



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time”

© by the Rev. Roy Reynolds

Sermon delivered on April 9, 2017

at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

(The Benediction for this service is integral to the service. The text read prior to the sermon was taken from Marcus Borg’s book, “The Heart of Christianity,” from a section called “Glimpsing the Pre-Easter Jesus.” His five points: Jesus was a Jewish mystic, a healer, a wisdom teacher, a social prophet, and a movement initiator.)

Centering Thoughts:

In the beginning was Sophia, and Sophia was with God, and Sophia was God.

—Marcus Borg alterations to John 1:1

Sermon is preceded by this:

If you would join me in reciting the 23rd Psalm, King James translation, I would welcome that. Let’s recite it slowly, so we can feel the pulse and enter into the imagery. Feel it like it is a song you are chanting:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. --*Psalm 23 - King James Version (KJV)*

Sermon:

Can you feel that in your heart? Not as an emotional reaction, but feel the comfort settling in your heart? Let the images enter and dwell there..., and feel the effects.

A presence is holding you with love. “Thou art with me.”

Love is sustaining you.

Sense a wisdom—a presence—preparing a table, then anointing you with oils. Wisdom brings hospitality, trust, and healing.

To be here, in this heart-space rendered by prayer, feeds the soul. To be here your cup runs over in waves of calm and inner peace.

You are filled with goodness and mercy, bathed in the currents of love.

This prayer is *not* some ancient belief being imposed on you. It is your heart’s longings being spoken to. (*Pause*) Our hearts’ longings are being heard, met, and held by an Other that embraces us; an Other invoked by prayer. This is a “felt reality,” not a physical reality. These currents go beyond our “horizontal life” of everyday “doings.” They bring to us that “Something More” that longs to love us. That “Something” has a name. It is the “Soul of the World.”

This practice—of reciting the psalms—draws from the Wisdom Tradition. It lived in

ancient Israel, in oral tradition. It was there long before Jesus lived. It came from the Jewish faith. The Psalms evoke the “Soul of the World.” Prayerfully these words conjure and enact the Shakinah: the Kabbalah wisdom goddess of ancient Sophia. Yes, there is a feminine aspect of God in Judaism (but it’s well hidden, just as it is in Christianity)! Prayerfully from Sophia we gain assistance for navigating the life of our feelings. I think of this as “The Feeling Stream of Life.” This is how we “sense the soul:” by tuning in to deep feeling and abiding there. When we listen and feel, assisted by poetic prayer, the sacred archetype visits us. She comes to dwell in our hearts. That is, if we let Her, if we invite Her in. This is the role of poet: to transport us.

That opening happened to Jesus. He became a poet who transports people to a feeling place of “being held by love.” He got there by awakening to the caress of Shakinah-Sophia, Who came flowing into his life. It dwelled within him as a boy, and incubated there. Then, as he matured, it became his ministry. We are talking about a very human Jeshua ben Joseph. Jesus grew up with this wisdom in his family. He heard and was bathed in the feelings. His mother was the source. She was Sophia in their home. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was young Jeshua’s wisdom teacher. When he grew to manhood, he took up the life modeled for him by her. He became a wisdom teacher. This is not speculation. This is scholarly truth.

As his ministry of three years was coming to a difficult close, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, a symbol of his bold and humble ministry. Jesus embodied a relational form of power. He led with love.

How could he have had the kind of confidence, and *hutzpah*, to ride into Jerusalem knowingly facing a fate no person wants to face?

I know the answer to that question. Honestly, I do. But my knowing does not mean I could *do* it. What would you die for? What would I die for? That’s the question. ...He rode the donkey carrying with him that question. (*Spoken as Jesus*) “I have lived for love, and I will die for love, if that be my fate.”

This fierce, and thus politically dangerous, spiritual teacher rode into the city to meet his fate.

Today is Palm Sunday: a day of remembrance. It mirrors to us the question: What do I feel so passionate about that I would devote my life to it? Would I die for it?

Maybe that’s too hard to ponder. How about this? What are the hungers of my heart? Am I honoring them with my life?

This is our question.

It’s a challenging question. But if we fail to confront this chasm in our lives, we will never know true freedom. We will not realize what we can give to the world. We will fail to see and feel our authentic selves. This is what Palm Sunday is about: being true to who we are, and living that truth.

To confront our emotional chasm we must face our resistance, our sense of inadequacy. That interior wall is our teacher. Yes, this takes courage. But as Marianne Williamson says, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light not our darkness that frightens us.”

What is your light? What is your truth? What is it that can bring meaning and purpose? Do you know? Do you fear it, even though you know it?

Allow me to take you into this for a moment of personal reflection. Be with your feeling life. Be there below your anger, and your distractions. Below your “yes-buts.” Be present with that which brings a warm inner glow.

What is it? What activity, or what respite from activity? Take a pause to reflect.

What you have felt, and possibly seen, is the True You. Being this presence in your private moments, and in your relations, is the Stream that wants to flow and become robust. You have been here before. You have glimpsed this gift. But its flame may have dimmed. If it has, it’s

because something has blocked the flow or snuffed the flame.

This means most of us. In the past decade I have often pondered this. I have looked at my strengths and my self-doubts. I have earnestly tried to move through the doubts, but it is just not easy. Something is not being seen, something hidden but powerful. I've examined my emotions and found some clues to that resistance and doubt. It has to do with grief. Grief that still remains. Tears are close to the surface, but I don't allow them to speak. I've noticed something else. Life for a mature person, even a life that streams with joy, still retains sadness. The heart is always slightly broken. Down there, in the Deep Within, there remains a tincture of tender sadness. The more I've pondered this, the more I've come to realize that, in this, I am no different from anyone else. In our hearts, we carry an undertone of grief.

That tone of grief, I think, is the way in to the precious inner world of feeling. I think of this as "the Path of Feeling; and I call that path, "Sophia," the World Soul. That is the very passage the Psalmist—the ancient wisdom teacher—offers in praying the words, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me..."

This leads me to this. We have not allowed ourselves to grieve. We stifle our grief, not knowing that embracing it can lead us to wisdom. It is grief—and the fear of death—that builds that wall. It holds us back. Jesus knew this. His ministry spoke directly to this, but most listeners completely misunderstood. They took him literally. In Matthew's record he said, "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Most who heard that thought he meant, "If you follow me, you will not die." That's not what he meant, and that's not where he was coming from.

Jesus was speaking as a Hebrew prophet. He was the mouthpiece of the Eternal. His words came from Pure Awakened Presence. If a Buddhist heard him, the Buddhist would get it. He was saying, "Wake up! Awaken to life as it flows through, not as the laws interpret, not as you've been led to believe. Wake up!" What keeps us asleep is our unprocessed grief and our fear of death. A friend of mine and Jean's—a single woman around our age—went through a period that taught us a great deal about grief. It can take much longer than one might expect, even to move through the early stages of grief. Her story involved meeting a man in one of her world travels. He was a rug salesman, and he, too, travelled the world. She met him in Turkey and they rather quickly hit it off. When he came to America he always made sure to come through Atlanta and spend a few days with her. She made regular trips to Turkey.

They saw each other for several years in this occasional arrangement...and fell in love. Then on one trip to the U.S. he became quite ill, and was hospitalized. Within weeks, he died of sepsis. That loss hit our friend with grief like she had never known. She had lost her dad, then her mother, but the death of this man she loved, "Stopped her in her tracks." She sank into mourning and could not surface, not even months later. She wondered, "When will this weight lift from my soul?" Yet she also realized that she could not avoid going through this pain, this feeling of loss. She said that during that time, she "...lost all pleasure in life." And came to this understanding: "No matter how I struggled or resisted, this cloud stayed impenetrable;...surrender made it easier."

That long period of grief—which lasted well over a year—opened her to seeing more thoughts and feelings that stirred within her. She realized that she was missing her "self." She could no longer find herself as a person who feels good; as she said it, "...accepting myself within my own skin." She wanted to find meaning and inner purpose again. Once she processed her distress that he was gone, no longer walking this earth, then she needed to find her own self.

As she began to rebuild her life from the inside-out, she shared her struggles and needs with friends, and she searched out books on grief, hoping something might help. One book seemed especially helpful for her: "*The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments*," by William Bridges. I share this with you because Bridges "speaks our language." He is an intelligent

progressive corporate manager who was devastated by his wife's sudden death.

Bridges has made his mark in business by consulting about corporate transitions. When his wife died of breast cancer, he could not manage to get back into a productive work mode. He wrote:

“All the things that I had written about transition—the very things that people had said were so helpful to them—now felt strangely unreal to me. I wondered, *‘How could I ever have tried to pass myself off as an expert on transition?....’*”

We are all in transition. We are all in grief, and grief is our passage into our personal truth. Mine and Jean's friend found sustenance in the advice given by Bridges. His book gave her a lens that opened the way for her transition—not back to things as usual—but back to life awakened by going through grief.

These words from Bridges stayed with her as a mantra and guiding wisdom: “Reorientation is transition's essential function, even in matters of life and death.” She also benefited by these words - “The important thing is this: to be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we could become.” ~ Charles DuBos

Our friend especially wanted me to hear this: “One thing that... reorientation... doesn't account for is that in reorienting ourselves, we also have the chance—although it is optional whether or not we seize it—to take a step forward in our development by letting go of a less-than-adequate reality and an out-of-date self-image.” (Bridges, pp. 35-36)

What can Palm Sunday say to us, if we open to its message? There's still time. There's time to find your truth and live it. What's it take? Confront your chasm. Face your grief. Live into and through the fear that has you stuck.

Do that here, through love. Amen.

Benediction – The Journey (Mary Oliver)

Questions for Reflection & Discussion:

1. As religious liberals, what is a fitting worship response for us to the fact that America is predominantly a Christian culture?
2. How can we UUUs become more comfortable with Jesus as one of our wisdom teachers?
3. What do I feel so passionate about and want to devote my life to? Am I willing to die for it?
4. What are my deepest longings? Do I have a sense of calling? That is, what does my heart hunger for?