

A Palm Sunday Peace Parade

And a Personal Pilgrimage

Luke 19:41-44; 23:32-34, 46

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Prepared Text of Sermon

It was last fall when I received a call from Jan Weren inviting me to preach here at Unity Church on the Lakeshore. She was lining up Sunday speakers for the first quarter of 2010 and, having just begun, I had the whole period from which to choose a Sunday. I chose the last Sunday of the quarter, not to put it off as far as possible but, rather, because I saw that March 28, today, was Palm Sunday and Palm Sunday is my favorite Sunday to preach.

I've come to recognize that in retrospect – one of the luxuries of retirement, which for me was June, 2004, is that one can reflect on the way one has come. I have been aware of my being gripped year after year by the Palm Sunday arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem. Luke narrates much of his story of Jesus as a journey to Jerusalem. In 9:51 we read that Jesus set his face as a flint to go to Jerusalem. And it is particularly Luke's account that moves me. Matthew, following Mark, makes it the triumphal entry of the king with tinges of nationalism which would be perceived as a threat to peace and order – and indeed there were many who would have loved it to be so. But Luke and John are clear – this is no display of nationalistic fervor – this is a Peace Parade. Not a war-horse but a donkey, an animal bespeaking humility. Not a military band but the voices of children.

And Luke's portrayal of Jesus on the crest of the Mount of Olives, surveying the city and weeping, moves me greatly. Luke's portrait of Jesus was written over a half century after the events. By the time he wrote, the Temple at Jerusalem was an ash heap and the city no longer the center of Jewish faith nor of the Jewish Jesus movement.

Thus, the words he puts in Jesus' mouth as he overlooks the city from the Mount of Olives are not prediction but description of the actual situation when Luke wrote. But the core of Luke's story, as well as that of the other Gospels, is most certainly true; Jesus came to Jerusalem. In the Synoptics he came only once; in John, three times. In any case, Luke, after the birth narratives, the Galilean ministry, puts Jesus on the way to Jerusalem (9:51). The crisis will build until it spills over in his tears; he weeps for the City. He needed not to be a predictor of

future events; any sensitive, insightful person might have known catastrophe was around the corner. In spite of his sense of the inevitable disaster, he entered the City and went to the heart of the religious, spiritual life of his people – the Temple.

His coming was peaceful. Luke and John present it as such, using the images found in Zechariah 9:9-10 of humility, peacefulness, non-apocalyptic, non-political. Jesus acted out symbolically his non-violent protest – he negated the Temple and all it stood for. It had become a den of thieves. The politics of domination and the economics of injustice were all tied up with the Temple as symbolic center, and Jesus' symbolic action was the climax of his non-violent protest in the name of the God of justice.

It was a dangerous, subversive action, for it called in question the legitimacy of the whole structural, religious, political, economic life of the Jewish nation under Roman imperial domination. For this action he was executed as a threat to the safety of the State.

So, there Jesus is on the crest of Olivet overlooking the city – weeping, “O Jerusalem, if only you were able to recognize the things that make for peace ... but they are hid from your eyes. Devastation approaches, for your violence in response to Roman violence will bring on greater violence and you will finally be destroyed, the Temple a charred ruin.”

Going back over the last two decades of my ministry I discovered I had preached seventeen times on Palm Sunday and on seven of those seventeen I had used the passage from Luke. And even more significant for me, two of those seven were pivotal moments in my own understanding of Jesus, of the way of Jesus – indeed, of Christian faith itself. Two past Palm Sundays represent moments of epiphany, or perhaps more accurately, having experienced epiphanic moments as I wrestled with the message, I made, for me, fresh expression of the Gospel.

It was Palm Sunday, April 15, 1984, that I preached on the subject, “Jesus, You Are Really Something!” I remember it well; it was a moment of discovery. While studying in The Netherlands in the late 1960's I had purchased Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In the days of heavy theological reading, Bonhoeffer's little volume sustained me spiritually as he recorded his prison experience, which was the consequence of being a part of a group that sought to assassinate Hitler. Hitler ordered Bonhoeffer's death in May, 1945, as the U.S. forces were closing in on the prison camp in southern Germany.

On Palm Sunday, 1984, I confessed to my people a discovery – that the life of Bonhoeffer moved me more than the life of Jesus. This is what I said then:

Jesus has no doubt been the greatest inspirer of human faith and life in the whole of human history. I have been reflecting on why his life has not been

more powerful for me. I think I understand why Bonhoeffer moved me more – or so it seems. I think it is because Bonhoeffer was of our time. He seems more human – more one of us. He took on Hitler – not the Jewish High Priest or the Roman Emperor. He was a man – just a man. But Jesus was something else.

The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that the Church in her theological discussion has removed Jesus – the real, historical, human figure – from me. Yet the more I penetrate through the theological haze surrounding him, the more I see him for what he was, the more overwhelmed I am at the grandeur of his life, the more I am moved by his faith and commitment, the more I love him and want to be like him. It is a paradox; the more I see him in his full humanity, the more I am inclined to bow in worship before him....

Of course we cannot get back into the skin of those first Palm Sunday pilgrims. We cannot divest ourselves of centuries of theological discussion and church doctrine. Yet sometimes someone catches a glimmer of what it might have been like. For example, in the rock opera, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which some Christians picketed and of which many more disapproved, I personally think I see something of the power and the impact of that truly human existence. Mary Magdalene's solo has always struck me – even moved me. Listen to the words:

I don't know how to love him, what to do – how to move him.
I've been changed – yes, really changed in these past few days
When I have seen myself.
I seem like someone else. I don't know how to take this.
I don't see why he moves me. He's a man. He's just a man.
I've had so many men before in many ways, he's just one more.
Should I bring him down? Should I scream and shout?
Should I speak of love, let my feelings out?
I never thought I'd come to this. What's it all about?
Don't you think it's rather funny I should be in this position?
I'm the one who has always been so calm, so cool, no lover's fool...
He scares me so. I never thought I'd come to this.
What's it all about?
Yet, if he said he loved me, I'd be lost, I'd be frightened.
I couldn't cope, I just couldn't cope. I'd turn my head,
I'd back away. I wouldn't want to know. He scares me so.
I want him so. I love him so.

Whether true to the real feelings of Mary Magdalene or not, something of the confusion, the adoration and yet the drawing back in wonder must have been true of Jesus' contemporaries. To meet him was to be changed by him. His power was not the power of coercion, but the power of grace;

not the overwhelming of pomp, but the weight of truth, of authenticity, of humility; it was the power of a person in whom God became transparent.

That was Palm Sunday, 1984. Something very deep was going on in my being – Jesus, the human being, and the way of Jesus as the way of non-violent resistance, the way of peace was gripping me. I knew well enough the history of those early centuries of the Christian era. I knew of the intertwining of the Constantinean establishment of the Church, emperors calling church councils, and elevation of the man Jesus to the supernatural status of Son of God, second member of the Trinity. Jesus' humanity was never denied. Indeed, in 451 C.E., the concise formula was rendered – Jesus, true God and true man. But I think my experience was not rare – the human Jesus got swallowed up by the Divine being. But for me, the man Jesus was emerging as the one I wanted to follow and in the ensuing decade became the one who more and more found expression in my preaching.

The second significant pivot point in my own understanding of Christian faith came to expression on Palm Sunday, 1993. Again from Luke 19, my sermon title was "Jesus Died Because of Our Sins, Not For Our Sins." This was a radical move because in making that claim, I was really denying the whole structure of atonement theology. In fact, I stood it on its head. I was beginning to see Jesus in the great tradition of Israel's prophets and thus his concern for the very real historical context of his life – Roman imperial domination with establishment Judaism's collaboration, oppressing the poor on the one hand and the revolutionary elements, the Zealots, plotting insurrection against Rome on the other. Jesus spoke truth to power. The common people heard him gladly. The authorities of religion and politics saw him as a threat to order – one that needed to be silenced. On that Palm Sunday, 1994, I said,

Two thousand years ago, Jesus said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem." Was not his point that there is only one way to deal with that which is so endemic to the human situation that spews violence and spawns response in violence? That is the way of sacrificial love – turning the other cheek; loving the enemy; embracing the one who spitefully uses me. Of course, you can't run a world that way. But my point is, you see, God's problem is not that God cannot forgive me. God's problem is that God doesn't seem to be able to *change* me. Jesus didn't die so that I could have the sentence removed and I could have a passport to heaven. I mean, wouldn't that be wonderful! I could say, "Yes, I believe. I'll take that ticket. Thank you very much," and remain unchanged. We have this neat theological system of Christian doctrine where the problem is our sin and the solution is Jesus' death. Sin is removed, guilt is removed, and there is openness to God.

Yet the world continues to be on the brink of exploding because in the human heart there is never any significant transformation. Not in my heart. And not in the hearts of the Muslim fanatics, and the Jewish

Orthodox, and the Christian fundamentalists. The problem is not that God can't forgive my sin. The problem is God can't break through to me. But, don't you see, the word *repentance* comes from the Greek word *metanoia*, which means to change one's thinking? The problem with the world is not that God can't forgive the world of sin. The problem is that the world's thinking will not change. We egg each other on, and we escalate the violence. We raise the stakes and nothing changes!

The die was cast; my focus had moved from Jesus as the Divine Interloper who came to be a sacrifice for the sin of the world to Jesus, the fully human being who came to challenge the human structures of domination, political, religious, social – the Jesus whose non-violent resistance spoke truth to power. One Lenten season I taught my people a mantra which occasionally is repeated to me:

He died the way he died because he lived the way he lived.

In the last decade of my ministry it was issues of social justice and peace that occupied me. Happenings in the nation, the political scene and international relations became the arenas in which I applied the way of Jesus as I understood it. I was greatly energized but, to be honest, I have often despaired, because it seems violence, conflict and war are ever present. And, to be honest, I have despaired of the imperial designs of our own nation.

There is a recent book by the journalist James Carroll whose title says it all – *The House of War – the Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power*. It is a history of the last seven decades, the history, thus, from the Second World War to the present. Generations of good and decent persons have led our nation, genuinely wanting peace, and we have carried a heavy burden of liberating people and ensuring peace.

But that is only one side of the story. James Carroll documents the disastrous rise of American power. Through historical circumstances we have evolved into a powerful nation with a military that has become the shaping force of American policy. We are a military state upon which depends our economy, our industry, even our great research universities.

In Carroll's telling of the history through which I've lived, it is clear that, had our leaders the mind of Jesus, there would have been no Cold War with Russia and again, had the Way of Jesus informed our leadership following the end of the Cold War, there would be no problem of nuclear proliferation today. Thank God our nation and Russia have just agreed on a significant reduction of nuclear arms. But they could have been banished at the Cold War's end.

Lest I leave you in too dark a mood on this Palm Sunday, let me speak of a relatively new understanding of our human nature and the whole cosmic dance into which our lives are caught up.

Did you watch the recent Winter Olympics in Vancouver? If you did, is there one moment in particular that stands out for you? For me it was the moment when Joannie Brochere, the Canadian figure skater, finished her first program – a brilliant performance and, at its completion, burst into tears. Her parents had come to Vancouver to support her bid for an Olympic medal. A day after arriving, her mother died of a heart attack. It was decided Joannie would skate nevertheless. She did. She did it beautifully – for her mother – and then burst into tears. I think there was not a dry eye in the Olympic stadium nor anywhere in the world where people were watching. The TV commentator Scott Hamilton’s voice cracked with emotion. In those moments the world was one, united in empathic embrace of that young woman.

I use that phrase “empathic embrace” because at the time of this event I was reading a book by Jeremy Rifkin entitled *The Empathic Civilization*, (Penguin Group, 2009). He opens chapter one with an account of December 24, 1914, in Flanders, Belgium:

“The evening of December 24, 1914, Flanders. The first world war in history was entering into its fifth month. Millions of soldiers were bedded down in makeshift trenches latticed across the European countryside. In many places the opposing armies were dug in within thirty to fifty yards of each other and within shouting distance. The conditions were hellish. The bitter-cold winter air chilled to the bone. The trenches were waterlogged. Soldiers shared their quarters with rats and vermin. Lacking adequate latrines, the stench of human excrement was everywhere. The men slept upright to avoid the muck and sludge of their makeshift arrangements. Dead soldiers littered the no-man’s-land between opposing forces, the bodies left to rot and decompose within yards of their still-living comrades who were unable to collect them for burial.

As dusk fell over the battlefields, something extraordinary happened. The Germans began lighting candles on the thousands of small Christmas trees that had been sent to the front to lend some comfort to the men. The German soldiers then began to sing Christmas carols – first “Silent Night,” then a stream of other songs followed. The English soldiers were stunned. One soldier, gazing in disbelief at the enemy lines, said the blazed trenches looked “like the footlights of a theater.” The English soldiers responded with applause, at first tentatively, then with exuberance. They began to sing Christmas carols back to their German foes to equally robust applause.

A few men from both sides crawled out of their trenches and began to walk across the no-man’s-land toward each other. Soon hundreds followed. As word spread across the front, thousands of men poured out of their trenches. They shook hands, exchanged cigarettes and cakes and showed

photos of their families. They talked about where they hailed from, reminisced about Christmases past, and joked about the absurdity of war.

The next morning, as the Christmas sun rose over the battlefield of Europe, tens of thousands of men – some estimates put the number as high as 100,000 soldiers – talked quietly with one another. Enemies just twenty-four hours earlier, they found themselves helping each other bury their dead comrades. More than a few pickup soccer matches were reported. Even officers at the front participated, although when the news filtered back to the high command in the rear,, the generals took a less enthusiastic view of the affair. Worried that the truce might undermine military morale, the generals quickly took measures to rein in their troops.

The surreal “Christmas truce” ended as abruptly as it began – all in all, a small blip in a war that would end in November 1918 with 8.5 million military deaths in the greatest episode of human carnage in the annals of history until that time. For a few short hours, no more than a day, tens of thousands of human beings broke ranks, not only from their commands but from their allegiances to country, to show their common humanity. Thrown together to maim and kill, they courageously stepped outside of their institutional duties to commiserate with one another and to celebrate each other’s lives.

While the battlefield is supposed to be a place where heroism is measured in one’s willingness to kill and die for a noble cause that transcends one’s everyday life, these men chose a different type of courage. They reached out to each other’s very private suffering and sought solace in each other’s plight. Walking across no-man’s-land, they found themselves in one another. The strength to comfort each other flowed from a deep unspoken sense of their individual vulnerability and their unrequited desire for the companionship of their fellows.

It was, without reserve, a very human moment. Still, it was reported as a strange lapse at the time. A century later, we commemorate the episode as a nostalgic interlude in a world we have come to define in very different terms.”

But was it a lapse or was it an epiphany moment when what is deepest in our human nature came to expression in a most remarkable fashion?

“Yet what transpired in the battlefields of Flanders on Christmas Eve 1914 between tens of thousands of young men had nothing to do with original sin or productive labor. And the pleasure those men sought in each other’s company bore little resemblance to the superficial rendering of pleasure offered up by nineteenth-century utilitarians and even less to Freud’s

rather pathological account of a human race preoccupied by the erotic impulse.

The men at Flanders expressed a far deeper human sensibility – one that emanates from the very marrow of human existence and that transcends the portals of time and the exigencies of whatever contemporary orthodoxy happens to rule. We need only ask ourselves why we feel so heartened at what these men did. They chose to be human. And the central human quality they expressed was empathy for one another.”

Thus Rifkin begins an extensive portrayal of the empathetic core of human nature, the recognition of which is a relatively recent discovery and calls in question the traditional understanding of human nature. He points out that the official chroniclers of the human story – the historians – “have given short shrift to empathy as a driving force in the unfolding of human history. They write about social conflicts and wars, heroes and evil wrongdoers, technological progress and the exercise of power.” Only rarely is the other side of the human experience covered – the side that speaks of our deeply social nature and the evolution and extension of human affection. Rifkin continues:

History, on the other hand, is more often than not made by the disgruntled and discontented, the angry and rebellious – those interested in exercising authority and exploiting others and their victims, interested in righting wrongs and restoring justice. By this reckoning, much of the history that is written is about the pathology of power.

Perhaps that is why, when we come to think about human nature, we have such a bleak analysis. Our collective memory is measured in terms of crises and calamities, harrowing injustices, and terrifying episodes of brutality inflicted on each other and our fellow creatures. But if these were the defining elements of human experience, we would have perished as a species long ago.

All of which raises the question, “Why have we come to think of life in such dire terms?” The answer is that tales of misdeeds and woe surprise us. They are unexpected and, therefore, trigger alarm and heighten our interest. That is because such events are novel and not the norm, but they are newsworthy and for that reason they are the stuff of history.

The everyday world is quite different. Although life as it’s lived on the ground, close to home, is peppered with suffering, stresses, injustices, and foul play, it is, for the most part, lived out in hundreds of small acts of kindness and generosity. Comfort and compassion between people creates goodwill, establishes the bonds of sociality, and gives joy to people’s lives. Much of our daily interaction with our fellow human beings is empathic because that is our core nature. Empathy is the very means by which we

create social life and advance civilization. In short, it is the extraordinary evolution of empathic consciousness that is the quintessential underlying story of human history, even if it has not been given the serious attention it deserves by our historians.

Rifkin explains the relatively recent recognition of the empathic core of human nature:

There is still another reason why empathy has yet to be seriously examined in all of its anthropological and historical detail. The difficulty lies in the evolutionary process itself. Empathic consciousness has grown slowly over the 175,000 years of human history. It has sometimes flourished, only to recede for long periods of time. Its progress has been irregular, but its trajectory is clear. Empathic development and the development of selfhood go hand in hand and accompany the increasingly complex energy-consuming social structures that make up the human journey. (We will examine this relationship throughout the book.)

Because the development of selfhood is so completely intertwined with the development of empathic consciousness, the very term “empathy” didn’t become part of the human vocabulary until 1909 – about the same time that modern psychology began to explore the internal dynamics of the unconscious and consciousness itself. In other words, it wasn’t until human beings were developed enough in human selfhood that they could begin thinking about the nature of their innermost feelings and thoughts in relation to other people’s innermost feelings and thoughts that they were able to recognize the existence of empathy, find the appropriate metaphors to discuss it, and probe the deep recesses of its multiple meanings.

We have to remember that, as recently as six generations ago, our great-great-grandparents – living circa mid-to-late 1880s – were not enculturated to think therapeutically. My own grandparents were unable to probe their feelings and thinking in order to analyze how their past emotional experiences and relationships affected their behavior toward others and their sense of self. They were untutored in the notion of unconscious drives and terms like transference and projection. Today, a hundred years after the coming of the age of psychology, young people are thoroughly immersed in therapeutic consciousness and comfortable with thinking about, getting in touch with and analyzing their own innermost feelings, emotions, and thoughts – as well as those of their fellows.

The precursor to empathy was the word “sympathy” – a term that came into vogue during the European Enlightenment. The Scottish economist Adam Smith wrote a book on moral sentiments in 1759. Although far better known for his theory of the marketplace, Smith devoted

considerable attention to the question of human emotions. Sympathy, for Smith, Hume, other philosophers, and literary figures of the time, meant feeling sorry for another's plight. Empathy shares emotional territory with sympathy but is markedly different.

Rifken connects empathy to its origins in sympathy and makes the distinction.

The term "empathy" is derived from the German word *Einfühlung*, coined by Robert Vischer in 1872 and used in German aesthetics. *Einfühlung* relates to how observers project their own sensibilities onto an object of adoration or contemplation and is a way of explaining how one comes to appreciate and enjoy the beauty of, for example, a work of art. The German philosopher and historian Wilhelm Dilthey borrowed the term from aesthetics and began to use it to describe the mental process by which one person enters into another's being and comes to know how they feel and think.

In 1909, the American psychologist E.B. Titchener translated *Einfühlung* into a new word, "empathy." Titchener had studied with Wilhelm Wundt, the father of modern psychology, while in Europe. Like many young psychologists in the field, Titchener was primarily interested in the key concept of introspection, the process by which a person examines his or her own inner feelings and drives, emotions, and thoughts to gain a sense of personal understanding about the formation of his or her identity and selfhood. The "*pathy*" in empathy suggests that we enter into the emotional state of another's suffering and feel his or her pain as if it were our own.

Variations of empathy soon emerged, including "empathic" and "to empathize," as the term became part of the popular psychological culture emerging in cosmopolitan centers in Vienna, London, New York, and elsewhere. Unlike sympathy, which is more passive, empathy conjures up active engagement – the willingness of an observer to become part of another's experience, to share the feeling of that experience...

What does this tell us about human nature? Is it possible that human beings are not inherently evil or intrinsically self-interested and materialistic, but are of a very different nature – an empathic one – and that all of the other drives that we have considered to be primary – aggression, violence, selfish behavior, acquisitiveness – are in fact secondary drives that flow from repression or denial of our most basic instinct?

Is there perhaps a different future than we have yet known? Might we be in an adolescent age with all its awful partisanship in our political life, the rage of

extremists, the awful acid that oozes from radio and the blather of cable TV's talking heads?

Remember Joannie Brochere skating for her mom.

Remember the Christmas Eve on Flander's Field

Jesus wept. So do I. But Jesus found the human cause worth dying for. So do I, for down deep, for all that makes us enemies, there is something deeper that makes us one.

References

Jeremy Rifkin. *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. New York: The Penguin Group, 2009.