

“Love So Amazing, So Divine Part I”
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
April 10, 2022 Sixth Sunday in Lent,
Palm and Passion Sunday
The Palm and Passion Stories in Luke

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Sixth Sunday in Lent and Palm and Passion Sunday. Christ calls us to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and love our neighbor as our self. The Christian contemplative tradition says that we can know God only by love, not by thought. We cannot fully understand the Palm and Passion story with our head, we need to open our heart as wide as possible to love and understand.

That applies to after the service today as well, when we emerge emotionally drained from what we will experience if we listen with compassion to the scriptures. I hope you will then *act* with compassion as you greet those who have gone on this intense journey with you. Please reach out with care and support, extending yourself especially to those you do not know well and those you know are having a hard time, both in person and on Zoom.

Call to Worship: This morning we will be following the Passion story in the gospel of Luke. The word Passion comes from a Latin root meaning to suffer; compassion means to suffer with. The Passion story describes Jesus’ suffering in his final days, and our task today is to suffer with him.

Holy Week was a journey of ordeal for Jesus and his disciples. It should be an ordeal for us, too. The most important thing we can do in this service is to be completely present, as if we have never heard the story before, and listen for what speaks to our lives and world and moves us this year.

The journey begins with the jubilant celebration of Christ as he rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Let us worship together with a fullness of joy ...

[The first reading: Luke 19:29-42]

Introduction to the Passion— In the days following Palm Sunday the euphoria of the triumphant entrance quickly turned to tension. Jesus was not acting like the Messiah that the people had expected. He did not claim the throne, he made no show of overpowering might.

Yet he did not let up on his radical preaching. He drove out the money-changers in the temple. He challenged the authorities daily. It was clear this couldn't last. Neither the powerful priests nor King Herod nor the Roman Empire would allow it.

Jesus kept going, boldly, bravely, riding on in a majesty that no eyes could yet see toward a victory that even his friends would mistake for defeat...

Sermon: *Love So Amazing, So Divine, Part I*

Isaac Watts was the English Congregational pastor and hymnwriter who wrote “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” He responds from the deepest feeling of the heart:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

It diminishes and distorts the meaning of the cross to talk about it only as an act of individual salvation or an atoning sacrifice. Jesus taught, healed and died out of love so amazing, so divine, but that love was a product of a spiritual path and sacred way of living that was all about self-emptying, laying down our life for others and the world, practicing our own crucifixion not out of a selfish desire for personal salvation, nor out of a masochistic martyrdom or messiah complex, but rather, guided by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit along a path toward the transformation of our lives and of human society into the realm of God's love on earth.

Jesus showed us how to have that self-emptying love in our daily life, liberating us from the lesser ways of being human that our egos are prone to take. We need to look at the passion story in that context.

We also need to look at it in the context of our current world to see how the Spirit that guided Jesus wants to guide us today. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, saying, “If you...had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.”

We can imagine Jesus weeping today over the virulent racism, sexism and homophobic bigotry in our society, we can imagine Jesus weeping over the latest reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we can imagine the depth of his weeping over the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile refugees languish at our borders, and we live in a nation of outrageous economic inequality and poverty.

Jesus is surely weeping over these many forms of violence. He lived and died for the things that make for peace, like inclusivity and justice and a sufficiency for all, and like compassion and basic kindness—things that remain hidden to so many eyes, including many who call themselves Christian.

Yet the earliest Christians saw that the Way of Christ prohibits violence and injustice of any kind. For the first three hundred years progressives and conservatives unanimously agreed that war and being a soldier and killing for any reason were forbidden by the teachings and Spirit of Jesus.

Then the church became coopted and controlled by violent rulers. Over time the Just War theory evolved to paint a moral sheen—a Just War had to be for a right cause and conducted in the right way.

Today's modern weapons make those criteria impossible to fulfill. They are intentionally designed to commit the worst offense of all, the killing of innocent noncombatants, either directly or by destroying the infrastructures needed to survive, like power, water and medical care. The Russian general who is taking over in Ukraine is notorious for his exceptionally brazen, brutal targeting of civilians, but the wars that the United States has waged in this century have also led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of noncombatants.

There can no longer be any pretense of morally justifiable war, and there can be no justification for other forms of violence—oppression and discrimination, environmental destruction, economic inequity.

And yet nonviolence and the things like compassion and justice that would make for peace are considered by many as being impractical.

Gandhi and King, inspired by Jesus, proved the opposite to be true. They showed that we have a nonviolent power that not only can stop violence but can create the realm of God on earth at the same time.

The name Jesus and Gandhi and King gave that power is love—not sentimental love, but agape, the love of God, the love we see in the life and death of Jesus. Gandhi said that this soul force of love is the only power on earth greater than the atom bomb.

That power of love is what Jesus meant when he told us to lose our life to gain life, and to take up our cross and follow him. Next week on Easter we will look at how the power of this self-emptying love is at work in our daily lives and in the world today.

But it is important for now that we sit with the suffering and grief that the Way of the cross brings, and how hard it is. We leave the disciples scattered and lost, not seeing any glimmer of hope.

We know what they do not, so we end with love so amazing, so divine that even hanging on the cross it can look at the world and forgive it, overcoming violence with a nonviolence powerful enough to create a movement that will last thousands of years, inspiring people to strive for the spiritual maturity needed to love as Jesus loved and create the realm of God around us.

We end drained, exhausted, grieved, facing a hard week and a hard world, yet believing that even now God's love is doing something new, still hidden to our eyes, to fulfill our hopes and dreams of peace.

Let us pray in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

The rain, the rain, it raineth down.
It wets my head
and it wets the town.