

“Where Angels Fear to Tread”

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UCC at The Villages

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I Kings 1:28-40

Mark 11:1-25

“[David] told them:

‘Take along some of my officials and have Solomon ride my own mule
to Gihon Spring.

When you get there, Zadok and Nathan will make Solomon
the new king of Israel.’ ”

I Kings 1:33-34a

Let us pray... O God,

Your ways are not our ways.

So, guide us as we go along on our respective journeys.

Be a light for us when the path is dark – help us to keep it light.

Help us to see the humor in any situation no matter how serious.

Amen

OK, it’s April Fool’s Day, so I better go ahead and tell a joke...

Steve Martin came on the scene as a comedian

after the very divisive time for American society of the 1960s.

Humor then was very political and very bitter,

kind of like... these days!

When the Vietnam War ended and there was some progress

with the Civil Rights movement, our country was ready for a change.

And Steve Martin was ready

with his unique style of absurdist humor.

Here is a song he claimed to have learned from his grandmother

that ‘meant something’ to him:

*Be courteous, kind and forgiving,
Be gentle and peaceful each day,
Be warm and human and grateful,
And have a good thing to say.*

*Be thoughtful and trustful and childlike,
Be witty and happy and wise,
Be honest and love all your neighbors,
Be obsequious, purple, and clairvoyant...*

http://www.madmusic.com/song_details.aspx?SongID=4195

The rest of the song departs from there into unknown coordinates...

Willard, p.2

Palm Sunday – which happens to fall on April 1st – April's Fools Day this year,
invites comparisons with that proverb
about going 'where angels fear to tread'.

It would seem that it was very dangerous for Jesus to do what he did –
foolhardy, even, to lead a parade into Jerusalem during that volatile
season of Passover when national emotions were running high
and under the nose of Roman authorities in an occupied Palestine.
And why would he be riding a donkey?

Then, this is followed by what seems to be a violent demonstration
by Jesus on the grounds of the Temple of Jerusalem itself –
in what has been called the 'cleansing of the Temple'.
And this would certainly have been embarrassing
to the Judean religious authorities.

On top of all that,
Jesus curses a fig tree as he is walking along with his disciples
early in the morning, and at day's end, they find it withered.
For working-class Third World peasants,
that activity would have the appearance of witchcraft.

Not at all politically correct –
What was Jesus thinking?

He was thinking about his death.

I have done many funerals over the years
and that comes with the territory of being a pastor in Florida.
And there are three things that I have learned to ask
about a person who has passed on
when I sit down with family & friends:
Tell me this person's story... Tell me what they were devoted to...
Tell me why they are loved...

And *always* there will be some anecdote to bring a smile and laughter
to a memorial service.

Now, that is not to provide a shortcut through grief
or in any way discount the pain of losing someone,
but humor serves to provide a goal for consolation and healing.
It is an act of defiance specifically in the face of the hopelessness of death.

Willard, p.3

It is the remembrance of a particularly tasty meal
or some forgivable foible, a practical joke or charming gesture –
a charitable act that will bring that person back to life
for a loved one.

Therefore it seems to me that humor is a foundational and practical part
of the Good News – *the Gospel* of Jesus Christ.

The Mirth of God is at work in the world – often unseen and unappreciated,
but there nevertheless.

It is what – or rather who I call Christ or the Holy Spirit or God
and whom others call Jehovah, the Great Spirit, the Buddha Nature,
Allah the Merciful, or the Great Mystery.

And that Mirth of God plays rough sometimes
and haven't we all from time to time found the joke to be on us –
to teach us.

Yet this is a God big enough and humble enough
who can take a joke, too.

The Son of God rides into town on a donkey instead of a white horse
like you'd expect a conquering hero to do.

From our Hebrew Bible lesson today,
we find the inspiration for this was King David who seemed to have
a good sense of humor himself.

When it came time to pass his leadership on,
David had his son Solomon ride on a donkey – actually a mule,
to the place where he was to be anointed as King of Israel.

It is not clear why David insisted on this
other than to impress upon Solomon to be humble as a servant-leader
for the sake of the people.

Reminiscent of this event, Jesus' rides into town on a donkey colt
partly to make the connection between King Solomon
and himself as the Son of David.

But it is absurd, too, as if to poke fun by not taking kingship too seriously,
while making the point that humility is also a defining quality for
the Messiah.

Jesus spends the rest of the day at the Temple,
observing the merchant activities in the Temple outer courtyard.

Willard, p.4

The next day he comes back and what follows is another bizarre scene –
so out of character for what we would expect of Christ
as he tips over tables and chairs and scatters things about...

Though nothing is broken and no one is hurt.

He has gotten all these people pretty well shaken up –

to get their attention when he delivers a pretty stern lesson:

"Is it not written,

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?

But you have made it a den of robbers." Mark 11:17b[RSV]

I like to think Christ was

making a way for what was inside the Temple to come out –

as well as allowing outsiders the opportunity to inquire within.

There's nothing funny, though, about how the priests respond

for they are now determined to punish Jesus.

As Christ and the disciples return to Bethany,

they find that fig tree – which Jesus had 'cursed' earlier, all dried up.

The disciples – no doubt frazzled by all they had been through that day,

must have been on their last nerve when they discovered this.

And Jesus immediately grounded their fears by saying,

'Trust God!'

And he teaches them a lesson about prayer and forgiveness –

that they can expect their prayers to be answered

like the crazy example of telling a mountain

to toss itself into the sea.

He uses humor to defuse fear.

Then, he talks about how public prayer should never be used

to personally shame others.

For we are expected to forgive as we have been forgiven – or else.

At which point I believe he glanced over at that withered fig tree

which could have represented

the nation of Israel and its leaders back then –

or any one of us who fail to recognize the time at hand

when we should be ready to bear the fruit of grace.

Willard, p.5

One thing that has bothered me, about that incident with the fig tree
is why Jesus would not have known it wasn't the season for figs.

Wasn't Jesus omniscient?

Wouldn't the Holy Spirit at least have whispered this in his ear?

Then again, wouldn't that even have been common knowledge?

The answer one of my teachers told me was that

Jesus simply "forgot".

Perhaps he was distracted by the dramatic events

he was planning and those that would be planned against him.

Perhaps he just forgot – like any person could forget.

We know the story – that Christ's death was imminent

and it would be a cruel death on a Roman cross.

Jesus had been behaving outrageously, but for a purpose –

to provoke a response.

It would seem to be a farce, but no one's laughing –

especially not Jesus who seems to be pressing onward

with a grim determination towards whatever lies ahead.

*The Son of Man – the True Heir of Humanity, must suffer and die,
but on the third day rise...*

Yet there is a dynamic of humor – or irony, at work

that is not "funny haha", but more like "funny a-hah"...

And not a bitter irony either, but a resolute joy yet to emerge,

On the third day, the Son of Man – the True Heir of Humanity,

will rise and have the last laugh...

Amen

*Our lesson from the Hebrew Bible today comes from I Kings 1:28-40
telling how David passed the leadership of Israel on to his son, Solomon.
This was preceded by an act of humility such that Solomon was required
to ride to the place of his anointing on a donkey.*

28David said,

"Tell Bathsheba to come here."

She came and stood in front of him. 29-30Then he said,

"The living LORD God of Israel has kept me safe.

And so today, I will keep the promise I made to you in his name:
Solomon will be the next king!"

31Bathsheba bowed with her face to the ground and said,

"Your Majesty, I pray that you will live a long time!"

32Then David said,

"Tell Zadok, Nathan, and Benaiah to come here."

When they arrived, 33he told them:

Take along some of my officials and have Solomon ride my own mule
to Gihon Spring.

34When you get there, Zadok and Nathan will make Solomon
the new king of Israel.

Then after the ceremony is over, have someone blow a trumpet
and tell everyone to shout,

"Long live King Solomon!"

35Bring him back here, and he will take my place as king.

He is the one I have chosen to rule Israel and Judah.

36Benaiah answered,

"We will do it, Your Majesty.

I pray that the LORD your God will let it happen.

37The LORD has always watched over you,

and I pray that he will now watch over Solomon.

May the LORD help Solomon to be an even greater king than you."

38Zadok, Nathan, and Benaiah left and took along
the two groups of David's special bodyguards.

Solomon rode on David's mule

as they led him to Gihon Spring.

39Zadok the priest brought some olive oil from the sacred tent

and poured it on Solomon's head to show that he was now king.

A trumpet was blown and everyone shouted,

"Long live King Solomon!"

40Then they played flutes and celebrated

as they followed Solomon back to Jerusalem.

They made so much noise that the ground shook.

Mark 11:1-25

- [1] And when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Beth'phage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples,
- [2] and said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat; untie it and bring it.
- [3] If any one says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'"
- [4] And they went away, and found a colt tied at the door out in the open street; and they untied it.
- [5] And those who stood there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?"
- [6] And they told them what Jesus had said; and they let them go.
- [7] And they brought the colt to Jesus, and threw their garments on it; and he sat upon it.
- [8] And many spread their garments on the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields.
- [9] And those who went before and those who followed cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
- [10] Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!"
- [11] And he entered Jerusalem, and went into the temple; and when he had looked round at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.
- [12] On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.
- [13] And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.
- [14] And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.
- [15] And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons;
- [16] and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple.
- [17] And he taught, and said to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."
- [18] And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching.
- [19] And when evening came they went out of the city.

[20] As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.

[21] And Peter remembered and said to him, "Master, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered."

[22] And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God.

[23] Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.

[24] Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

[25] And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

Inspired by Mark 11:1-11

AND AS THEY APPROACHED JERUSALEM
THROUGH BETHPAGE AND BETHANY, AT THE MOUNT OF OLIVES,
JESUS SENT OUT TWO OF THE DISCIPLES TO GO AHEAD, SAYING,
“GO INTO THE VILLAGE ACROSS FROM US,
AND JUST AS YOU ENTER IT, YOU WILL FIND A COLT TIED THERE
UPON WHICH NO ONE HAS EVER RIDDEN;
UNTIE IT AND BRING IT HERE.
AND WHEN SOMEONE ASKS YOU,
‘WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?’
YOU SAY,
“THE ONE WHO IS CALLED “THE LORD”
HAS NEED OF IT AND WILL SEND IT RIGHT BACK.”

SO, THEY WENT.
AND THEY FOUND A COLT TIED UP OUTSIDE A DOOR,
OPENING TO THE STREET.
AND AS THEY WERE UNTYING IT,
SOMEONE FROM A GROUP STANDING NEARBY SAID TO THEM,
“HEY! WHAT’RE YOU DOING THERE, UNTYING THAT COLT?”
AND THEY SAID ONLY WHAT JESUS HAD TOLD THEM TO SAY,
SO THE GROUP LET THEM GO.

AND THEY BROUGHT THE COLT TO JESUS
AND LAID THEIR CLOAKS ON IT FOR JESUS TO SIT UPON.
THEN, A CROWD TOOK THEIR CLOAKS
AND SPREAD THEM OUT ON THE ROAD.
SO, OTHERS CUT DOWN LEAFY BRANCHES FROM A FIELD
AND DID THE SAME.

AND THOSE WHO LED THE WAY AND THOSE WHO FOLLOWED, CHEERED,
“HOSANNA! HOSANNA! HOSANNA!
EMPOWER US!
PRAISE TO THE ONE WHO IS COMING
IN THE NAME OF THE ONE WHO IS GOD!
PRAISE FOR THE BELOVED COMMUNITY THAT IS COMING
ON BEHALF OF OUR ANCESTOR DAVID!
HOSANNA! EMPOWER US TO GREATER HEIGHTS!”

SO, JESUS CAME TO JERUSALEM;
AND ENTERING THE TEMPLE, HE OBSERVED EVERYTHING...
WHEN IT WAS AT DAY’S END,
HE DEPARTED FOR BETHANY WITH THE TWELVE DISCIPLES.