

Palm Sunday - He Did What?



Rev. Dr. Susan Suchocki Brown

March 20, 2016

About now the days and times are getting quite interesting for Jesus and his gang of disciples and followers. He has been busy preaching and teaching and going about healing people and telling his disciples to let the people approach him for this. He has found it harder and harder to get any rest, time for prayer, his ministry, or thinking about the times he was in the midst of and about what directions to go. In the stories and verses before the reading I shared this morning, Jesus had challenged the ruling systems and the Pharisees. These were the rule keepers who were working closely with and paid to keep things running smoothly for the Roman rulers. Jesus had been challenging the status quo in many ways, he and his disciples went into the grain fields on the Sabbath and gathered grain for the poor and hungry to eat, telling those who tried to discredit him that people needed food more than they needed to follow oppressive religious rules. Also on the Sabbath he had healed a man whose hand was withered and disabled. On these two occasions, and one can imagine there were others as well, he was challenging the well-ordered but oppressive system. With Jesus' action and words, he was saying that healing and helping should and could be done when needed and not regulated and restricted by a religion whose major teaching had been to seek justice and mercy. It is during this time that Jesus was reported as saying, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

These are very soothing words today I can only imagine them being incredibly powerful then too. The Pharisees who previously had been watching from afar as this rebel rouser from Nazareth had been wandering around with his rag tag gang began to think about the ways they might destroy him and his ministry.

Though Jesus left the place where he was in some immediate danger, he continued to wander and heal and teach hope for the reformation of the Jewish religion. Let us not forget that his initial purpose was to reform the religion he was born and raised in. At one point his situation had become so precarious and dangerous that his mother and his brothers came to where he was to speak with him. (Mt. 12 46-50). (yes Jesus had biological brothers and sisters. One brother was James. James continued Jesus ministry after Jesus' death. He also had sisters though their names are not known.) I am guessing that this is not the first time that his mother and family, had uttered words like, 'He did what?' or "What did he do now?" We don't want to forget the Jesus was the eldest male, son, heir and the reputation, support and endurance of the family depended on the eldest acting according to expected social standards of behavior. Jesus had been wandering around healing, teaching and confronting the status quo and this is not the expected behavior of the eldest child. I can imagine his mother and brothers wanting to have a conversation with him to remind him of his responsibilities, to remind him of the need to come home and do what he is supposed to care for the family.

However, Jesus was never one to conform to the expectations of societal or cultural held views. His desire to reform the Jewish religion that had lost touch with its roots to care for the least of these was more powerful than family roots. Jesus taught that the Jewish religion had lost touch with the 10 Commandments as laid out for correct ethical behavior and the Jewish religion had become part of the system of oppression and wealth instead of acting with "steadfast justice." At this point in his ministry Jesus was gaining a reputation as a serious trouble maker and the last thing the Roman Emperor and the governor, who was in charge in Jerusalem and Israel, wanted was another civil uprising. Through the years any uprisings had been quelled pretty quickly but Jesus and his group were not so easy to put down and they were

gaining momentum. Most societies don't take kindly to revolutions and this society was on the verge of one. However as long as Jesus stayed within the reformation of the Jewish religion then it could be contained. And that was becoming a problem as the reading I shared this morning will reveal.

After refusing to speak to his mother and brothers, after refusing to stop healing and stop speaking to the people - as is evident in the next story told in our bible story- often called the Loaves and Fishes story Jesus was at the point of no return. I mean what could possibly be better than a crowd of 5000 people figuring out how to feed itself and everyone else there with limited resources.

But wait, wait it gets even better- hence the reading I shared this morning. Let us look at it: for in my opinion this was a major turning point in Jesus' ministry and this is what pushed him over the edge and those who were out to get him to begin to find a way to stop his dangerous revolution; which certainly would mean civil upheaval if not stopped.

Jesus and his disciples withdrew to Tyre and Sidon this area is north of Galilee in the province of Syria. It is away from the region of Galilee where Jesus had been teaching preaching and healing. It was an area not under Roman rule and administration and many, many miles north West of Jerusalem.

While there our story tells us a Canaanite woman comes to him and asks him to heal her daughter. The disciples tell Jesus sent her away- she is being a nuisance. Finally, Jesus turns to her and says - go away "I was sent only to feed the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He continues, "it is not fair to take children's bread and throw it to the dogs." And her answer, "Yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table." Let me unpack this seemingly simple story and tell you how I believe this story is significant and how I think this story shifted the focus Jesus had. His comment, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep'- means until this moment he was taking his message only to the Jews of Judea/Israel. He was saying that his message of reformation was only to be applied and focused on those who are Jewish, that it only pertains to those who are born and bred and raised Jewish. To this day one is Jewish- by birth, then by choice but first and foremost birth and family, in particular mother's family. Jesus is now out of the

county that is full of Jews he is in a land that is multi -religious, multi- ethnic, full of for example Canaanites, Syrio- or Syrian Phoenicians, many of these are from ancient tribal god or goddess religions that the Jews preached against. A woman not of his culture, not of his religion approaches him for a healing for her child. He dismisses her saying I am not here for you, I cannot take away from the children I am responsible for, (that would be the Jews that are under his watch and care) to feed others. She says well of course you can for even the dogs get to partake of the tossed out pieces of nourishment, the crumbs that are tossed to them or that fall when eating. In what I think is a profound wake- up call that he was being narrowly focused on bringing his message of justice, compassion, care and healing only to the Jews he opens up and begins to heal and speak and bring his message to all people.

When his family asks, “he did what?” they are not just saying – Jesus how can you abandon your family and your duties and responsibilities as the first born son, they are saying- now you have gone and opened up the possibility of helping beyond our tribe, religion and beyond our country you have opened up a world of possibility.

The challenge that the Canaanite woman gives is more than will you let me have some scrap, the challenge is will you, Jesus, now be the one to bring a healing presence to all who need it not just your people? It was a choice he made. I know that the bible story would have us think that she suddenly had a conversion experience and fell into believing in his power of healing but I would stand that on its head and say that he had the conversion experience and grasped that his saving message was not for Jewish people alone but for all who are sick, hungry, oppressed and in need.

This is the profound message of Jesus and as we enter holy week when he was crucified and when millions of people celebrate his enduring message let us never forget that the strength and courage and profound blessing of Jesus’ ministry and works is that we can still learn from him.

As the week before his crucifixion comes into view. Jesus did not waiver in his message, he faced the consequences with courage and faith, he didn’t side step or avoid what he and others in his close group must have known was going to be the inevitable outcome.

What can we as UU's hope to learn from these stories? That Jesus' message is an important one and that we should never be closed to learning from others, that we are best served if we think beyond limits and boundaries that we or others might impose on us; that courage is a mindset that is best met when we are in the presence of others; that oppression is a societal construct that we do have the power to confront; that what we say, how we love, how we offer healing to the world matters not just today but forever.

May it be so.