

Handing Over  
Rev. Julie Emery  
A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church  
March 28, 2010 Palm Sunday

*Luke 23:13-25, 32-33, 44-48*

*Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him." Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.*

*Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.*

*It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent." And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts.*

I heard a pastor this past week refer to Palm Sunday as "whiplash Sunday." She was referring to the experience we all have in beginning worship in Palm Sunday with Jesus' triumphant processional into Jerusalem and ending it with his crucifixion and death. I learned as well that many pastors simply do not preach on this day. Instead they hold a dramatic reading of the passion story - much like we do at our Good Friday service. I don't blame them. It is a challenge for anyone to try and deal with the onslaught of emotions that comes with the kind of journey that Jesus took over that week. From heightened joy and excitement to betrayal, trial, suffering and death. From the joyful cries of

“Hosanna!” and “Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord,” to the hate-filled shouts of “Crucify Him!” It’s enough to give any of us a sore neck.

It’s not an easy story to tell in any sort of shortened fashion either. Luke’s telling of the final days of Jesus is told like any good scientist – with attention to the smallest details. And so from the triumphant processional to the crucifixion we cover five long chapters. It is a big story. It is The Story. The Story of our Faith. The Story we remember again and again so no one will ever forget.

Most of us would just as well skip over the hard parts – including myself. I’m not much for blood and gore. I could leave out the beatings and mocking. I always feel myself mentally looking away at Peter’s betrayal, like trying not to look at a car crash you know is going to happen. I just wish for once he wouldn’t do it. I shake my head at Pilate’s inaction in the face of the crowd who calls for Jesus to be killed. How can any of us feel anything but shame?

Just as well to go from the height of the processional to the empty tomb and skip over all that stuff. Just as well to focus on the glory of what God can accomplish rather than the evil that humanity can perpetuate. Just as well.

When we fast-forward through the events of the week as Luke tells it – we begin to see two divergent understandings of power that are the source of the conflict that ends with the death of Jesus: One vision of power that demands obedience through fear and violence; the other self-sacrifice for the benefit of others, a non-violent protest against the powers of this world. Powers still at work today, vying for our attention and commitment.

I was reminded over the weekend that this past Thursday marked the anniversary of one of the most memorable tragedies in the history of New York City, one that came long before the attacks on the world trade center in 2001: the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire. In memorial, schoolchildren in the city and relatives of the 146 garment workers who died fire 99 years ago gathered to remember something that never should have happened. Most of the victims were women, most of them Jewish and Italian immigrants, most of them heartbreakingly young.

They were killed because labor laws allowed the clothing company to lock the doors to keep them there, because the fire department didn’t have ladders that reached above the sixth floor, which was two or three floors below the workers trapped in the fire. Labor laws and fire departments have changed since then – in part due to this unspeakable tragedy.

Part of the annual remembering is led by a filmmaker named Ruth Sergel. Each year on March 25, she leads volunteers around the city to the homes of each of the 146 victims, writing their names in chalk on the pavement outside the

buildings. She describes it as “a different kind of power” – the power of communal memory, of standing up for innocent victims, of standing up for justice.

What is boggling is that while the tragedy changed labor laws in our country it seems that is not enough. Wal-Mart was found to have been locking in their workers just a few years ago. And last month, 21 workers in Bangladesh died in a fire at a garment factory with locked exits. It is not enough to simply remember.

Luke, more than the other gospel writers, is concerned about justice. At the death of Jesus, the centurion roman guard is given a line that proclaims the center of truth in the gospel writer’s eyes. In Mark and Matthew’s gospels the centurion says, “Truly this man was the Son of God.”

But Luke’s centurion says something different. The centurion in our text today instead says, “Truly this man was innocent,” he says.

“He has done nothing to deserve death.” “Truly this man was innocent.”

Luke takes pains to show us that Jesus went to the cross an innocent man. Pilate speaks to the crowd three times about his belief that Jesus did not deserve to die, but in the end sends him to his death anyways. The thief on the cross beside Jesus rebukes his mocking companion, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”

“Truly this man was innocent.”

Despite his innocence, despite his words of hope and peace, there is something about Jesus that people resist and wish to eliminate. There has been something about Jesus that people have resisted all along. Throughout his life and ministry – the actions and words of Jesus have been met with opposition and even fury. This is not our kind of power. Our power is a power that keeps us - here and them - there. Our power is a power that builds walls of division, a power that perpetuates the huge gap between the poorest of poor and the wealthiest of wealthy. It is the kind of power that doesn’t want to share, that ignores the pain and suffering of others. Our power is a power that betrays, that condemns, that preserves the self at all costs.

Each of us has these stories – stories of our own betrayals and pain. Stories we have read or experienced which display the injustices that are part of the human condition. They have early beginnings – on buses and in school cafeterias – moments when we joined in mocking or at least looked away. Or perhaps we were the ones ridiculed and cast out because of a powerful crowd. Perhaps it is part of why remembering our adolescent years is so painful.

I can remember the faces of those I failed to stand up for. I can remember the shame I felt at being too weak.

Jesus spoke of a different kind of power – a power that proclaims release to the captives, a power that lets justice roll down like a mighty water, a power that lifts up the poor and downtrodden, and condemns the rich and haughty.

Throughout his life – Jesus acted with a different kind of power – a power that heals the broken, that welcomes the outcast, a power that forgives the sinner, loves the forgotten. In his final days ‘Jesus is silent when the world screams for vengeance, he is a man of peace while the world acts with violence, he is a person in prayer when the status quo is obsessed with politics and he is aligned with all who suffer and are wounded when the world looks towards power, prestige and ego satisfaction.’<sup>1</sup> In his final days Jesus stands with the least of these and in doing so Jesus stands for justice.

Jesus is all about justice.

Rev. Jim Wallis, progressive Christian author and editor of Sojourners Magazine tells a story about when he was in seminary and participated in a bible study that found “2,000 verses in the Bible about the poor, about God's concern for the left out, left behind, the vulnerable and God's call for justice.” And then they took an old Bible from seminary and they cut out of the Bible every single reference to the poor, to social justice, to economic justice. When they were done, the Bible was just in shreds.” There was almost nothing left.

At the very heart of the story of the Passion of Christ we find Jesus in solidarity with the prisoner, the lonely, the betrayed, the beaten, the outcast. Jesus dies between two criminals, unjustly condemned to death...and we must ask ourselves...can we live with that? Can we live with the kind of power that rules our world again and again? Can we live with the injustices that occur everyday around us? Can we live with unjust healthcare systems, unjust labor practices, unjust foreign policy, unjust behavior toward our neighbors?

We must ask: will we continue to resist the love, mercy and truth of Jesus Christ? Will we silence the honest voice? Will we condemn the innocent agitator? Will we laugh at the misfortune of others? Will we pursue our own agendas for the sake of expediency and personal profit?

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<sup>1</sup> Summed up nicely by blogger: RJ (UCC pastor in Pittsfield, MA) at “<http://rj-whenlovecometotown.blogspot.com/>

Or will we decide, “For the sake of Jesus, I am no longer going to participate in something that is vindictive, punitive, or evil.”<sup>2</sup> Will we hand ourselves over to the power that Jesus offers? The power that stands for what is right and just and merciful and true?

Will we tell the story or will we live it?

Will remember the story or will we hand ourselves over?

Hand ourselves over to love and peace and forgiveness? Hand ourselves over to hope and grace, and self-sacrifice?

Will we hand ourselves over to the power that conquers all – even death?

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Much of this sermon was birthed out of an excellent article in the lectionary resource: Bartlett, David L. and Brown Taylor, Barbara eds. “Feasting on the Word” Year C, Volume 2 Lent through Eastertide. WJK 2009 This quote: pg 182