

A FEAST IS LAID BEFORE YOU

Sermon by Audette Fulbright
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All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City

Palm Sunday. The last Sunday before Easter; the Sunday before Holy Thursday and Good Friday. A story of Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, to hails and hosannas, before his arrest, abuse, crucifixion, and the empty-tomb wonder of Easter.

This holy week in Christian mythology is the story of our lives, too, make no mistake: the juxtaposition of success, honors, and feasting with betrayal, rejection, suffering, even death. In that last week, it wasn't just parades and palm fronds. Jesus ate a simple meal with his friends. They drank wine together. He asked them to sit nearby, wakeful, to be present to him while he prayed about his fears. He experienced the heartbreak of someone close to him betraying him. He lived through the pain of abandonment. He suffered. It was as Dickens said, the best of times, and the worst of times.

This past week saw the murder of Stephon Clark, the 22 year old father who was shot by police 20 times while doing nothing more than standing in his own backyard, holding his cellphone. It was the week that Jaelynn Willey died after being shot at Great Mills High School in Maryland, by a white boy the press decided to describe as "lovesick." It was the week millions of people gathered under a spring sun to declare #Enough at the March for Our Lives. It was the week of my younger daughter's 11th birthday. The same week a man from a class I taught at Iliff got his doctorate.

This is the nature of the world: marvelous and tragic things are happening constantly. We achieve something outstanding; we are touched by loss that changes us.

To survive the holy weeks of our lives, we need to be able to live in the blessing of the ordinary. Too often, we take little notice of the simple or satisfactory, uncomplicated moments of our lives - the days when the trains run on time, when we get enough sleep, when the sun shines down and we have a chance to belly laugh. The ordinary joy of tucking a child into bed, or the simple grace of a just-saying-hi phone call with a parent.

There were days, you know, where Jesus and Peter and James and the rest of them were just walking under the sun, talking together. My guess is that Matthew had an annoying habit of snorting when he laughed, and Luke was way too fond of puns. Hours and days between stories, when they relished the cool of evening, or were satisfied by the simple joy of bathing their feet in a chilly stream.

Most of our lives pass in the ordinary, but because we are so often lost in our concerns for tomorrow, or caught up in the drama of our times, we lose sight of the feast that is the now. The satisfying and nourishing reality of those precious, ordinary moments, which pass away and once gone, we discover were often the best of things.

One of my very great mentors was the Rev. Gordon McKeeman, whom I delighted in knowing in his later years down South. Gordon is the author of one of our Unitarian Universalist meditation manuals. His is titled *Out of the Ordinary*, an appellation which I know captures the essence of his basic theology, as it does mine. In a piece called "Truck Driver," he writes:

“The other day, I was driving on an expressway... Near one of the exit ramps, one of the highway denizens, a behemoth “semi” had pulled over onto the berm. The driver had emerged and was gathering some wild plants along the side of the road.

“In that moment, another stereotype bit the dust. I know what truck drivers are like. They are strong, burly masters of profanity, rootless gypsies who have neither homes nor families. They care not a whit for sunsets, mountain peaks, seashores or wildflowers. But now I have seen one take the time to stop and look carefully at the splendor by the roadside. I’ve been by that spot numerous times. Not once did I take the time or trouble to stop and look at the miracles of leaf and flower. Goodbye, shattered image! I think I shall not miss you at all!”

A feast is laid before you, if only you will notice it. It may be the kindness of a stranger, allowing you to move ahead in the checkout line. It may be the simple fact that not once this year or perhaps, ever, have you had to worry about where your next meal would come from. It may be something glorious, like the pleasure of your vacation home or the joy you take in attending the ballet. It might be the comfort and ease in which you move in the world, never once concerned if you encounter the police in your daily round. It might be the freedom you feel in embracing your lover on the street, assuming that your expression of affection will be regarded kindly by passers-by.

I believe the greatest spiritual practice we can pursue is that of attending to the possible grace of every moment, paying close, close attention to the wonder of now. Now, when we are here together in this Sanctuary. Acknowledging this moment, as we sit together under the light of this morning’s sun, not drifting ahead in our minds to Coffee Hour, or the errands that may come later in the day. It is by living and loving as many of the ordinary, blessed moments of our lives as possible that we have the strength and fortitude for the holy week moments of marching for gun reform or making that big speech, or running for office so things might finally change. Without the centering peace of a life lived deeply and with awareness, the turbulence of our holy weeks tumbles us and turns us over, leaving us feeling constantly unmoored and anxious, even afraid.

How many of you watch *The Rachel Maddow Show*? I have been a huge fan and had a powerful crush on Rachel Maddow since 2004, when she had a show on Air America with Lizz Winstead and Chuck D. Nowadays, of course, she’s much the darling of the progressive left and her news program is prime time cable news viewing, where her reporting is phenomenal. Having said that, about every tenth show I find myself shouting at her, “I’ve got it, get to the point!” because Rachel uses the device of underscoring a thing at least three times - occasionally more than three times, which is when I find myself yelling - so that her audience will remember whatever it is that she really wants us to understand and remember.

In sermon and speechwriting, they put it this way: Tell them what you’re going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you told them. It’s the same thing. What I am saying to you this morning is that Palm Sunday - the opening piece of Jesus’ Holy Week story - is a story that has been told and remembered for thousands of years for a very good reason. Because although uniquely dramatic and mythically imaginative, it is also a story that has resonance in our own lives. We, too, live lives that are, in many ways, under threat - lives into which come moments of joy and celebration and honor that may also be beset by sorrow and heartbreak. Ask anyone whose birthday falls on September 11, or any of the teenagers who, in this month since the Parkland shooting, have found themselves the leaders of a world-changing moment that comes as a result of the death of friends and a permanent scar on their psyche.

All our days will be lived in the context of holy weeks. Treasure, then, my friends, the ordinary blessings of each day: rising in the morning, the sacrament of coffee, the bliss of cuddling on a couch at the end of a long day and a new episode of your favorite show. It is the joy of the ordinary that we find, in the end, that we miss the most. The poet Linda Pastan put it this way, in her poem, "The Happiest Day" ("The Happiest Day," by Linda Pastan: <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-happiest-day/>), "May your coming holy week be blessed by every wonderful, ordinary thing, and may you be thereby sustained."

Amen, ashe, blessed be!