

A Holy Fool

a sermon by the Reverend Dr. Susan Veronica Rak
preached on 1 April 2012

The Unitarian Society – a Unitarian Universalist congregation, East Brunswick NJ

So, I thought to myself two months ago, it being April Fool's Day and Palm Sunday, why not combine the two and talk about Jesus?

We started with an odd pairing this morning: Lisa Simpson and Jesus. Any of you who've watched *The Simpsons* have probably picked up her passion for justice - the prophet in the body of a grade-school girl full of childish foibles but a keen eye and a caring heart.

Lisa Simpson's goal is to do good in the world, to alleviate suffering, and, when necessary, through guilt persuade others into doing the same. In one episode, her grandfather... unexpectedly inherits one hundred thousand dollars and wonders what to do with it. Lisa urges him to give it to the needy - she tells him that there are "little children who need more library books, and they are families who can't make ends meet." As is usual, her advice and pleadings go unheeded. But she tried.

Lisa often questioned the conventional wisdom, regardless of how unpopular such questioning might be. And, Mark Pinsky notes, she is a compulsive truth-teller, seeming to take perverse joy in whom and how she offends. Participating in a patriotic essay competition, she discovers her congressman is involved in a plot to cut down a national forest for timber. In her speech she says: "The City of Washington was built on a stagnant swamp some two hundred years ago and very little has changed... only today it is the fetid stench of corruption that hangs in the air." Naturally, Lisa did not win the competition.

She took pity on scorned individuals offering solace and affection for the unloved. She tried to transform the playground bully Nelson... and she sends lonely, loveless Ralph one of her Valentine's. Her care and concern only goes so far - Nelson remains a bully and she rejects Ralph's devotion.

But more than other characters in this fictional world of Springfield, she tries to live out those "Christian" virtues.

In some ways, like Jesus, her character seems to grow out of the "holy fool" tradition... someone who might pretend to be mad or contrary as a kind of distraction from his or her real purpose: to do good, to make a difference without it being readily noticed as such.

Today - Palm Sunday - marks the day in the Passion narrative - the story of Jesus's death - when he entered the city of Jerusalem on - as my late father used to love saying - on his ass.

It marks the beginning and an ending. It is where the story of Jesus the itinerant rabbi comes to an end. It marks the point where some believe salvation begins, washed in the blood of an awful execution. Palm Sunday - brings to mind one of my favorite songs in Jesus Christ Superstar:

hosanna heysannah sannah sannah hosannah-hey sannah-hosannah...

Hey J C, J C you're alright by me

Jesus enters the city of kings, the seat of Roman occupation. No one is happy to see him there... not the high priests in the Temple, not the new Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Up until now in the story, Jesus had been moving about Galilee, healing people, offering comfort, teaching through stories and offering odd pronouncements every now and then.

But here he comes, into this city, called and pulled by some need to fulfill a prophesy? Or a sense that this is where the people need him to go? The crowd - rabble, as they are called in the song - welcome him with praise and wonderment.

That is what I love about the *Jesus Christ Superstar* version of this story... it's a song that is equal parts praise and damnation. The crowd asks for a smile at first... but then they want something more... they want him to fight for them, to die for them.

What little there is to know about this person Jesus factually indicates that he was no fighter... not a revolutionary zealot in the style of the Maccabees or the others recorded by more trustworthy historians. The story of Palm Sunday and the following week is all part of the myth-making... how else could Jesus be a "savior" if he did not die, and then rise again?

Now we know that the Gospel stories that tell us of this drama were not eye-witness accounts. It is likely this whole palm-waving parade never happened as described there. But the telling of it means something. Unitarian Universalist minister Thomas Mikelson noted that:

As we learn more about Jesus, the first century rabbi, trained in the wisdom of the Jews, impatient with religious bigotry and hypocrisy, champion of the powerless, a healer, and resistant to Jewish religious leaders who collaborated with Roman occupation forces and disgraced the dignity of their ancient wisdom, Jesus comes into focus more and more as a charismatic, non-violent, compassionate freedom fighter.

The later story-tellers and founders of the Christian church would have you believe he was a "supernatural God/man". Whoever Jesus was, he was human. Not a flawless, saintly human being, either. He was not simply a shaman or miracle-worker. Those are wonderful stories, where he changed water into wine and multiplied loaves and fishes and walked on water and raised the dead. But they do not describe literal events. How could they?

Yet something happened in those spontaneous healings and other events, but just what we will never know. Beyond miracles and charisma, there must have been something else that attracted those followers, those who felt touched by his presence.

The people who followed him were mostly the have-nots, the lower rungs of the 99%. When he spoke to them, he spoke of them. He lived with them. People did not have to travel to some great university or holy temple to receive his wisdom, to experience his touch. He was among and of the people.

That Jesus, who "walked the countryside of Galilee and marched into Jerusalem with his followers to confront religious and political leaders was a very different person from the one who was reported by his devoted promoters in the years immediately after his death". The authors of the gospels - all of them, not just the received four of the Christian Bible - didn't know him personally. None of these stories are eye-witness accounts and many of them use shared sources [although we don't have them to prove it, there are enough parallels to support this theory]. But for centuries people have argued

about who Jesus was, what exactly the gospels mean to teach us... and even if Jesus ever really existed as a person.

We do not have hard-and-fast proof. But that alone is not reason to reject the stories or the lessons. Throughout the history of Unitarianism, there has been a trend toward uncovering and incorporating the ethics of Jesus. The teachings presented in the Gospels were far more important to Thomas Jefferson than the miracles, which added drama and flair to the narrative.

And a century later, Theodore Parker opined that there were two natures to Christianity: the transient and the permanent - and what was ever-lasting were the ethical teachings, the moral lessons. There were the "beatitudes" - from the "sermon on the mount" - or the plain, depending on who is telling the story - where those who are blessed are not the popular or the mighty or the wealthy, but the poor, the peacemakers, the merciful.

This is the Jesus who said the great commandment is to love God, and your neighbor as yourself. This is the Jesus who dined with tax collectors - more hated than the IRS enforcers of our own day. Who spoke directly with women and allowed them into his company when the culture of the time forbade it. A "holy fool" of a man flaunted custom and law... he ignored ritual purity laws, he defended the woman "taken in adultery" who was about to be stoned to death. In short, in all of this and so much more, he was asking for trouble.

It continued on into that week in Jerusalem... commonly known as the cleansing of the Temple, where an angry and chastising Jesus physically drove the money-changers and animal sellers out of the temple courtyard. This is the only story where Jesus' anger takes a physical form. It may be told only to support the idea of Jesus setting up a whole new, pure, religion. Or it may be told to remind us that there are times when things should make us angry; when we might have to get fed up, and we might have to act. We might have to say something.

Only a holy fool would put himself into the line of fire, as it were, asking for trouble from both the Romans and the Jewish hierarchy, be it Herod or the High Priests. He was a threat... and person of the people who could command attention. And the procession into Jerusalem was just one event - but it was quite remarkable. Gospel historian Marcus Borg notes that it is likely that Jesus' procession was timed to coincide with another "triumphal" parade.

As United Church of Christ minister Karin Case notes:

On a spring day in 30 A.D. a military procession approached Jerusalem from the west. It was a carefully choreographed show of force to announce the arrival of Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. Pilate's primary residence was some sixty miles away—in Caesarea by the sea—a far more desirable location on the Mediterranean coast than land-locked Jerusalem.

His visit to Jerusalem was planned to coincide with the festival of Pesach—or Passover—which thousands of Jews would come to celebrate at the Jerusalem temple. Pilate was coming to town in order to keep order. The military procession toward the western gates of the city was a show of force.

Just picture a great Roman military parade from one of the many "sword and sandal" epic films - I know I've seen many and can easily imagine the show of force it

would have been. I don't know about you, but I am always made uneasy by such military parades now - the lines of tanks and trucks carrying large guns... the hundreds of soldiers marching in rhythmic order - left right, left, right... the fly-over by military planes. When you see one of these parades, you know who is in charge.

The other procession, what some believers like to call Jesus' "triumphal" entry into Jerusalem, tells a different story - sends a different message.

I wish we had some scraps of paper where the people parading into town with the prophet and healer from Nazareth had written down their hopes, just what they wish he would accomplish... or who they thought this man riding on a donkey - or some other beast of burden - really was and what he was there to do.

They had heard his teaching, seen his healing, and shared meals with him. They had to have been aware of the controversy he stirred up wherever he went. Yet, as Reverend Dr. Case notes,

"they had also experienced the life-changing power of his presence. The men and women in the procession that day had witnessed, through Jesus, a different way of being in the world."

Perhaps it was just a small group of followers who surrounded Jesus on the road from Galilee. But coming into a crowded city others joined on to see what the fuss was all about. You know, we all love a parade...

Word passed from person to person - who was this personage, with all these happy people round him?

"It's Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee! The rabbi. The prophet who healed the leper, and cast out demons - the one who cures disease and can restore sight to the blind." A few might look doubtfully at the passing parade...

"I'm not so sure about him—I've heard he eats with tax collectors and sinners. Look at that motley crew!" And yet others might have looked in wonder... "I've heard that he speaks with great authority. I've heard he has power to command the wind and water!"

Was he there to smile at them and make them feel comfortable and loved? Was he there to lift their spirits and encourage them into the battle against oppression? Was he there to die for them, to expiate some sins or be serve as a symbol of what they were against?

There are many spins to the Gospel stories and Jesus' message. But most agree that he was there as a prophet, one who preached - however obliquely - of a new kingdom of God... something over and against the powers that be into the moment. And that people matter. Underneath it all is a message to grow up - to move into the world with the power of compassion and not the might of force.

What does this tell us today? No messiah is marching down Ryders Lane this morning... at least as far as I know. And even if he was, we are not likely to be out there cheering him or her on, would we? We'd want proof beyond miracles.

But I'm saying is that there is no proof - only hope. Only confidence that something is possible. and knowledge that we are the ones who will make it so.

We are the ones we have been waiting for. And you are not alone... and we are in this together.

We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond.--Gwendolyn Brooks