

**United First Parish Church
Palm Sunday Sermon, 4/9/06
By: Michelle Walsh**

Passion, Proclamation, Risk and Loss

OK, so I know at least some, if not many, of you are thinking – that’s a lot of bible verses and biblical songs for a UU service, even if it is a Jewish and Christian holiday season. Right? You can raise your hands if the bible gets to be a little problematic for you because mine will be right up there with yours. So let me forewarn you now, there’s a few more readings coming from the Hebrew scriptures but they’re a ways into the sermon so you have a chance to catch your breath a little.

I know that many of you grew up in Christian orthodox church traditions, and these have left ambivalent if not negative or painful impressions for at least some of you – while others may range from indifference to an active interest in Christianity. However, the Christian Easter season, including Palm Sunday and its relationship to the Jewish Passover, personally gives me pause for thought these days. First, you need to remember how utterly unchurched I was as a child. Basically, Christmas was a time for presents and Easter was a time for getting a pretty frilly outfit and a visit from the Easter Bunny. Vaguely, I knew it all had something to do with Jesus’ birth and death, but I remained pretty ignorant of the Christian calendar and orthodox interpretations until I went to seminary. It did seem like an awful lot of holidays to keep track of – Advent, Ash Wednesday, Lent, and Good Friday, etc.

I'm not about to give a sermon on the Christian calendar, but it has seemed to me that Unitarian Universalists are often much better at describing what we don't believe, than what we do believe – *particularly* when it comes to the Christian holidays. Since I've been a humanist for all of my adult life, and a practicing Buddhist for the past 10 years, it's a curious fact to me that we as Unitarian Universalists are often much better at finding the wisdom in all religions *except* in Christianity. This has struck me no where so strongly as during the Easter season, and I've come to a rather radical opinion that Unitarian Universalists simply cannot do Easter justice without figuring out a new ground of emotional meaning linking Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter for UU's.

Here's an example: A couple of years ago, I attended a Unitarian Universalist Easter service in which the religious education director gathered the children and told them what Good Friday and Easter meant to her. As usual, there was talk of our normal themes of winter and the coming of spring (which by the way we co-opt metaphorically from paganism without doing those traditions justice either) – and then there was talk of what we, as Unitarian Universalists, *don't* believe in, such as the bodily resurrection of Jesus. But then she said she'd given a lot of thought to what Good Friday and Easter meant to her – that to her, it was about feeling sad and then feeling better – sometimes really sad like when somebody dies and then our memories help us to feel better. In fact, she said, it was like the idea that when we go down, we always come back up – kind of like a yo-yo. Yes, a yo-yo. Not only that, in a truly intergenerational effort, she had members of the senior high youth group come up and do a yo-yo demonstration before the

congregation. There they were for a good minute with very large self-conscious grins bouncing their yo-yo's up and down. Everybody got the picture? And, of course then, all the kids got sent off to Sunday School with their own personal yo-yo for Easter.

Now some of you may be thinking, hey, that was actually a pretty clever and cute idea. I don't suppose associating Easter with yo-yo's is much worse than associating it with pretty dresses and the Easter bunny. And I *was* appreciative of the RE Director's mention of sadness and Good Friday. But are we missing an opportunity to be even more substantive here? Why do we struggle so much with this particular holiday? I have a suspicion that it isn't the mythic story of Jesus' bodily resurrection that hangs us up so much as it is the traumatic story of radical suffering and death posed by Good Friday in the aftermath of the hope symbolized by Palm Sunday.

We do have a Unitarian Universalist Christian tradition of viewing Jesus as a human being and as a Jewish prophet. We are among those who took the historical critique of the bible seriously. Erik Walker Wikstrom, a Unitarian Universalist minister, liberal Christian and Zen practitioner, writes about the perspective of Jesus Seminar scholars: "The picture that emerges of the historical Jesus is of a young man who knew firsthand the weight of oppression and what it was to be downcast and crushed, yet who also knew firsthand a deep and unshakable connection to that creative, dynamic spirit called God...The portrait of the person who emerges from the quest for the historical figure is deeply moving: a young,

passionate, ‘God-intoxicated’ person who believed so deeply in his principles and ideals that he was willing to suffer and die for them.”¹

We know that first century Palestine was under Roman occupation and if you were not lucky to be among the very, very small group of privileged elite, you were among the vast majority of the poor living under conditions of barest subsistence. According to the stories that have come down to us through the centuries, Jesus was among this oppressed minority. Our texts are from the Gospel of Mark, written first within about 40 years of Jesus’ death. Jesus enters Jerusalem in the week before Passover, a holiday marking deliverance from slavery. He enters as a *Jewish* prophet seeking to renew his *Jewish* tradition – he enters with the intent to proclaim his passion and his beliefs. In an act of dangerous and deliberate political theater, he enters mounted on cloak-covered donkey, knowing full well that his fellow Jews would recognize the religious symbolism from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Book of Zechariah chapter 9, verse 9 – “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you: triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” A triumphant and risky moment by Jesus’ design, according to the story!

Likewise, it seems thoroughly appropriate that we at United First Parish are participating in our own brand of political theater during this holiday season. We consciously draw upon very deep American historical traditions and values through the association of this church building with the Adams’ presidencies when we raise a

¹ Wikstrom, Erik Walker. Teacher, Guide, Companion: Rediscovering Jesus in a Secular World (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2004).

banner proclaiming our passionate faith and belief in marriage equality for all. Yet passion and proclamation always come at some risk, as we well know.

At my school, Boston University's School of Theology, traditionally a Methodist training seminary, we as a student body have also been challenged in our beliefs, passions, and proclamations this semester in wide variety of ways. In another story for another day, many students at Boston University have become involved in opposition to the Level 4 Biohazard Laboratory being built by BU in the oppressed Roxbury/South End community – and they have been using political theater such as wearing gas masks or acting as dead bodies strewn on sidewalks during BU tours to make their point. The response of the Dean of BU's Marsh Chapel to the Christian social activist group was rather interesting. One of his cautionary written remarks was: "Among civilized people, the day of political theater is past." Can you imagine the students' reactions? I contrast his position as a white, comfortably middle class, highly educated male minister with that of an African-American womanist theologian, Dr. Terrell, who is struggling as a single parent to support herself. She proclaimed in a talk a few nights ago that: "Melodrama is the artistic response of oppressed communities to the absurdities of life." Political theater such as Jesus embodied on Palm Sunday is such artistic melodrama. It is in the service not of the privileged 'civilized' elite but of the suffering, invisible, angry oppressed.

The Methodist church and Boston University's School of Theology are also actively struggling with their position in relation to the bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgendered communities, sometimes known as the BGLT community. Student

groups were banned for the first time from running services this year at Marsh Chapel – and what is the precipitating reason believed by many students? Well, the BGLT group on campus known as Sacred Worth had requested the right to design a worship service for the first time. Can we imagine what it must be like for people to experience themselves as banned from designing worship? The president of the student group, an openly gay man, left the school not too long after this.

In contrast, I was recently in awe of one student, whom I had always known as a woman, who got up during community lunch to announce he was in a process of changing his sex from a woman to a man and he wanted his classmates to know so that they would not be shocked when he began to use the men's restrooms. Knowing full well how conservative some of my classmates are in their beliefs, I was relieved and inspired that he received thunderous applause for his announcement. Can we begin to imagine how much courage that must have taken for him?

Unfortunately then, a few weeks later, a gay student in the community received an anonymous death threat in his mailbox. Please forgive me for reading the threat out loud to you but I want us to witness to what some people in our society are subjected to – the threat said: “You are a dead fag. No reconciliation for you.” Can we begin to imagine how utterly frightening and rage provoking such a threat was for him – both on a physical level and on a religious level? Some people might decide to suppress their fear and anger because that might be safer, but he decided to publicly challenge the entire community on the atmosphere at the school that would allow such a threat to be made. Think back on our transgendered student – can we begin to imagine how he must have felt to hear of this death threat to a

fellow minority student and the possible implications for him? Can we also imagine what it might have meant for him to see his fellow student risk taking a public stand as he did – as well as then to see those administrators, professors, and students who have come forward to risk proclaiming themselves as allies in the process of change?

Risking proclamation does not always mean winning, however. Sometimes it means a direct encounter with or witnessing to horror or traumatic loss. There are BGLT students in the school who are dedicated to the Christian tradition – as bewildering as that might seem to some who see only pain and oppression in the tradition, particularly for that community. These are not students who will come into our Unitarian Universalist communities. They see a potential for liberation inherent in the Christian tradition and they are determined to wrestle with their respective denominations to the very end. I know students who are in the ordination process for Methodist ministry and who know full well that they will be denied ordination because they are openly gay or lesbian. I have asked them, what will they do then? This is their life goal and calling – how can they tolerate such suffering? They answer me that when they are denied ordination they will start the process all over again and continue and continue because they know that their cause is right and just.

As a humanist and a socially engaged Buddhist, how can I not seek to understand and respect their passion, proclamation, and risk taking? There authentically are some who find in the Christian tradition themes of liberation, not oppression. Through *their* liberation theological understanding of the tradition, they find sustenance during suffering and the dark, lonely, fearful nights of the soul.

And sometimes they find the courage to risk proclamation and possible death – a death that may come not only physically but also spiritually in a death of dreams. What are *we* willing to proclaim and risk? And can we tolerate, respect, and witness to the possibility of loss? As we look toward Good Friday and Jesus’ crucifixion on the cross after his provocative and triumphant entry into Jerusalem – can we as Unitarian Universalists be faithful witnesses not only to the joyful moments but also to the tragic moments – to those moments that come to each of us in our own way and make us cry out: “My God, My God – or Life, Life – Why have you forsaken me?” May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.