

Palm Sunday'S Legacy of Risk and Reward
a sermon in two parts

Delivered at Channing Memorial Church on April 17, 2011

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Part I

In Central Falls, a mill town north of Providence, there is a Syrian Orthodox church called St. Ephraim's. This is where I took my children to Sunday mass every week from the time they were infants until the time they were old enough to tell me they had better things to do on Sunday mornings. In the Orthodox tradition, the Easter season is the high point of the church calendar, and its holy days are timed to correlate with the Jewish Passover, because it was for the Passover that Jesus came to Jerusalem, where the Easter story was to unfold.

Beginning with Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent, serious believers in the church abstain from both meat and dairy foods for 40 days. Throughout the lenten season, there is a feeling of heightened excitement as the calendar moves closer to the great celebration of the resurrection, Easter Sunday. But before that is Passion Week, highlighted on Thursday by the ceremonial washing of the feet, when the priest kneels down to wash the feet of the altar boys, whom he always tells to take a shower before coming to church if they want to be invited back next year. The following day is Good Friday, the day of the crucifixion, when members of the congregation come to church wearing black and join a procession around the perimeter of the church in mourning for the crucified Jesus as he was laid in the tomb.

But the most celebratory, the most joyful, the most anticipated holiday in the Orthodox calendar takes place the Sunday before Easter. On Palm Sunday, parents dress their small children in their dressiest new clothes, and compete for the adulation of the crowds as they carry them in procession through the aisles, each child holding aloft a candle wrapped with clusters of flowers tied with great tendrils of colorful ribbon and bows. In the Aramaic language, the language of Jesus, everyone sings "Hosanna, hosanna, Oh Son of David", Hosanna, Oh, king of Israel". The exhilaration of the congregation is palpable as together they raise their voices in commemoration of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Our Unitarian faith has no ambivalence about Palm Sunday, or passion week, or Easter, even though we descend from a Christian tradition. Palm Sunday is not even on Channing's calendar of religious holidays, and we simply do not commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus. In fact we seem to be embarrassed by our historical connection to the idea that a man who was the son of God willingly died for our sins so that we might have eternal life. Yet I remember as a child being handed a palm branch in the Unitarian church my family attended, so I am curious to know what has become of the rituals commemorating Palm Sunday. I suspect today's price of \$16.95 for 4 date palm branches might have something to do with their absence, but is it possible that the words "Palm Sunday" have entirely disappeared from the Unitarian lexicon?

So I looked up "Unitarian Palm Sundays" on the web, thinking I had googled an oxymoron and would come up empty-handed. To my surprise I found Unitarian Palm Sunday sermons in spades, and every single one of them began with a disclaimer: Not part of our faith tradition. Then there would be a BUT. BUT the message of Palm Sunday is very relevant to who we are as a faith community today. The author of each sermon would go on to project his own interpretation of what Jesus' entry into Jerusalem should mean.

For Peter Morales, President of the UUA, its legacy is a mis-guided reverence for suffering in and of itself, when instead Palm Sunday should make us conscious of the redemptive power of compassion evoked in the face of suffering.^{1 2 3} Christopher Walton, speaking at the First Congregational Society of Corvallis Oregon, looks at Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and asks, "what if he had decided not to go? Without the

¹ "Suffering," Peter Morales, Senior Minister, Jefferson Unitarian Church , March 20, 2005.

² "Why Do I Celebrate Easter?" a sermon by Sarah Movius Schur, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Corvallis, Oregon, March 16, 2008. Sarah Schur, speaking at the UU Fellowship of Corvallis, Oregon, says that the Easter season should be an inspiration to follow the example of prophetic men and women who have worked and sometimes died to make the world a better place

³ "Rising to Life," a sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, MD, Sunday April 16, 2006. The Rev. Roberta Finkelstein, speaking in Fredricksburg, Maryland, questions why Unitarians ignore Lent and Palm Sunday, when these celebrations commemorate the humanistic aspects of the life and teachings of Jesus that are at the roots of Unitarianism: Lent acknowledges the human tendency to fall away from our ideals, and Palm Sunday is a celebration of "justice over power, truth over spin, the power of the common people over the undeserved power of the rich an mighty

example of his knowing sacrifice, would we have seen the martyrs through the ages who have stood their ground on behalf of what they knew to be right, even in the face of threats to their life? Without Jesus' example, would Martin Luther King have led his march from Selma to Montgomery?⁴

In these Unitarian retellings of the Palm Sunday story, what I'm hearing is Jesus as a model for emulation in that he was a risk-taker for the sake of what he believed to be the greater good. The model is one that is open to the possibility of failure: Jesus in fact died, horribly, and he was not to be a king in this world, but the model assures us of ultimate reward, even if the outcome is not what we might have hoped.

But is risk taking for the greater good really that uncomplicated? Is recognizing the greater good obvious when we see it? How can we take a true measure of the risk we might take on? And when we take a risk, it's one thing to endanger oneself, but what if what we do endangers others?

I'm going to tell you the "Reader's Digest" version of the tale of a group of young American evangelicals who accepted the Jesus challenge to go and preach the gospel to all the nations. For them, the greater good was saving the souls of Nestorian Christians in Kurdistan by teaching them the doctrine of Grace; the risk, they thought, was to themselves, their own safety, and in their separation from home and family. But any risk to themselves was supposed to be insignificant, because they were also imbued with a reverence for suffering just as Christ suffered.

These young people were not Unitarians. In the 19th century, Unitarians were minor members of the cast in a vast missionary enterprise. Indeed they could be called the out-casts of the enterprise, disinvited from joining in the efforts of other missionary societies, and they were remarkably unsuccessful in establishing Unitarian

⁴ "In the Spirit of Jesus," a sermon by Christopher L. Walton, First Congregational Society [Unitarian Universalist] , Jamaica Plain, MA, Palm Sunday, April 8, 2001.

congregations abroad when they tried.⁵ The starring roles for Americans went to the New England Congregationalists who founded the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1810, and to the Presbyterians in the latter half of the century. Many of those who joined the Missions Board were decidedly anti-Unitarian, and were the same people who founded missionary-producing Andover Theological Seminary in 1808, which was established as a bastion of Calvinist orthodoxy specifically to counter the rise of Unitarianism.⁶

In 1841 and 1842, these young Americans sailed from Boston to Beirut and Constantinople, and from these towns made their way overland to the city of Mosul, a place we hear much about in the news today in connection with the American occupation of Iraq. Mosul was to be a stopping-off point of the missionaries before settling into their target station in Kurdistan. Every one of them was just married. They went without maps, without knowing that the weather was hot, without knowledge of Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Syriac, Greek, or Kurdish. In fact they knew no foreign languages at all, not even German or French. The men were going to preach the gospel to the Christian Nestorians, saving their souls and showing them how to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Their wives were along to make a home for their husbands.

Within two years all were dead, all except one, a man who returned to Massachusetts and eventually became minister of the Pilgrim Congregational Church in Providence, where he died in 1897 at the age of 74. As for the others, one died on the road to Mosul with symptoms of malaria, and his wife died two weeks later in premature labor after falling off a mule; others died of typhoid, heat stroke, and non-stop diarrhea.

⁵ See, inter alia, "Unitarian Universalist International Engagement: History and Vision in Three Parts: Pt. I: The First 125 Years," available on-line, NA, ND. One of the main sources for this PP slideshow is Spencer Lavan, Unitarians in India, in which are stories of failure. In 1821, the Rev. William Adam, a Baptist Missionary in Calcutta, converted to Unitarianism, but eventually joined the "Brahmo Samaj", "Society of Worshippers of One God," an organization of Hindu Unitarians, and in 1830 resigned as a Unitarian missionary, declaring that he entirely regrets his association with Unitarians. Rev. Charles Dall brought American Unitarianism back to India in 1855, but later, when theological conflicts arose between the Unitarians and the Brahmos, Dall chose to join a Brahmo Samaj.

⁶ Paul William Harris, Nothing But Christ: Rufus Anderson and the Ideology of Protestant Foreign Missions [Oxford, 1999], p. 26.

Another wife died in childbirth with her unborn baby. Two children born in Mosul also died, one before and one after the death of their father.

In 1844, the ABCFM decided to call it quits in Mosul, yet none of the missionaries, had they lived, would have admitted to defeat. Each and every one of the Americans, on their deathbed, claimed that they never regretted their decision to come to the far ends of the Ottoman Empire, and they were privileged to have had the opportunity to sacrifice themselves in the cause of saving the souls of Kurdistan's nominal Christians. God was merciful in allowing them to suffer as Christ had suffered. To a person they professed certainty that they would join Jesus in heaven; moreover, that they looked forward to it.

Even though the outcome they had hoped for did not come to fruition, for them, the return on their investment had been guaranteed before they set sail from Boston, because they had set out to do what they believed was right. If they failed, they had the satisfaction of having tried, and whatever seeds they planted would be nurtured by others they assumed would come after them. They were at the vanguard of the largest voluntary association the United States has ever known, and though the Americans of the Nestorian mission could not have imagined it, people who came as evangelicals after them to other regions would do a great deal more than preach the gospel; they would go on to build schools, open hospitals, and found the Middle East's great Western oriented universities in Cairo, Beirut, and Istanbul. In Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, and Turkey, nearly all of the liberal political voices that emerged after World War I were the product of schools founded by American and British missionaries.

As replayed in the missionary movement, the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is very much a story with meaning for Unitarians, in that its retelling reminds to value the greater good, to strive for it, and to assume whatever risk is entailed. The story also encourages us to feel that honest effort in the right cause is its own reward. What the story should also remind us, and none of the Unitarian narrators of the story I found in my web search ever do, is first, that what constitutes the greater good depends on individual conscience, and second, risk can never be fully assessed until after the fact, when hindsight shows us who has been made to pay for our risk-taking, and at what price.

Now, on that point, here is a part of the story I haven't told you yet. One of the missionaries, a doctor from Utica New York who had grown bored with his original station in Persia, went to scout out a site for the new mission station along a stretch of villages in the Kurdish mountains, in an area where there had been on-going rivalries and skirmishes between Kurdish and Nestorian villagers. There, in a Christian village called Asheeta, he bought a piece of land, and paid for the construction of a school building, housing for three missionary families, a chapel, and various out-buildings. So large were these buildings all together in relation to the neighborhood that they were locally called "the castle." Immediately upon their completion, some Kurds in neighboring territory were to claim that the buildings were an outpost of British imperial power, established on behalf of their Christian rivals, the Nestorians. The buildings became a flashpoint for an outbreak of violence between Kurds and Nestorians. In the summer of 1843, before any missionary families had even visited the station site, a Kurdish chieftain led an assault against the Nestorians in villages throughout the Asheeta valley.

For years afterward, travelers recorded coming upon the bleached-white bones of the men, women and children who had been chased over a precipice, shot, stabbed or mutilated; some still with plaited hair on their skulls, intact skeletons lying fully clothed where they had fallen, looking upward at the sun through hollow eye sockets, most simply lost in a heaving, rolling, mountain of human devastation.

INTERMISSION: CHOIR SINGS THE REFRAIN OF "THE LAST SUPPER," FROM "JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR"

Part II: Investing in Our Values

Channing Church has its own vision of the greater good, and it's printed on the front page of our order of service every Sunday. Our vision statement challenges us to live our lives as an expression of our religious values. As a community, we're very, very good at this. Every one of the committees listed on the back of the OOS is dedicated to fulfilling an aspect of our church's vision. Whether Green Congregation or Caregiving, Soup Kitchen or Coffee House, RE or Worship, Fellowship or Membership, Social

Action or Endowment, Music or Property, the efforts of each group contributes to the richness of all of our lives and helps us strive to live according to the values we profess.

Why should that commitment to our vision not extend to the way we invest our money? Given our vision, why would we want to invest in, and profit from, industries that make tobacco products or alcohol or handguns? Do we want to invest in companies that use child labor, or buy the bonds of countries practicing genocide? Do we want to invest in industries that make weapons designed not to defend but to maim and kill the maximum number of human beings possible, even long after conflicts are over, such as land mines, and cluster bombs, and bombs that release white phosphorus or leave spent fuel rods littering areas where children will find them?

The effect of screening out investments in things we don't like may be negligible in terms of influencing the marketplace, but it presents an opportunity to do what is right just because it is right. And the effort is not just whistling-in-the-wind: as a result of shareholder advocacy, next month [May 17, 2011] JP Morgan Chase shareholders will be voting on a genocide-free investment proposal aimed at PetroChina, which has been complicit in the civilian killings taking place in Darfur.

Screening out categories of things with which we don't want to be associated is just one way to put our money where our values are. We could be investing for positive change, in such industries as clean water and cleaner energy, or in companies that insure fair hiring practices and avoid child labor. We could look at community investing, which directs capital from investors to local organizations to provide loans for small businesses and community services such as affordable housing, child care, and healthcare.

Would there be risk in putting our money where our values are? Some funds that focus on values investing may underperform the market; others may bring very favorable returns. The goal of the UUA's endowment investing fund aims for a conservative return of 5%. This seems small when compared with the DJI Average, which showed 9% growth for 2010, or when compared to the NASDAQ Composite Index which showed 15% growth for the same year. Yet it's possible to achieve the same level of results through a socially responsible investment vehicle: for example, the

Calvert Social Index Fund [A Shares (w/o sales charge)] grew 13% during the same period.

Risk is inherent in any market investment. Unforeseen disaster can strike however cautious the course we choose. The difference is that when we invest in our values, whether we make a lot of money or receive only a modest return, we are likely to always feel rewarded because we have done what we think is right.

Historically, the relationship between churches and their money has been fraught with the inherent contradiction between the church's ethical values and the need for income to do the things churches need to do. Before the Civil War, the venerable American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the Board that sent our missionaries to Mosul, was repeatedly challenged to stop accepting donations from slave holders or from churches that had slave-holding members. In response, the Board was quick to declare that they personally “have no connection or sympathy with” slavery. However, they needed the money if they wanted the missionary enterprise to succeed, and consequently the Board declared that they would “adhere to the sole purpose for which this Board was organized, the propagation of the gospel in heathen lands by supporting missionaries and diffusing a knowledge of the scriptures.” “We cannot allow ourselves to be turned aside from this most sacred trust,” said the Board, “by mixing it up with any other concerns.”⁷ The sacred trust of the Board was to propagate Jesus’ gospel of love, even if the money to fund the enterprise was being earned through the most unloving of human activities.

This same dilemma is with us today, on this Palm Sunday. Churches have to be solvent. There is no worship service and no fellowship without a sacred space, heated and lighted, with staff and a minister. Yet it is very important to remember that we are not faced with a choice of either/or, because socially responsible investing can be successful investing. So as we reflect on the meaning of Jesus’s risk-taking for the greater good, let us bear in mind that return on investment means more than cash in our coffers. It also means an opportunity to let our money be one more conduit to make our lives a reflection of our values, and to carry our values out into the world.

⁷ Annual Meeting Report, The Missionary Herald, 1843.

MOMENT OF SILENT REFLECTION