

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Commitment to Action”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 28, 2021

Opening Words

Today is Palm Sunday in the Christian Calendar. This is the day to remember Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. His entrance was a parody of the grand processions on strong, handsome horses leading ornate chariots that announced the arrival of dignitaries as they entered Jerusalem. Jesus rode into the city gates on a little donkey walking over palm fronds that were laid in his path. The crowds cheered just the same as if a king was entering the city gates. They cried out, says the Gospel of Mark, “Hosanna; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.”

That entrance begins the last week of Jesus' life often called holy week. Maundy Thursday remembers Jesus washing the disciple's feet and the Last Supper. Good Friday, his crucifixion.

What got Jesus in trouble was his cleansing the temple of money changers and those selling sacrificial animals. Jesus had a vision of the temple as a place of prayer and a place of peace for all people. Let us cultivate that vision of peace this morning.

Reading

Matthew 21:10-17

And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?” And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”

And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant, and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

“‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?’”

And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

Spoken Meditation

I have a guided meditation for you this morning to connect you with that moment in time that the reading describes. I invite you to turn inward.

Let us imagine in our minds what Jesus might have seen as he approached Jerusalem. King Herod had spent untold wealth reconstructing the Temple replicating its glory during the reign of King Solomon. It was a magnificent sight to behold for those who lived in rural areas and rarely saw walled cities. Such a display of opulence and wealth! Most would have responded with awe, which was the purpose of such monumental architecture.

Imagine the great architecture you've witnessed or known about in your life. The Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, the pyramids, our own New York State Capital for that matter – all can move us with their beauty.

But Jesus did not respond that way. He wept. He knew first-hand the hardship and suffering of the people driven into poverty to pay for this opulence. Those tears reflect how many rural Americans feel as they look to the opulent cities on our coasts with extravagant displays of wealth.

Bring to mind those you know who suffer unjustly from oppression and victimization, neglected as they fall through the social safety net that today has big holes in it.

Let us hold those emotions in tension with each other. Let neither erase the other. Feel how hard it is to be in both places of worshipful awe and bitter tears. Don't try to decide which is right and which is wrong. Hold them together as best you can as we enter a time of silence.

Sermon

Jesus did what prophets have been doing since Moses made a covenant with God to protect and bless the Jewish people. When he entered the temple's large outer court of the Gentiles, he witnessed a marketplace of buying and selling. Not that he didn't know about it. Everyone knew you couldn't use profane Roman coins with images of deified emperors in the temple to buy sacrifices. Everyone knew that your half shekel obligation to the temple couldn't be paid with Roman money. No one liked the lousy exchange rates that were offered.

Even more objectionable was the scamming going on as part of the system of sacrificial offering. When someone came to offer a sacrifice, such as the one a mother was obligated to offer as a blessing for her newborn child, that individual had the option of bringing their own sacrifice. The law said that the sacrifice had to be *without blemish*. So Temple inspectors looked carefully at what people brought. To stimulate sales of sacrificial offerings, they would look really, really carefully to find something to disqualify the offering and force mothers to buy one at an inflated price. This whole system of sacrificial offering was well known at the time to be deeply corrupt and exploitative.

So like prophets before him confronting royal corruption and temple exploitation, Jesus angrily disrupted it. In the Gospel of John, Jesus was described as using whips to drive the sacrificial animals out of the Temple. In Matthew, we just heard about tables being overturned and merchants being driven out. While doing it he proclaimed, quoting the prophet Jeremiah, “My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you make it a den of robbers.”

Jesus could have just given a speech in the courtyard where Rabbis and teachers gathered their students and preached against the practices he saw. He could have quoted scripture and prophets and denounced what he saw.

Instead, he acted and disrupted the buying and selling. His commitment to action was total and complete without doubt. He knew this was the right thing to do. And he knew he would likely pay an extremely high price for his action.

Jesus holds those two truths together in the Garden of Gethsemane, those poignant words on his lips, “May this cup pass from me, but thy will be done.” He begs his sleepy disciples to stay awake with him saying, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Alone, in these distressing hours before his arrest, his humanity shines through movingly as he holds his commitment to action with the results of his actions together.

Christians often elevate the suffering of Jesus during Holy Week that ends with Easter. I honor and am moved by the agony he experienced.

And Jesus is not alone experiencing overwhelming sorrow to the point of death.

I’ve been moved reading about a Mexican mother named Miriam Rodríguez. I read about [her story in the New York Times](#) last December. In 2014, her 20 year-old-daughter Karen was kidnapped. Miriam paid the ransom and more that was demanded. Her daughter was not returned. Eventually, Miriam intuited she had been killed.

In San Fernando, the drug cartels operate without much interference from the police. Miriam got little help in solving her daughter’s kidnapping. She even sat down with a gang leader to negotiate. When all else failed, she took it upon herself to find those responsible and demand that they be brought to justice.

She cut her hair, dyed it and disguised herself as a pollster, a health worker and an election official to get their names and addresses. She invented excuses to meet their families, unsuspecting grandmothers and cousins who gave her details, however small. She wrote everything down and stuffed it into her black computer bag, building her investigation and tracking them down, one by one. [\[article\]](#)

It took three years for her to track down get arrested and convicted nearly every living member of the gang that had abducted her daughter. The Zetas weren’t appreciative of her one-person challenge to organized crime and success putting 10 gang members in prison. On Mother’s Day,

2017, after she successfully identified one of her last targets, she became a target herself. She was shot to death in front of her home.

Miriam is but one of many mothers and fathers who have risked their lives seeking justice. I think of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. The mothers began demonstrating April 30, 1977 to petition for their disappeared children. In September, on a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Lujan, the mothers wore their children's diapers as headscarves with their children's names embroidered on them. In Chile, I think of the mothers who also gathered holding pictures of their disappeared children, asking where they were, refusing to forget them.

Susie Guenther Loewen, a Mennonite, [writes](#):

Think about it: “armed” with nothing but their identities as mothers—i.e., givers of life—these women stood up to military dictators, to regimes of unspeakable torture and violence. Those who gave life from their own bodies thus stood as witnesses to the God of Life, confronting those who would presume to take away life, to do away with the lives and bodies they, as mothers, had co-created with God.

None of those mothers wanted to be where they were. I'm sure they would have preferred to be home with their children, feeding them, or going to their grown child's home, caring for their grandchildren, or just celebrating family life together. These mother's hearts could not rest until they acted, until they made a commitment to prevent such evil being done to anyone else's children.

Passionate commitment to action, for many is not self-chosen. I imagine Jesus witnessing the exploitative nature of the Temple moneychangers at work felt compelled to do something about it. Not violently, for he might have been immediately killed by the Roman soldiers that watched everything that was happening from above, but theatrically disruptively. For Jesus to be who he was, he could not walk by the scene and not act.

Miriam could not continue to live knowing that her daughter was dead and not respond. She was driven. She made huge personal sacrifices, giving up her normal life to pursue justice for her daughter. A commitment to action was the only way she could continue to live and have meaning in her life.

In a way, I wouldn't wish this kind of suffering on anyone. To have a child disappeared is a grievous injury to the heart. Few of us here have experienced such an intense call to action.

And yet, some of us may be sensing less intense calls to action to which they are not paying attention. Some of us may be experiencing discomfort, an urge to act that might be confusing or unfocused. Or maybe, some of us are experiencing a call to action and resisting it saying, “Not now.”

I felt some of that about being nominated to run for the UUA Board. I know it is a lot of work. I know I'll have to cut back on some activities I really want to do, that I enjoy. But, when I got the initial contact with the request, I *immediately* knew I had to say yes. I knew intuitively there was something *more important going on* than adding one more activity to my busy schedule. And it turns out that my candidacy will have me running against a representative of an anti-UUA protest

movement. I'm now stepping into a contentious spotlight where I might have a unique role in helping to make an unanticipated positive difference.

What inspired me to say yes when I sensed a call to action are the giants who model commitment to action beyond anything I ever hope to achieve in my modest efforts. I am in awe of people like Bryan Stevenson, a fellow Delawarean – though we grew up in completely different experiences of the state. (Bryan grew up in the racist rural Sussex County and I in the college town of Newark). His work with inmates on death row, his willingness to bring justice where Black inmates are routinely disrespected and discredited, his compassion, *all* deeply move and inspire me.

Another giant I recently learned about is the human rights lawyer, Kimberley Motley, of African American and Korean descent, who went to Afghanistan to teach lawyer skills and stayed to represent Afghan clients. She learned not just the formal Afghan justice system but also how to work with the ancient tribal systems of justice. In her TED talk, she describes using tribal law to undo a marriage of a six-year-old girl to a rich man's son as payment for a debt. Her work for human rights is remarkable being a Black woman in a male dominated Afghan legal system. I doubt this was her life plan growing up in Wisconsin.

There are other giants of commitment to action I could mention. Bill McGibben is a local favorite of mine. We know him from 350.org. Ever since publishing his groundbreaking book in 1989, *The End of Nature*, he has been fighting climate change and advocating for solutions. Angela Davis has been fighting white supremacy from the 1960s. She hasn't let up and is still at it. And we have local peace and justice advocates here in the Capital Region. These are the faithful that come to all the demonstrations. I'll mention one name, Pat Beetle, who must be in her 90's now, very frail, but she still keeps showing up to answer the call to action. When I get tired of showing up for one more rally, I think of Pat's determination and get myself moving. These are my people who are committed to action week after week, year after year.

Yesterday, I got a text from Elissa Kane honoring one of the most significant actions of my ministry, performing a joint same sex marriage ceremony for two couples, March 27, 2004. Answering the call to action *usually* doesn't get on the front page of the Times Union the next day. That call came from *our congregation*, though, you didn't say that is exactly what you wanted me to do. But when a reporter came to our congregation a couple of weeks before, asked what people thought about gay marriage, and were surprised *not* to hear any negatives, *I heard* a readiness for bold action. I was in the unique position to offer, through my official capacity, to do weddings. Lynn and Elissa, and Bob and George were willing to seize the moment and make a public witness for marriage equality by violating the law. I was overjoyed to have the opportunity to support *their commitment to action*.

The opportunities for action *need not* be so monumental. Opportunities present themselves and can be quickly lost as they pass by. No matter how rational one might wish to be about calculating the decision to act or not to act, in the moment, there can be a sense of knowing that says "yes" or "no." That sense of knowing can be refined by acting and reflecting on the results of the action taken. If we don't act, we can't learn from the results, both good and bad. Wise action comes from the accumulation of learning through doing.

So my encouragement for you this morning is to take inspiration from those whose lives are a testimony to a commitment to action. I'm not asking you to get crucified, far from it. My encouragement is to make a repeating commitment to action so you learn and grow in wisdom in order to act in ways that make a positive difference in the world. And that may entail some risk too.

Yet, the best way to become a wise actor is to make an ongoing commitment to action.

Prayer of Affirmation

This is a Passover Prayer by [Rabbi Rachel Barenblat](#), a meditation on Exodus 12:34 which says:

"So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls wrapped in their cloaks upon their shoulders."

You'll need to travel light.
Take what you can carry: a book, a poem,
a battered tin cup, your child strapped
to your chest, clutching your necklace
in one hot possessive fist.

So the dough isn't ready. So your heart
isn't ready. You haven't said goodbye
to the places where you hid as a child,
to the friends who aren't interested in the journey,
to the graves you've tended.

But if you wait until you feel fully ready
you may never take the leap at all
and Infinity is calling you forth
out of this birth canal
and into the future's wide expanse.

Learn to improvise flat cakes without yeast.
Learn to read new alphabets.
Wear God like a cloak
and stride forth with confidence.
You won't know where you're going

but you have the words of our sages,
the songs of our mothers, the inspiration
wrapped in your kneading bowl. Trust
that what you carry will sustain you
and take the first step out the door.

Source: [Velveteen Rabbi's Haggadah for Pesach](#)