

## **EVERYONE LOVES A PARADE Palm Sunday 2009**

**Everyone loves a parade. How much fun it is to gather with friends and family and to assemble in the best of Syracuse weather to celebrate- to drag out the lawn chairs to the edge of a curb, to get a few balloons for the kids from the vendor on the corner and maybe a souvenir or two, and to watch a live performance for free. Anyone can go to a parade and join in the festivities with nothing whatsoever expected of us than to watch, to cheer to sit back and to ENJOY the day. Today is Palm Sunday. It can be an interesting holiday for Unitarian Universalists, as curbside observers of one of the most famous of any historical parades; the outcome of which is sadly, from my viewpoint, not a credit to the end result of that event, at all. Let us for a moment travel back in time some 2,000 years ago. Let us park ourselves, on that gravelly, dusty road into the city of Jerusalem in the year plus or minus 33 A.D. As the story is told, there was a man sitting on a donkey, followed by a few dust encrusted comrades, spurned on by a small throng of cheering bystanders. There were stories and rumors about this man that he was the 'new king.' There were rumors, tales and myths, significant enough to bring out those who were in need of catching a glimpse of this man said to possess a divine power, who taught love and freedom in exchange for tyranny, taxes and servitude.**

**I probably would have gone to Jesus parade and made my way through the crowd to see him, riding on the back of a donkey. Donkeys were very significant in those days, not just as pack animals, they were also a symbol of humility, patience and courage.**

**The all familiar palms that were waved and then placed as a carpet of welcome, is a story which came to us through the ages to mean a non-violent symbol of victory without weapons.**

**Palms were also commonly used to keep the dust down as we might scatter hay on a parched dirt road for the same purpose.**

The Hosanna's chanted to greet this tiny ensemble were meant to welcome royalty, a new king, a new hope, very possibly the promise of a fair and just government for the thousands of citizens, workers and slaves who occupied Jerusalem and the many nomadic settlements surrounding the periphery of the city.

We know the legends of the beginning and the ending of this unadorned, simple nondescript parade. However, this same man, once Hosanna'd loudly, strangely found himself crucified and strung up a week later, supposedly by the very same crowd who had lined the road to Jerusalem waving Palms of welcome, acceptance and peace in his face.

I guess I still don't understand how they reversed this simple celebration of adoration and joy, into a schizophrenic bloodthirsty killing and then managed to convince us that such an injustice was predetermined by God as a necessary act to free humankind from the curse of original sin. In short it amazes me that we can honor an extraordinary human being and then turn around and angrily condemn that same person to death in less than a week.

As a child, when I first heard this story from my friends, I was confused. Killing, I had been taught to believe was wrong. Yet in this case it was O.K. The end somehow justified the means. I never understood why any good could come from the death, by human decision, of such a gentle man.

Had this ancient God lost his mind? Or had we lost ours?

As the years passed and I became more acquainted with how the theological perspectives had evolved in order to explain this horrible, senseless act, I realized that we, the human community, when gathered in large groups, have at times reacted unreasonably in a similar fashion, even today, by embracing two concepts which motivate our actions throughout all of our living. EXCITEMENT AND JUDGMENT. In spite of our "advanced" intelligence and capacity for rational thinking we can easily become caught up and carried by the excitement of the moment.

We can be swayed, full tilt by crowds expressing happiness or sadness by violence or peacekeeping, by silence or rock throwing and can become very judgmental in keeping with the tenor of the crowd to be safe, even if we disagree. It is the very nature of our species to be enveloped in waves of emotion and feeling, influenced by the excitement of the moment. No one wishes to be identified or noticed as a sole voice of dissent amid a large majority of the opposition.

Palm Sunday in itself is an example, for serious reflection of what mass EXCITEMENT can do and how quickly the mood can turn from a harmless joyful celebration into a violent, deadly anger and thoughtless judgment. Even today that premise holds true.

Back in the late 1970's, my brother was a news photographer. Among his collection of photographs was a series taken of a parade in a small town in Arkansas for the local newspaper. There was one photo among the rest that caught a Black police officer stopping a white teenager from heaving a large stone at the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan as he passed by with his throng of followers. The photo was titled, "FREEDOM IN AMERICA."

The black policeman was doing his job and doing it well. However, my brother commented that he wished that the angry and vicious crowd had either not gathered at all or had simply gone home. With no audience, there would have been no meaning to the parade.

If the crowd had dispersed when the Klan had arrived there would have been no need for any expression of outrage that they were there. Public displeasure would have been made very clear by the lack of an audience affirming their presence. But no one left and the Klan continued to taunt the angry crowd. Although that one young dissenter was right to protest and very courageous to object, his violent reaction meant that he was the only one that was taken away . The Klan got what they wanted , an audience.

2,000 years ago had I attended the celebration that brought Jesus into Jerusalem, I would have been intrigued, joined the crowd, "Hey, a parade, great!" I would have waved the palms and sung the Hosanna's like everyone else. A week later I would have gone to the public trial and heard what had to be said. But.. would I have spoken out and said "You are all wrong. This is a good man and a kind man and I will not vote for him to die?" Would I have voiced a judgment that could have taken my life too?

What if 100,000 had done just that? What would Christianity be like today, had Jesus never died for our quote sins? What if we had we had all taken a unified responsibility for our convictions, for his very teachings and shouted out loud, together that Pontius Pilate was making a grave mistake? He was waiting for the crowd to sway his decision.

What would have become of the "sins" that we have been told that Jesus died for? Maybe those sins would have never existed. Maybe we all would have gotten a different message and found a greater truth, an excitement in the power we have to influence the judgments placed before us for our consideration, that can change the course of our lives, our beliefs and our faith, not to mention our history?

Everyone loves a parade. Life was made for parades, but we never know who is going to join the march and what it is exactly they represent or are marching for. When we set up our chairs and settle against the curb, for the perfect view, I would also trust that we are ready to honor and support exactly what is we are cheering for.

Ironically, not far from where the Ku Klux Klan rightfully angered that boy in my brothers photo, a town called Jonesboro lay under a cloud of teachings gone wrong, wrought with the consequences of young children growing up wielding real guns, the tools of violence; proudly photographed holding their weapons, wearing the uniforms of destruction long before they were old enough to understand what killing really meant.

Combined with the added influence and false glamour of media, “recreational” violence is so often overlooked as a harmless form of entertainment. Somehow these children learned that guns could be used to eliminate anyone that displeased them. It happens all the time on television. (It just did in real life in Binghamton.) Those children were church going children, who grew up in a world that still has trouble separating the pursuit of excitement from the realities of our actions, of thoughtless judgments that can be lethal.

Today, we study and some recite the teachings of Jesus so simple and pure, revered and preserved for centuries, yet theologians have concluded that he too had to die, by human hand so we could be saved. I don't get it I don't understand that reasoning, that excuse for taking a life. I can't imagine that the children do either. We have concocted such a mixed message of love and violence as inseparable partners, why are we surprised when it happens over and over again?

So what can we say about Palm Sunday?

What do we tell ourselves and teach the children? All people learn by example, especially children and it is our job to define what it means to live kind, helpful and responsible lives, to step forward and dare to speak out the real message of our Judeo-Christian heritage, that God is Love and to remove from voice and view the attitudes and weapons of hatred.

Our greatest sin then and now was not the one Jesus was crucified for, rather it is one of passive acceptance and thoughtless judgment as the life parade marches by. It is one of understanding that the divine lives within us all, from which justice can prevail should we choose to speak out and make it so.

I believe in his lifetime, that's all Jesus wanted to tell us and maybe its time we finally heard the true message of his living.

So be it

Amen

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