages, including many Old Shippers (we are so proud of them!) and many more Unitarian Universalists, and thousands of others of all traditions and beliefs, who marched yesterday to end gun violence, marched for sane gun legislation, marched for our lives, all lives, marched for love, that name for faith shared across all outward differences.

Faith manifest across time, bridging differences in tradition, culture, time and place... faith to *live* for.

So it is. So may it be.