

YEARNINGS

Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life

Living in the Present, Yearning for a Future **(Yearning for Transcendence)**

A prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
April 4-5, 2009 • Sixth Sunday in Lent (PALM SUNDAY)
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

O give thanks to God, for God is good; God's steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, "God's steadfast love endures forever." Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to God. This is the gate of God; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is God's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that God has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O God! O God, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God. We bless you from the house of God. The Sovereign is God, and God has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to God, for God is good; for God's steadfast love endures forever.

Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

***"Many people spread their cloaks on the road,
and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.
Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,
Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
'Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'"***

Mark 11:9-10

Woody Allen quotes can usually get your attention. "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work," he once declared, "I want to achieve it...by not dying." Or, "I don't mind dying," he said. "I just don't want to be there when it happens." Or, "In America we have decided that death is optional."

Well Woody, yes!...sort of. Who wants to die? Who wants to think about it? Who wants to hear a sermon about dying this morning? Even hearing this introduction to my "prompting" you may feel trapped and whisper to yourself – "With the kind of week I've had what's the 'good news' in thinking about dying? So I have my work cut out for me today because that is exactly my intention – to say there is gospel, "good news," in learning to die.

Granted, it is a strange sequence that we affirm in the church – that death comes before birth. We are accustomed to think of it the other way – first there is birth, at the end there is death. And, that is true as

far as biology is concerned. But the reverse is true as far as soul making is concerned. First we die, and then we are born...and it happens over and over again throughout our lives.

What is striking is that this process of dying then living is not only at the heart of Christianity, but at the heart of the other enduring religions of the world as well. In Islam, Muhammad is reported to have said, "Die before you die." The Buddhist path is one of "letting go" – the same internal path as dying to an old way of being and being born into a new. According to the *Tao te Ching*, the sacred text for both Taoism and Zen Buddhism, Lao Tzu said: "If you want to become full, let yourself be empty; if you want to be reborn, let yourself die." Rabbi Kula, in his book *YEARNINGS: EMBRACING THE SACRED MESSINESS OF LIFE*, speaking of course from a Jewish perspective, in his chapter entitled "Dying for Life" says

Every wisdom system until the modern period has taught that dying and being with those who are dying is the ultimate challenge and the greatest spiritual opportunity. As Rabbi Jack Reimer [who by the way was the former Rabbi at Beth Abraham Synagogue here in Dayton] says "No one can claim to be wise about life whose wisdom does not include a relationship to death."

This process of dying, then living, is central to the world's religions. It is the universal process of personal spiritual transformation.

Marcus Borg, in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, notes this:

Seeing this commonality between the way of Jesus and the ways of the world's religion is sometimes disconcerting to Christians, given our history of "Jesus is the only way." But the commonality is cause for celebration, not consternation. Not only does it mean, to echo an exclamation in the book of Acts [Acts 10:45/Acts 11:18], the Spirit has gone out to Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, and so forth, but it also adds credibility to Christianity. When the Christian path is seen as utterly unique, it is suspect. But when Jesus is seen as the incarnation of a path universally spoken about elsewhere, the path we see in him has great credibility.
(Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, page 119)

So let's explore this possibility...this notion of death then life. Let's begin by overhearing a conversation between Jesus and the disciple brothers, James and John. This conversation happens just before Jesus' Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. So let's listen in: "Jesus, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Jesus says, "What is it you want me to do for you?" James and John said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." (Mark 10:35-40)

And we think: "Those ambitious, conniving, power hungry disciples...trying to get the jump on the others! How rude! How selfish of them! And besides didn't they know by now that Jesus was declaring another kind of kingdom, a God who reigns within and between us in community?"

That's been my typical response to these disciples in the past. But I've started to rethink this position a bit lately and come down off my self-righteous, judgmental high horse! Actually...don't we need *more* disciples seeking out positions of leadership and influence in both the Church and society? And I'm not talking about leaders identifying themselves as being *Christians* – we've got plenty of those! I'm talking about *disciples* of Jesus who seek out leadership and influence and actually lead with a sense of justice and compassion and courage to care for the poor and those on the margins of society – to seek social justice that only a civil government can assure. How hungry I am for authentic leaders with integrity and persuasive abilities in matters of love and peace and justice. And as in the prophet Amos's era, our problem is not a lack of piety in high places, but a gap between personal piety and public morality. Personal piety is no substitute for justice in the land.

What is interesting is that Jesus doesn't scold the disciples for their request to sit at his right and on his left. He does what he often did. Being a good Jew, he countered the question with a question: "Are you able to drink the cup I am about to drink?"

And what is this "cup" he is about to drink? The word "cup" Jesus uses again a few days later. It was nighttime. The setting was a pleasant, private garden not far from the city of Jerusalem – the Garden of Gethsemane. The disciples were sleeping in spite of Jesus' request for support. Jesus was alone. No, Jesus was lonely. His life was on the line. His moment of truth had come. He was driven, like no other

time, to his knees in prayer. He was “sweating it out.” Like drops of blood, sweat fell from his face, Luke tells us. And the “cup” metaphor comes again to Jesus’ mind. “God, I am coming to You like a little child...Abba, Daddy, Papa you are to me...that close, that caring. If it is possible, Papa, let this “cup” pass from me. Please God, please, take away this ‘cup’. I don’t want to drink what’s in it.”

And what was this “cup” he resisted? What was this “cup” he asked James and John to drink? I want to submit that it was the “cup” of his dying. Think about it. His “Kingdom of God” movement, as he had named it, was dying. That painful loss must have been in the “cup.” The closeness, the companionship with his friends was coming to the end. Another death. And coming was a predictable encounter with the authorities with its public humiliation and likely execution/violence. So much to let go of. So much to relinquish. Yet, if Jesus were to speak to us today, I imagine him saying that all along he was challenged to drink from this “cup”...that all along he learned how to give himself over to dying in order for new life to be born.

At twelve years of age he said “no” to his parents’ expectation of him, while saying “yes” to being about “his Father’s business.” That was a dying. Later at his baptism by John he was saying “no” to his pursuits and “yes” to being a “beloved” child of God, willing to go wherever that took him. That was a dying. Then during the temptations in the desert wilderness he said “no” to achieving his mission through power over others...and “no” to gaining attention by being spectacular...and “no” to offering needed bread instead of bread for abundant living. To all these expectations that others had of him he said “no.” He was willing to pay the price of defining for himself his own sense of Abba’s claim upon his life. Death that was...each time. Each time it was the end of something important. Each time it was a step into the unknown. Each time he had to trust that what he most needed would be provided. Each time he believed that a sip from the “cup” would somehow serve the purposes of the intimate God.

But his deepest, most wrenching letting go was in the Garden of Gethsemane. There in the Garden – more than on the cross – Jesus died. How else can you explain his freedom and determination during all that followed? His calmness during the trials? His composure during the public humiliation? His care for his adjacent sufferers...and for his mother...and even for his enemies. His honest outburst from the cross: “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” In a profound sense, Jesus had already died. He had given himself over to a larger life and purpose.

Now, let’s not trivialize or minimize death. Jesus won’t let us do that. The cross itself won’t let us do that. Endings are painful. Deaths are agonizing. Standing over my brother’s grave back in 2006 was awful. He was a beloved husband, a devoted father of two teenage girls, a son and a brother, and he died at the age of 42. It was a gut wrenching loss for me and my family. That song, “Live Like You Are Dying” was his song. And I can tell you that his cancer diagnosis caused him to love more deeply. Being that he was the only “straight” son out of three boys, our relationship was not always close. But after his cancer diagnosis, in his own way, he sought to amend the old differences between us and move on with loving and living.

It’s hard to say “goodbye” to people to those we love and care deeply about. It’s hard to say “goodbye” to things. It’s hard to say “goodbye” to positions...and in this economy some of you are having to deal with the uncertainty and fear of a job lost. It’s hard to say “goodbye” to privileges we love and cherish.

I’m thinking of the stunning Iowa Supreme Court decision this past Friday, making same-gender marriages legal in Iowa. In Iowa?! I am reminded, and empathetic as well I might add, about how difficult this whole notion of marriage equality is for people of a more conservative/traditional religious or cultural understanding. It is a loss for sure. Call it the loss of heterosexual privilege or call it the loss of long held worldview, but either way, it is loss. When people say same-gender marriage “threatens” heterosexual marriage, they are naming their loss. And sometimes that loss is laced with anger and rage. And that sense of loss and that notion of “threat” will have to die before any new acceptance and embrace of marriage equality is born. I feel for, and sympathize with people who have to go through that kind of loss. I had to go through it myself. The religious fundamentalism of my youth and the oppression and pain it exerted on my life as a gay man had to die in order for me to be born again into new, and acceptance and freedom and integrity and wholeness.

We’re never ready to do it...to die...to embrace whatever death is necessary and called for. Letting go, in whatever form it takes, is the hardest work we ever do. And there is no leaping over the pain from our losses. Endings come before new beginnings...burial comes before resurrection to new life...death

comes before birth.

This is what I most want you to see about Jesus – that he learned to give himself over to dying through his life. He learned to let go. He learned to face into the endings. He learned to trust that there was always life beyond death...that in giving himself over to dying he was giving himself over to something about to be born.

And I am able to see this about Jesus because I have seen this about you. Being a pastor I have the privilege of often being alongside of persons facing death in all its various forms. And you have taught me. I have watched how precious a marriage or job can be when you know it will end some day. I have noticed how special a friend is when you know that the relationship is impermanent. I have observed how you can treasure valuable things when you realize you cannot possess them. I have observed how present you can be to the moment when you realize your moments are limited. I have noted that gratitude for health comes to those who know it to be a fragile gift that will not last forever. Leave it to a country singer to say it well: "Live like you are dying." This you have taught me this. You have taught me to drink from the "cup."

And some do live, as one has counseled, with "death" just over the left shoulder always advising us to live fully the life, the grace, that is "now." As Rabbi Kula says, "Living in the present prevents us from living a life deferred."

But others I have observed live as if death never happens and endings can be avoided. I've watched them attempt a "crash" course in learning how to let go when letting go is required. Painfully I have seen some who hang on for "dear life" and miss just that – the "dear" life that comes only by *not* hanging on. And I have witnessed, as you have, a cherished hurt that becomes cancer to the soul because it is held on to way too long. Some of us never learn how to die and are ill prepared when we have to.

On some level we all know this truth. If a mother tries to hold on to the child in her womb there is no birth. She must give up control and surrender to the birthing process. And mothers and fathers spend a lifetime learning to give up their children – and children spend a lifetime learning to give up their parents – so that new births of maturity can happen.

On Palm Sunday we find Jesus riding a donkey amidst much celebration and excitement: "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven!*" But even amidst such shouts of joy there was this "cup!" Palm Sunday is surrounded by this "cup." The "cup" is mentioned just before and after Jesus' ride into Jerusalem. The air is thick with the "cup." Both before and after the waving of the Palms, Jesus speaks of this "cup" that he must drink. Could Palm Sunday be a day...for sure a day marked by paradox and pathos...that Jesus practices his determination to live...even as he was dying? And could Palm Sunday be our reminder to live in the present, in the now, even as we yearn for a better future amidst so much death?

Yes, death is in the air, but Jesus embodies the way to live NOW that is born out of dying! Yes, death is in the air, but today...TODAY!...bring out the palms and sing the song: "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven!*" Today, let us LIVE!

Yes, death is in the air...it always is. Maybe Jesus and Tim McGraw are on to something: Go sky diving. Go rocky mountain climbing. Ride a bull! Love deeper! Speak sweeter! Give forgiveness you've been denying! Live the present. Live now. Don't defer life. Rabbi Kula reminds us that:

"None of us can really know when our time will come, but when that time does come, will we be ready? It all depends on how we are living right here, right now in this very moment, which could be our last. Almost every day, we have the opportunities to embrace life more fully, to be free from pretense, to do the right thing for the right reasons. But we often put things off, thinking we still have time.

Whatever your theory of death, the ultimate test is, does it help you harness death for the service of life? To be ready to die we have to be ready to live – to live with such care and passion that we redeem life from the harshness and absurdity that death imposes. The question becomes less about death than about what kind of person we want to be so we can die that much more fully alive.

Learning to die as you live. Learning to die in order for new life to be born! Live like you are dying. Dying for life! What a strange sort of paradox this is. Is this what Jesus meant when he asked James and John if they could drink from the cup from which he drinks? They answered, "We are able!"

As we come to gather around this Table on Palm Sunday, perhaps we should ask ourselves if we are able...if we are able to drink from the cup that Jesus drinks? Now, we may want to consider a more humble, and a bit more realistic, response than James and John offered— maybe a prayer:

"Lord, help us to be able...
to be able to drink from your cup
and to be willing to die over and over again –
that we might be born again...
and again...
and again."

May it be so for us! Amen.