

"A Good Story,"
a sermon preached by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist
on Palm Sunday, April 1, 2007

The reading is the poem "What Jesus Runs Away From," by Jalal al-Din Rumi:

The son of Mary, Jesus, hurries up a slope
as though a wild animal were chasing him.
Someone following him asks, "Where are you going?
No one is after you." Jesus keeps on,
saying nothing, across two more fields. "Are you
the one who says words over a dead person,
so that he wakes up?" "I am." "Did you not make
the clay birds fly?" "Yes." "Who then
could possibly cause you to run like this?"
Jesus slows his pace.

"I say the Great Name over the deaf and the blind,
they are healed. Over a stony mountainside,
and it tears its mantle down to the navel.
Over non-existence, it comes into existence.
But when I speak lovingly for hours, for days,
with those who take human warmth
and mock it, when I say the Name to them, nothing
happens. They remain rock, or turn to sand,
where no plants can grow. Other diseases are ways
for mercy to enter, but this non-responding
breeds violence and coldness toward God.
I am fleeing from that.

"As little by little air steals water, so praise
dries up and evaporates with foolish people
who refuse to change Like cold stone you sit on
a cynic steals body heat. He doesn't actually feel
the sun." Jesus wasn't running from actual people.
He was teaching in a new way.¹

Sometimes people ask, "is "Unitarian Universalism a Christian church?" I'm sure
some of you would answer empathically, "no!" Others, perhaps, would say "yes." I'd say,
"it depends." It depends on how you understand that word Christian. We come from the

¹ Translation by Coleman Barks from "The Essential Rumi," HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.

liberal Christian tradition. That is our history and our heritage. It's part of our DNA. But because we have been unwilling to exclude people, because we do not say there is only one way, we have moved fairly far from our Christian roots, often with good reason. Some say we are now more than Christian. I chose UUism rather than a more traditional expression of Christianity precisely because I wanted to be part of a faith that was intentionally diverse, I believe there is value and depth in the Jesus story, and I believe we would strengthen our faith, both individually and as a denomination, if we renewed our connection to our Jewish and Christian roots.

The mystic Rumi says Jesus was teaching in a new way. And that's what caused problems for him with the authorities, and that's what got him killed at the end of the week the church calls Holy Week, the week that begins today with Palm Sunday.

I am often troubled and dismayed by what gets done in Jesus' name, by how Christian churches have misused the Bible to oppress and dominate others, by how "accepting Jesus" has come to mean worrying only about your own self and your salvation.

I've come to call myself a Christian, but I'd probably prefer to be called one who tries to follow Jesus. And I have no illusion that trying to follow this Jewish prophet is going to be easy. But I find myself nurtured by this tradition—it's the one I grew up in, and the stories in the Jewish and Christian scriptures nourish and inspire me. And I love the seasons of the church year—I especially like the waiting and watching of Advent in preparation for Christmas.

But the Jesus who inspires me also troubles me, because he asks us to do things like love our enemies, and speak truth to power. If you take his message seriously, then this week is a tough one, because the events of holy week show what happens to people like Jesus. The story of his entry into Jerusalem is the culmination of his itinerant ministry, of the time he spent out in the country teaching and healing and connecting with the common people. Throughout the story, those follow Jesus are attracted by his charisma and his power. They come to believe he is the Messiah, the awaited, hoped for king who would restore Israel to the prominence it had when King David ruled. Messiah and Christ are Hebrew and Greek words for the same thing—they are titles, they mean, 'anointed one,' or 'the one we've been waiting for,' they don't

mean the messiah is divine, in the way we understand it. That's an understanding of Jesus that developed later. As I said to the children last week, Christ is not Jesus' last name.

A theme in the gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel, is that the disciples often misunderstand who Jesus is. Before they reach Jerusalem he told them that this was not going to end well, that he was not going to be the kind of king they expected or hoped for. There was going to be a cost to pay.

I was talking about this yesterday at home, and my daughter asked, "What is Palm Sunday about anyway?" And I said, the traditional description is "Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem." And my wife piped up, "And it was all downhill from there. Talk about a crappy week." ☺

Think about it--what kind of king rides into town triumphantly on a donkey? Coming into Jerusalem that way was more like street theater. Jesus certainly knew the words from the prophet Zechariah, who said, "Rejoice . . . O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). Jesus doing this was a way of getting the attention of the crowd and thumbing his nose at the religious authorities of the day,² many of whom were more interested in cozying up to the political powers and protecting their own privilege than in heeding their tradition's call for justice and mercy.

Even though I've come to call myself Christian, There is plenty I disagree with in much of contemporary Christianity. This is true for most all UUs who are Christian, and there are plenty of progressive Christians like us in other denominations too—people who take seriously Jesus' call to love and to justice.

One of the biggest problems I have with mainstream Christianity has to do with interpreting the events of this week. I've never really understood why the day that Jesus is killed gets called Good Friday. It doesn't make sense. The powers that be kill a prophet and we call it good? Jesus' death presented a problem for the early Christians. The messiah was supposed to be powerful; not one executed as a criminal.

So, much of Christianity now says this was all part of God's plan. That Jesus was killed, that Good Friday is good because Jesus needed to die to pay for human

² See the commentary by Jirair Tashjian at www.cresourcei.org/lectionary/YearC/Clent6nt.html

sinfulness. That his death somehow saves us. This belief is called substitutionary atonement. And it has never made sense to me at all. It was unknown to the early Christians, and only entered Christian theology in the 12th century, when St. Anselm articulated what has come to be known as atonement theology. Anselm believed that human sinfulness had so offended God, things were so bad, that God required what Anselm called an “infinite satisfaction” to set things right. Jesus’ death on the cross was payment, ransom, for the sins of the world.³

Around the same time, another theologian, Peter Abelard, had a different view. He saw Jesus’ death not a payment for sin, but as an act of love. But Anselm’s view prevailed. And since then the church has tended to place a high value on obedience and suffering, and has often paid more attention to Jesus’ death than to his life.

What kind of God would require that kind of sacrifice? Not any God I believe in. My teacher Carter Heyward says, “The only theology worth doing is that which inspires and transforms lives.” We have a responsibility to develop a life-affirming theology. That is what Jesus was trying to do two thousand years ago—inspire and transform lives. It’s not his fault that humans have so often misinterpreted his message and twisted it for their own ends.

Jesus never wrote down his beliefs or developed his theology. We only have stories that people told about him. The stories of Holy Week are not easy ones to hear, but this week, I will spend time reading the last few chapters of the Gospel of Mark, and meditating on them. It will be part of my spiritual practice, trying to walk through this week with Jesus and his friends, as they face the end of their time together.

Some of you might resist this. You might say, “This is a terrible story, and I know how it ends. Why would I want to hear a story of betrayal, suffering and death?” It’s a fair question. And I can find myself resisting this story too. But spiritual practice is not always comfortable.

³ See Heidi Schlumpf’s essay, “For Us and For Our Salvation?” at www.uscatholic.org/2005/03/cov0503.htm.

As I meditate on this story, I'll wonder, "How would I act in this situation?" I'll try to imagine myself in the story. If being associated with Jesus was going to get me in trouble, would I be inclined to turn him over to the authorities, as Judas did? Or deny I even knew him, as Peter did?

When Jesus was facing his fears in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he said to Peter and James and John, "sit here while I pray," and then, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake," do you remember what the disciples do? They fall asleep.

Have you ever had to sit through the night with a sick child, or with someone who was dying? Have you ever had to be present to something you would rather run away from? It can be hard to stay awake at times like this. The temptation is to check out, to turn away.

Listen to what Rabbi Sandy Sasso says about the Exodus story: "What happened once upon a time happens all the time." This is true for the Jesus story too, and that's why I'll be meditating on it this week. Because I can learn from this story, because it can change my heart. If you would like to join me, let me know, and I get you copies of the text.

In our own lives we have moments when we feel abandoned, when we are tempted to run away, or to betray another in order to protect our own interests. We live in a world in which death and disease, tragedy and disappointment come to all of us. It's an old story. And it's not the whole story--there is also a story of hope, of redemption, a story that affirms life even in the midst of death. But for that you'll have to come back next week.

The story of holy week is not an easy story. It calls us to confront our own hard-heartedness, our own fears, our own complicity with powers that oppress and destroy. But it is a good story. It calls us to open our hearts to the mystery of life, to realize that it is often in what appears to be the most difficult of times that we discover who we are and what we are made of; we sense that we are not alone, we find the strength and courage to open our hearts and become more fully human.

Rumi says Jesus was teaching in a new way, calling us to have hearts of flesh rather than hearts of stone.

I don't care if you call yourself a Christian or a Buddhist, an atheist or an agnostic. I do care about what kind of heart you have. I do care what kind of people we are becoming. Do you have an open heart, or has pain and disappointment and fear caused you to close it off? Are you open to being moved, to being changed, to being transformed?

We will probably not be required to make the kind of life and death choices the holy week story describes. But we will be called, again and again, to choose where we will stand, and with whom; to decide how we will act when we know there is a cost to be paid.

My prayer this week is for courage, for the kind of courage that, in tough times, assures me that I am not alone, that gives me strength to have an open and loving heart. I pray this for myself, and, of course, I pray it for you.

Amen.