

Religion or Religious Rebellion
April 14, 2014 (Palm Sunday)
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‘Conformists.’ I hear that one a lot... or at least it’s very loudly implied.

‘Folks who blindly accept the powers that be.’ That’s another thing ya hear around.

‘Ultra (or uber) religious,’ some might say. “Jesus freaks.” (that one’s been around awhile).

‘People who kneel to outside control, even when that control is harmful and unjust.’

‘People who work with the people in power to JUDGE and OPPRESS!’

...Then the real smacker comes when they insult your *intelligence*, right?

All of these are baffling to me; but nonetheless, they’re there.

These are all insults and slams used to make Christians feel low, these days.

You see it a lot online, and in conversations with people my age or younger. Or older.

Christians have a really bad rep in popular culture, right now. Not good.

You know, while I was in the Springs last month,

I learned from one of the members of the Methodist board, that in thirty years,

they expected the Methodist church to shrink by 30%?

This means on average the church has been shrinking by 10% with each new decade.

Not good at all. ...At this rate, the church could go away entirely, if things don’t change.

Which means the teachings of *Christ* would disappear from the world,

if something doesn’t happen to bring new life to what we’re doing, here.

And what becomes even more difficult about the situation,

is the very things people complain about,

are things which don’t in any way, reflect the heart of the Christianity at all,

They in no way reflect the heart and soul of the person who started it,
in those days we just read about this morning, on Palm Sunday.

Now, I don't mean to sound like a crazy cult leader right now, so if it comes off that way,
Please know that's not the feeling I hope to spread here---

---and I know enough of you know me well enough to know I'm not weird that way.

But friends, there is an overwhelmingly large movement in popular culture right now,
Working hard. Working roughly. Working *powerfully* against the Christian religion,
Hoping to see it finally come to an end.

And if that statement doesn't seem like enough on its own,
all we need to do is turn on the television.

All we need to do is tap into the facebook newsfeed.

All we need to do is *invite someone to come to church*, right?

And this truth becomes clear enough on its own.

And just to set the record straight: trust me,

I don't in anyway *dislike* the people who are working against Christianity.

I don't even think what they're saying is *wrong* on its own.

Our religion has sadly *earned* this reputation over the years.

And the *anger* people feel toward the Christian movement
and all of the wrong ways it's moved over time is *legit*.

....BUT. (...And there's definitely a BUT,

otherwise I wouldn't be standing here at this pulpit

on this beautiful Spring day talking about God and Jesus.)

This anger people feel. This movement against the Christian cause,
Is in a lot of ways just wrongly framed. Mistakenly directed.
It has nothing to do with the spiritual basis of the religion *itself*,
But with some of the messed up things misguided followers
have wrongly done in the world, while misusing the name of Christianity
to back up their *personal* desire to hurt and to hate as effectively as possible.
God's been misused and abused by God's followers.
Jesus' name has been used for purposes completely against his own.
A *lot*. Right? ... That's my feel for the situation, anyway.

And it's frustrating to me, because I know that God and Jesus
are definitely *not* to blame for any of the crazy stuff we do.
It's us. It's always been us.

And to blame God or Christ for any of it---

---To lash out at the spiritual *following* of God and Christ---

to me is like being angry with Abraham Lincoln, and denying the truth of his cause,

Because a professed Yankee at a donut shop in New Jersey made a racist comment over coffee.

There's a disconnect, there.

When Christians acts with hate, or oppression, or violence---all absolutely terrible things--

What it means, is they're doing it wrong. When we do these things,

we're simply *not* being Christian.

It doesn't mean that being Christian requires wrong-doing.

No, actually... what's kinda funny and ironic about it all,
Is when people say these things---when they lash out against the powers that be,
And raise their voices against the oppressive forces of corruption...

...When they yell out for the freedom of all people,
And point this tension they feel toward religion---Christianity, specifically---
They're actually doing a very *Christian* thing.

Without realizing it, they're actually following the life and teachings of Christ.

They're actually doing the religion very *well*, right?

This is one of the reasons I enjoy hanging out with people who don't identify as Christians,

Because whether they acknowledge it, or understand it themselves,
they're actually very effective followers of the same cause
and passions which gather us here together, today.

Today is Palm Sunday. And it's a day of *rebellion*.

...It's a day of *disruption*, and *mischievous*-making.

It's a day of examining ourselves and the world in which we live,
And looking at the oppression which exists around us, and standing *against* it bravely,
And passionately, in the name of our God with heated love and courageous strength.
Even though we're small in the midst of tall things.

At this start of Holy Week, Palm Sunday is one of the pinnacle days
when we really see the heart of Christ shine bright into the world.

---When he stood up as the true rabble-rouser he was.

We've spoken in depth through other Palm Sundays

about exactly what it was Jesus did that day he rode into Jerusalem;

So we won't go into *too* much detail about the same stuff, as we worship God together--

---As we celebrate the courageous life of Christ, this morning.

...But to lift our hearts back into the moment,

I'll sweep us just briefly through a little refresher,

about what happened today, two thousand years ago.

---That day Jesus rode on a donkey into Jerusalem,

received by all of those splayed palms and cloaks laid over the ground...

....Surrounded by all of those shouts of joy and relief.

This wasn't an incidental moment. This wasn't a timid moment.

It wasn't simply an entrance into that place, which happened to turn out nice.

What it was, was a direct and deliberate act of defiance, on Jesus' part,

against the powers that be.

---Against the corruption of the Roman government,

and the too tightly tied religious hierarchy too willing to do their bidding.

Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem wasn't only his own. It didn't happen in a bubble.

In fact, Jesus' procession into Jerusalem was actually a *counter-procession*, if you remember.

One done in the face of the power shown by Pontius Pilate,

who was processing into Jerusalem on the same day, at the same time. Only much differently.

Religious scholar Marcus Borg states it so much better

and more clearly than I can, so I'll just read his words about it.

In his Book about Holy Week, called "The Last Week," Borg writes:

"Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology. Though unfamiliar to most people today, the imperial procession was well known in the Jewish homeland of the first century. Mark and the community for which he wrote would have known about it, [b/c] it was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals."

(To sort of do the ole smack-down on the natives of Jerusalem,

reminding them of the *real* rule---the real *power*---

---over their lives while they gathered to worship God during Passover.

They showed up to keep everybody in LINE.)

Borg goes on to describe this display of military power on the part of Pilate. He says:

"Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city. A visual [blast] of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."

This act on Pilate's part, didn't just push the power of the Roman's,

but their religious *beliefs*, which placed the Emperor as the Son of God.

This ride into Jerusalem---this counter-procession---

---it wasn't just an accident. Jesus planned it in advance.

Coming from the *opposite* end of the city, doing all opposite, *opposing* things,

Jesus---called a king and savior of the spiritual hearts of the people---

---rides in not in grand display, but wearing his tattered clothes.

His ground-beaten sandals. Not on a high-standing steed,

But on a *donkey*. All the while, being received more enthusiastically, with more heart,
with more soul, than the Roman rule on the other side,
By the residents of Jerusalem, surrounding.

And from here, our reading from the gospel of Matthew,
in the lines just past the ones [our liturgist] just read,
Moves straight into the moment Jesus goes into the temple and turns the tables over,
Yelling about all of the money being exchanged and those
corruptions of commerce taking over the true soul of the day.
---Taking advantage of people seeking God, just to make a quick buck.

Palm Sunday is a celebration of the rebellious soul of Christ.
And his courage to stand up against oppression and unjust power,
For the sake of the well-being of people being pushed down and away.
What Jesus did today was stand in the face of the corruptions of religion,
which (strangely enough) tear us away from the heart of God,
While it pretends to uphold the search.
On this morning we celebrate together in worship, Jesus was a mischief-maker,
Wiping away all of the religious muck which covers the very thing we seek...
... and standing up to the rule of unjust forces working to isolate,
and grind people down for the sake of their own gain.

And this brings a rush of gratitude, and awe,

and appreciation into my own heart, just thinking about it.

Today, at this start of Holy Week, we're called to remember the life and message of Christ.

Which wasn't about oppression. Or conformity. Or mindless following.

Or even the upholding of religion, itself.

But instead, about breaking down all of those jumbled up structures which pile too high around our search for the soul of God in our own.

About losing everything we know, for the sake of gaining that goose-bump-feeling of God inside and all around us.

What Jesus taught while he was here,

was that only our love for God, and our love for each other matters.

Everything else is just fluff---even the religion we follow to find these things to be true.

For the sake of *God*, Jesus was willing to stand against *religion*.

For the sake of empowering the people, he very dangerously---

---obviously at real risk to his own life---

---moved them *away* from the painful pounding of the powers of that be.

And all of this debate and fighting, these days... it's just very interesting to me.

...Because I think if all of these people who speak so harshly against Christianity ever *met* that man we call *Christ*, they'd realize they were already following him,

already stepping toward the places he moved us toward,

and they would want to keep walking whichever way he went.

...Doing what he was doing. *Trusting* where he led them.

And *echoing* the sounds of his voice speaking against all of the mucked up stuff of the world.

At the heart of Christianity is a *defiance*---a standing up and against---
 ---anything which might remove us from our sense of God and our love for each other.
 ...Even when that thing is religion itself. And *especially* when religion ties itself
 to the same oppressive powers hurting innocent, marginalized people.

The thing that makes Christianity unique amongst the other religions,
 is strangely *exactly* what a lot of people cry out to see and feel in the world,
 while they complain *against* Christians,

(...in all of the online ranting. On all of the topical talk shows.)

Jesus worked every day in his ministry to spread love over hate,
 and acceptance and care over rejection and oppression.

Other religions of the world seek the same; but Christianity is startlingly unique,
 in that it is a religion *against* religion.

---Jesus being one of the most powerful speakers about the ways too much structure
 takes us too far away from God, Who is our rock, and our foundation.

And he spent his life working to tear all of that stuff away,
 so we can see more clearly what lies beneath.

---So we could see that God sits deep inside our soul,
 and soaks into all of the skin, and eyes, and faces, of the people around us.

So we could see more clearly that what holds us and wraps us up each day
 is the life and love of God and God alone...

...not ritual. Not public prayers. Not lavish robes.

And that real worth only comes to our soul when we recognize the worth in all others...

...every single person, especially those turned away

and put down by exclusive and overbearing religious structures.

Friends, as we near the end of Lent, and enter into this Holy Week before Easter,

let's remember the heart of Christ. The courage of Christ.

And do whatever we can in the days ahead to make our hearts more like his.

To embody the same courage, when standing in the face of oppression and wrong doing.

As we stand in the middle this rampant fight---

--pointed so passionately against Christianity, these days---

Let's let God move and speak through us

with the same clarity and care we saw in Jesus' own life.

Loving the people who hate us, and reminding each other

of the fact that it's never religion which saves us, but God and God alone.

---that powerful movement of God and God's love in the world,

reflected *through* us---if we're doing it right. Or doing it at all, right?

As we step further and further ahead into closeness with God,

let's carry with us a holy, unstoppable, indiscriminate love...

...standing against anything which moves us away from giving universal love and care,

With the same bravery we saw in Jesus on this day we call Palm Sunday.

And maybe... in doing this,
the sight of Christ will once again be clear enough in the world,
To lift hearts high and move all of our searching souls
to walk along with him to all of those defiant,
loving, God-seeking places toward which he lived to lead us.

Amen.