

“Jesus, Riding on a Donkey, Speaks Out on Religion and Politics”

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The young rabbi pauses on a hilltop, gets off his donkey, looks out over the city, and breaks down crying. Choking back the tears, he says to his beloved Jerusalem: “If only you had recognized the things that make for peace. But they are hidden from your eyes. And now the days will come when enemies will surround you, and they will crush you into the ground. Oh, if only you had recognized the things that make for peace.”

The young rabbi weeps, and climbing back on his donkey, rides on into the city. There he will engage in symbolic protest, non-violent direct action we called it back when I was demonstrating around the campus here in the 60’s.

Today we might say that first Palm Sunday was an ‘Occupy Jerusalem’ movement. In any case, it was a foolhardy attempt to usher in a new social order — to demonstrate, to display the things that make for peace.

The legend of Jesus in Jerusalem, from his tearful entry on Palm Sunday to his crucifixion on Good Friday, is wrapped around, encompasses, a powerful body of vivid stories of courage and outrage. We could perhaps use a bit of that this morning: Power, courage, outrage.

That was what I hoped when I gave an ironic title to this sermon: “Jesus, Riding on a Donkey, Speaks Out on Religion and Politics.”

When I thought up the title I was reflecting on the recent Republican Presidential debates, and specifically on the grand brouhaha over the intersection of religion and politics, and even more specifically on the foolishness, to my mind, of secular fundamentalists whose rigidity may actually help hand the forthcoming election to the party of the radical religious right.

So NO, this morning I’m not going to be castigating Rick Santorum (much), because he is not here, and neither, I bet, are many who support him. So, no this is not about the sins and blind spots of Newt Gingrich, but rather about our own—about and for the sort of folks I imagine gather in a place like this. It will be a challenge, and I think you can stand it.

Those of us on the progressive side of the street tend to talk about issues like reproductive rights, marriage rights, economic opportunity, and affordable health care — in the most rational, antiseptic and secular language possible. When pressed, we sometimes say we are doing that because we believe in “separation of church and state.”

I believe that is misguided. How sad to think we must hide our religious convictions. How sad to think we must confine our faith to our closets, that religion is a private matter. How sad to compartmentalize our lives—religion over here, politics over there. How sad and wrongheaded to think that a clause in the constitution intended to assure religious freedom should be twisted — twisted so that a social and even judicial consensus develops, holding that religion should be banished from public view and from political discourse.

But what does all that have to do with Jesus, riding on a donkey?

Absolutely nothing... unless we let the story of Jesus in Jerusalem speak to us about the things that really matter, the things that make for peace — and, while we are at it, realize how ludicrous it would have been for this fearless prophet to have made separation of church and state into an idol, to have compartmentalized his life, to wall off his faith from his actions. Let me ask you to compare two very different stories that may help make my point.

See if you will in your mind’s eye this scene: It is the Christmas season in a Massachusetts town that we shall call “Middletown.” Residents pass by the old town hall across from the church green and are refreshed by the crisp air, and by the familiar seasonal display on the lawn of the town hall: a life size crèche, a depiction in statuary of the nativity of the Christ child.

Refreshed, comforted by the familiar, put into a seasonal mood, we might imagine--all of the residents, except for... the minister of a certain local liberal church, whose denomination we dare not name. A minister who says the crèche violates the constitutional separation of church and state.

And so there begins an effort by the town mothers and fathers to save the nativity scene, and to stay out of court. Town council members decide they can avoid prosecution if they somehow surround the holy family with a secular seasonal display. Everyone in town is invited to bring cast off decorations: Santa Claus dolls, reindeer, candy canes and all such.

To surround the crib of the baby Jesus, there are also found several enormous, inflatable Winnie the Pooh balloons. What is produced is described as “somewhat jarring aesthetically.” In other words: one hell of a silly mess. But the people of that town have saved something dearly meaningful from *Separation of Church and State Fundamentalism*.

Now, a much older story that is also about symbols. Not long after dismounting from his donkey, Jesus is confronted by smarmy and unctuous religious and government leaders who ask him about paying taxes. They are trying to trap him. If he says that it is legal to pay taxes to the emperor in Rome, Jesus will be disgraced before his people, who are being taxed to death.

If he says don't pay taxes to Caesar, the smarmy officials can have him arrested on the spot for promoting tax evasion and rebellion. And Jesus asks: “Do any of you gentlemen happen to have a denarius you could show me?” So the first thing we know is that Jesus and his friends DON'T have any of these Roman coins. But the officials of the Temple and the puppet royal family have no trouble handing over the denarius.

Then the rabbi asks: Whose image and title are on this coin? An official replies: “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, pictured here in a laurel wreath, sign of his divinity.”

Now, these officials are supposedly the most observant Jews in the land. Oops. While they are charged with upholding the law, they are unlawfully carrying around graven images proclaiming a false god. And so Jesus says (and we all know the lines if not the real meaning): “Give to Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to God that which is God's.”

In this way, he escapes arrest, but more importantly (the symbolic power and meaning of the story) he dramatizes the hypocrisy of the leaders of the Temple state who are forcing Roman taxation and economic ruin on the people of Palestine.

This is NOT a story about separation of church and state, but rather about a religious response to government corruption and exploitation.

Jesus of Nazareth was a God-intoxicated, nurturing human being who lived an integrated life, a life of wholeness. It would never have occurred to him to separate his religion from any other part of his life. It was all of a piece. What did occur to him was to separate corruption, hypocrisy, and tyranny from both religion and the state.

We might anachronistically say that Jesus was not at all concerned about destroying a one-ton Ten Commandments monument in an Alabama courthouse (remember that kerfuffle?) . Jesus was concerned instead with destroying a million-ton temple that was bleeding the poor people dry. He had his priorities straight! He had a larger and a grander vision than a *secular* society. His vision was of a *just* society.

The great temple at Jerusalem, rebuilt in incredible grandeur by King Herod, was a vast enclosure devoted to commerce, worship, and animal sacrifice. It was here that observant Jews must come to pay for the forgiveness of their sins, to pay taxes and tribute that often added up to 40 percent of their income. The Temple state, propped up by the Roman legions, demanded this system of taxation. The alternative was shame or degradation or death.

Those unable to pay the tax suffered in shame and worse. Often their property was confiscated, and they fell from being farmers or tradesmen or artisans, to being day laborers, and then to being beggars. And no matter how many fell into poverty, the Temple continued to squeeze, and the wealth continued to concentrate in the hands of fewer and fewer. (Does any of this sound familiar?)

Government and religion intertwined, to steal and cheat; the evil was not in the intertwining, but in the exploitation.

Then along came Jesus of Nazareth, riding on a donkey, to say in effect: "Religion does not *bless* exploitation; religion *challenges* exploitation!"

About that donkey: An ancient Hebrew prophet had said that the people of Palestine would be liberated, not by a mighty warrior king on a white stallion, but by a humble man, riding the colt of a donkey, championing the poor.

Jesus and his followers were acting out that prophecy, doing a piece of street theatre. Then on to the Temple. Jesus had wept openly because he no longer believed that the Temple could be saved. Beautiful and magnificent, a grand place for worship, spectacle, it nevertheless had become totally corrupt—corruption on an enormous scale.

A moment if I may for counterpoint: The American Civil Liberties Union detects a tiny cross among many other historical symbols on the official seal of the city of Los Angeles, California, symbol of the city's Spanish heritage. It nearly takes a magnifying glass to find it, but find it they do, and then bring the considerable resources of the ACLU to bear to eradicate it. And they do! (Amid ever-so-much publicity.)

This, too, was symbolic action. You may not realize it, but the ACLU acts in your name, even if you are not a member. To middle of the road middle America, the ACLU represents progressive values, and it does no little harm in fanning the fires of the backlash against imagined left wing extremism.

If you are not already a member, I urge you to join the ACLU — so that you can demand that they stop doing frivolous little things — and instead focus on the very great need to assure civil liberties to our citizens detained illegally and secretly, to rescue victims of torture, to combat hate crimes, and to stop deportation that breaks up families and breaks hearts.

“Dear American Civil Liberties Union,” the note attached to my next membership check may say, “Please work hard for religious freedom, but not for freedom from religion.”

For Jesus, religion was certainly a very personal thing, but not a private thing. He was an observant Jew, prayed fervently and publicly, kept Jewish law and custom. Filled with the spirit of a God he called “Papa,” he came to the temple to confront evil with non-violence. There he upset the tables of the moneychangers—the branch bankers of the great Central Bank of the corrupt

temple state. And all of this Jesus did, not because he believed in good secular government, but because he believed in God.

In June, hundreds of Unitarian ministers will don clerical collars—wearing our faith not on our sleeves, but around our necks--and demonstrate for human rights in the streets of Phoenix, Arizona.

No two-faced posturing about ‘separation of church and state’—rather I think we will be saying by our collars and by our actions: “Our religion teaches and demands justice and compassion for all human being as the law of the land.”

How wonderful it would be if President Obama joined us, linked arms with other religious leaders of all faiths, and said: *“I am a follower of Jesus Christ, who teaches fairness and forgiveness and a preference for the poor. Those are going to be the overarching values of my administration from this day forward.”*

The legend of the last days of Jesus in Jerusalem is a story of rousing passion and action and determination—coupled with humility and self-examination. So then I invite you, today, tomorrow, to live into this story, to go up on the mountaintop of your imagination, and look out over your city, your nation. See if you can recognize the things that make for peace.

Look out and see the people who aim to do good, but miss the mark. See there the things that make for strife — the rigidity and political correctness and self-indulgent self-righteousness, all in the name of secular virtue and separation of church and state.

Go up on the mountaintop of your imagination, and look out over your city, and see the things that make for peace. Look out and see those who are skillful and effective in challenging exploitation, and then go down the mountain, into the city, and join them.

Look out and see those whose religious practice refreshes and motivates their work for justice, and then let us go down the mountain, into the city, and join them.

Look out and weep for those in pain, those who are suffering, and then let us go down the mountain, into the city, and join them.