

Palm Sunday 2010

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"If I only Had One Week to Live"

When I was young, my classmates and I handed out palms in Sunday School on Palm Sunday, it was an honor to be asked. When we read about the entry into Jerusalem and made little parade routes and clay donkeys on brown construction paper, I made two just incase the first one collapsed. I loved the music and sang loudly. One Palm Sunday, as I sat fidgeting with the smocking stitched into my dress that contained enough starch to bring an entire Army to attention, listening to the same story again, I heard the teacher say something I had never realized before. She said that on Palm Sunday, Jesus knew he was going to die. From that day on, all the rhetoric, palm giving, clay creatures and cut out donkeys, would not make up for that disturbing revelation. For the first time I really understood the correlation between Palm Sunday and Easter. No one could seem to explain to me exactly how Jesus managed to cope with knowing when he was going to die. My fairly traditional Universalist Sunday School teachers taught straight from the good book and no one ever offered any practical here and now, real life insight as to how we are supposed to think about this and how are we supposed to prepare for the end of our lives in such short notice.

Much later as time passed, I cared for my mother in the last week of her life, as many of you have done with loved ones. I asked her if there were any regrets. She lifted her head off the pillow, looked me right in the eye and said, "Yes.... I wish.... I had eaten more ice-cream!" Not too long after she passed away I went to work in a Funeral Home, owned by my former youth group leader who had been a UU all his life. I thought I could learn something from being around the dead, hoping to see or experience the aura of death, that alleged moment when the last essence of life, the soul, leaves the body and slips away.

I saw a lot of things in those six years as a funeral home employee. I learned that death can be exquisitely beautiful or intensely sad, ugly and messy. I also

learned upon caring for the dead, the lesson of their living could not be found in any clues around the shells that remained, regardless of their condition. Rather, their legacies came from their families, especially in their perceptions and recollections not only of that last week of life, but in the memory of the whole picture...of all that preceded the last breath. I have heard a number of folks faced with the actual or impending death of a friend or loved one say, "I'm going to live my life today as if it were my last." I often wondered exactly how they planned to do that?

That really got to me. Think about it..... one more week to live, I know that once I got through the initial anger, disbelief and the bargaining for more time - that would take at least 3 or 4 days, then making the long list of all the things left unsaid, undone or unfinished, time would be up.

Not to mention the stress of worrying about what to say to those who would be the most affected or left to decide what to do with the ton of stuff I've collected and held onto over the years; such as that ponderous brown and black ceramic nut dish with the impish smiling squirrel on top that my nephew gave me for Christmas many years ago, or the odd assortment of collectable Burger King toys meant to be my nephews' inheritance 30 years from now when they might be worth something!

How could I possibly see everyone I wanted to, get all the bills paid, update my list of preferred readings and hymns for my memorial service AND clean the house?

The mere idea left me feeling so exasperated that I decided that I certainly was NOT going to live each day or week as if it were my last as it wouldn't be long before no one could stand being around me, and everyone would be wishing it were true!

My personal crisis, of mentally playacting in this hypothetical mello-dilemma, came to an abrupt and peaceful conclusion when I really thought about how I would react to such improbable knowledge and changed the wording just a bit, from "I'm going to live each day as if it were my last, " to " I'm going to live each day as if it were my first."

It is no co-incidence that Palm Sunday and Easter fall in the springtime of the year. The time when all that appears to be dormant, stagnant and bare, very soon becomes the most beautiful and never stops blooming, it is the hope that life or the spirit does continue in some form.

The idea of beginning anew everyday, takes real courage. It changes everything, inviting us to leave behind all of the troubles we have no control over, thinking up new ways to make our lives interesting and more importantly the option of making peace with ourselves over and over again as each new obstacle arises. We have so many possibilities and opportunities to reach out and take a firm hold on this life, to make changes where they are needed and to see in perspective the all things we can change. It is the sum total of all our days that matter, not a last week or a last breath. There is a great deal of truth in the poem, "Between The Dash" as that is the essence of the creation of Christianity and why Palm Sunday is recognized and celebrated. The last week of Jesus life was a culmination of all the legends and stories that made his time on this earth so meaningful to so many.

Regardless of what theologians have done to the significance of his life, there is one aspect that stands out, aside from walking on water and turning water into wine... his philosophy of loving thy neighbor, not just once but throughout his time on earth; his acceptance of all people and his efforts to bring a new idea into the religious arena, that the sins of ones past is not the only criteria upon which one should be judged.

I would hope that in my last days, I would be remembered for more than a mad scramble to right wrongs or to clean up what had been left for another day.

In the end I would also hope that I did have enough ice-cream, took time to play and spend more time with children who have the right idea. For them seeing life as a first day everyday is a natural act of living, a true blessing, that is lost for us adult responsibilities weigh on our time.

As I thought back to the many families I sat with in the Funeral Home under every circumstance you could imagine, the truth always came in how much love had been shared. It had little to do with the amount of stuff to be dispensed. I reminded one evangelical family who was fighting over who got what, that Jesus has nothing to divide up but the lesson of his living and the love he shared. Another young man came to me with his guardian, he was developmentally delayed, and asked me to bury his mother. With tears streaming down his face he painted a picture of a withered, sad, old woman who had lost her other son, who loved him deeply and he wanted 'a real good funeral'. When he left I went down to the garage to meet the hearse carrying his mother's body. She was a big woman and on each arm was a large faded heart shaped tattoo, one said Bill and the other said Betty! She was an old biker, a drug addict and a boozier. She loved her son, cared for him in the very best way she could and he knew it. That was all that mattered to him, the rest was irrelevant.

A Last week, like it or not, our work, and all our efforts have already culminated in our legacy. It has already been created.

In my last week I am sure I will want a hot fudge Sunday with 3 scoops, nuts and whipped cream. Of course to spend time with my family and closest friends, with reminders of how much I do love them hopefully with much laughter, in remembrance of the good and quirky times we shared.

I know I want my cremated remains pulled up to the front of the church in a red flyer wagon by my niece and nephews to the Grand March from Aida.

It would be nice if we all had a remembrance service while we were living, to hear first hand all the wonderful things I hope folks would say about us in our presence, things that were assumed and not said while we were still alive. Why wait?

For me Palm Sunday is a special time, a day which once displaced my childhood comforts and challenged me to think about what I would do, how I would behave and react. More importantly I realized that we are not perfect and never will be, we can only do the best we can. We do struggle with the reality of our mortality, with the all that accompanies the realization that no matter how long we live, there will be tasks left unfinished. May we choose the ones that matter, that will in the end tell the truth to those we love, while we have the chance....

Today is a new day, all awaits our coming, all around us is in harmony, all is before us to find, all is beckoning for us to enjoy, to love and to share ... so welcome to this mystery... to a new day that has just begun.

So be it Amen

Rev Helen C (Holly) Baylies © March 2010