

COURAGE TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN

We have momentarily left the Twelve Steps of AA and their deep roots in the Christian tradition. We shall return to them sometime after Easter. Meanwhile, we turn our attention to the events of what is called Holy Week or Passion Week – the culmination of Jesus' earthly life and ministry.

However incredible the ministry of Jesus – the teachings, the healings, the miracles; however much we might be impressed by the baptism, the wilderness trials, the gathering of the disciple band, the power of the relationships being formed: without the events of this final week (Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday), it is extremely unlikely that we would ever have heard of Jesus.

As for Holy Week itself, we can focus on what Jesus is saying and discover from that a perspective on what is happening. He gives many instructions; He does much teaching and arguing with His opponents; He talks with the disciples at the Last Supper; He speaks a few words during the arrest and trial, and from the Cross. We get one perspective and dimension by listening to what Jesus *says*.

We get a different perspective and dimension by paying attention to what Jesus *does* in this last week. There are times and ways in which actions speak louder than words. Focusing on what Jesus does, we could very nearly conclude that it doesn't matter what He says. The story is carried in the actions alone:

- Jesus enters Jerusalem in prophetic, Messianic style.
- He scatters the money-changers.
- He assumes the right to command – to teach and lead on the temple premises – all week.
- Jesus enacts the New Passover. Instead of warding off the Angel of Death and being freed from slavery (Exodus 11:1-12:36), this *New* Passover (Last Supper) enlists all who partake of it as servant/slaves of God, ready to die for God. Do you want freedom and life, or slavery and death? Actually, the two Passovers do not stand in contradiction, for one is grounded

in the physical dimension and the other is grounded in the spiritual dimension. Yet the symbol message of the Last Supper is a nearly total reversal of the First Passover.

- Jesus waits in the Garden when He could have (should have) run.
- The Crucifixion and the Resurrection are deeds about which we speak endless words, and we need to keep talking and sharing and trying to comprehend the full magnitude of such events. But in a sense, they require no words. They speak forever just by the force and power of the actions themselves.

If we have approached Holy Week from these two directions (what Jesus says and what Jesus does) and spent time with each dimension and perspective, then perhaps we can take a third look – and see Holy Week as the climax or pivot point of all earth history. All that comes beforehand leads up to it; all that comes afterward springs from it, and takes power and direction from it.

In any case, we have come to Palm Sunday again. Much of the world around us is not walking with Jesus through Passion Week. Some think they have gone beyond it. Many are more engaged with worries and concerns of their own. Most are mostly unaware.

But we who are sworn to be followers want to follow Him still. It is not that we don't have our worries; we are aware of living in a scary and threatening world, and in very troubled times. Yet instead of drawing us away from Passion Week, as if that were long ago and we have no time for it, we are drawn to it more than ever – seeing all things illumined by its light, defined by its themes, given purpose and hope by its outcome.

How then do we come to Palm Sunday? With things sacred and familiar, we must always find some way to break through the veneer of past worship and sheer familiarity – the veil that tells us we already know all about it. It doesn't take much, if we are willing – just enough to get us started, to get us engaged again, to get us thinking and feeling again.

Courage to change the things I can. That simple phrase is my way back into Palm Sunday this year. It doesn't have to be yours. It doesn't matter what gets us back into it, as long as we come fresh and real and willing again. But I am using that phrase this year, and some of you may want to also. It comes from Reinhold Niebuhr, one of Union Theological

School's most famous teachers. He was never my favorite theologian (Emil Brunner was, closely followed by Anders Nygren). But I've read everything he ever wrote because he was Frank Weiskel's favorite teacher, and I worked with Frank Weiskel, so it was survival for me to know Niebuhr. Long after everybody has forgotten Niebuhr and all the books he wrote, great and small, the world will still remember a prayer he gave us, one of the shortest prayers in history: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* This "Serenity Prayer" is said thousands of times every day by people trying to get their bearings, who want to remember the principles by which they live, who are seeking the presence and help of God. Interesting (not that it matters) that it comes out of the Evangelical and Reform side of the United Church of Christ.

Now forget all of that. The benefit comes if we pray the prayer, not just look for its origin and pedigree. But I was realizing, as many of you might also, that mostly when I use this prayer, I am contemplating the first phrase: *serenity to accept the things I cannot change.* There are endless applications, and control issues are so numerous and so insidious that some of us find ourselves praying the prayer all through the day some days.

The second phrase is of equal importance, even if some of us get to it less frequently: *courage to change the things I can.* To me, this is the epitome – the distilled essence – of Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday is the strongest action Jesus ever took in this world, humanly speaking. You may be more impressed by the calming of the storm, the feeding of the five thousand, the Sabbath healings, the raising of Lazarus, or whatever. But Jesus could have calmed every storm that ever hit the Galilee and He never would have been crucified for it. He could have healed every person in the nation – and on the Sabbath – and some would have fretted and grumbled, but they never would have crucified Him for it.

It is the political action Jesus took on Palm Sunday – and the way He followed up on it throughout the week – that got Him crucified. Palm Sunday is the strongest action Jesus ever took, pragmatically and politically. It was a threat and challenge to political power and influence – to who was in charge and had the right to govern. That's what got Him crucified. Claiming to be the Son of God wouldn't get Him killed ... until He started using it as a reason for claiming authority in the real world. That puts everything in a different light. Jesus wasn't

kidding; He was serious about changing things. *Courage to change the things I can.*

Moses could preach about freedom and justice until he was blue in the face and old and gray, and it wouldn't really matter and nobody would mind very much. Not until he walked into Pharaoh and said, "We all have to go three days' journey into the wilderness to worship our God." *That* was different! Who had true authority? Who was in control of what would actually happen? Clearly that forced a confrontation.

To be sure, priests and Pharisees and even King Herod had been wondering about Jesus because He made noises that sounded more authoritative than what they were used to. He had been getting their attention, from time to time, as His movement grew and spread, and they wondered what He was leading up to. But when Jesus took over the temple the week preceding Passover, confrontation was no longer avoidable. Remember: There was no separation of church and state. This was not just a church, not even just a really big church. This was the temple – the center of the nation's life.

Courage to change the things I can. What did Jesus think He could change? That is what blew me back into Palm Sunday this year. What did Jesus think He could change? How does that compare to what I think *I* can change? Or to what you think *you* can change?

I read and re-read the story and contemplate it this way and that. I try to comprehend and understand it from this perspective and that. But no matter what I do to it, *He* is trying to change the world. *Courage to change the things I can.* Jesus is intentionally doing things, taking steps, making plans, organizing and training disciples, strategizing – and none of it makes any sense until we see it heading straight for Palm Sunday: the confrontation; the bid for taking over the country in a peaceful, spiritual coup. To be sure, it's a backup plan. Nevertheless, Jesus is serious about changing things – about changing the whole world.

What am *I* serious about changing? What are *you* serious about changing? How are we followers of the One who set out to change the world if we are not trying to change anything ourselves? I'm not talking about changing our bank accounts or about changing from overweight to trim, from too busy to more relaxed, or from steady work to retirement. What is it that you pray for when you pray for *courage to change the things I can*? Dangerous thinking. In the light of this story, that very nearly goes without saying.

We do not dare lose sight of the fact that Jesus goes at it from the foundations. To change anything, at least in the Christian tradition, we begin by changing ourselves. More accurately, we begin by letting God make changes in our own lives, in us personally. Jesus gets baptized; the dove descends; He finds a new identity – at least a new awareness. Jesus then goes into the wilderness, and everything about His own life and purpose changes. We'd never heard of Him before this. After this, He is different, His schedule is different, the way He spends His time and life is different. All authentic change begins with ourselves.

Jesus gathers a support community – a disciple band, a church (*ecclesia*). That is the second phase of the change. He begins introducing others into the change that He Himself has experienced. They live it together, act upon it, act it out. So the disciples' lives also change. They find new identity also. After this, they are different, their schedules are different, the way they spend their time and life is different. So the change starts with the One and spreads to the many. Yet each of the many has to change at the point of the One. That is, each has to decide. Each receives the change first as an individual. Each must experience conversion, even as Jesus did. Jesus is always willing to wait for this. It cannot be faked – no mass conversion, no substitutes. Each must walk the Path in his or her own right. Those merely riding the coattails of others weaken and endanger the whole mission. (Was that Judas' problem? I don't know, but it's ours.)

Jesus moves into Palm Sunday with His own change and the change of His followers already in place. Further changes will come, yet no one attempts this larger change until their own change – individually and as a body – is authentic.

Have you ever known people who try to change the world without any personal change, and without any personal change in those they enlist for the cause? “If I can get everybody else to shape up and do things right, then maybe my own life will be okay.”

Jesus' life is okay already, even as He rides the donkey toward Jerusalem. No matter what happens or how the people react, Jesus' life is already authentic, centered, dedicated, devoted. There is nothing anyone can do to change that. Is that where some of His courage comes from? Can you fathom a Palm Sunday apart from courage?

Jesus, of course, is not on a level to challenge the whole world to change. On Palm Sunday, He challenges the authority of some of the political/spiritual leaders in the capital city of a tiny nation that is no longer truly a nation. It is a vassal province – a “waystation” of the Roman Empire. And He cannot “hold” the temple in this pseudo-capital city, even for one full week. Is this “courage to change the things I can”?

Do I try to measure that phrase according to what I think I can actually, sensibly, successfully change? If I can actually change it, then I should take courage and do so. Otherwise, if it isn’t clear that I will be able to do it – be successful in the attempt – then I’m off the hook. That’s how I think. Is that how you think too?

Palm Sunday shatters that illusion for me. I am convinced Jesus fully intended to change the world. From my perspective, it is very clear Jesus *did* change it, and goes on changing it still. But from a worldly perspective, Palm Sunday is as far as He got. Yet all of the change He truly wrought came after Palm Sunday. It came *through* Palm Sunday, and because He dared to do it.

“Courage to change the things I can” is not about successful outcomes, at least not by anything I can know or measure. Jesus – the One we follow – was living *toward* the change, out of His own personal change, and with everyone who claimed this change with Him. They lived for it, lived toward it, and believed in it with all they had and were. That was *their* notion of “courage to change the things I can.”

This is very disturbing – and very comforting. First of all, it means I have to rethink all my notions and convictions about what I am trying to change, and on what basis. Secondly, it means I can go back to living for some changes I had given up on. It doesn’t have to be grand; I don’t have to be in some high position or in some moment in time where my own mind can believe I might be successful and accomplish change in some good and final way. No, I get to live for it, live toward it, and believe in it with whatever I have and am. Where it comes out is not in my hands, any more than Palm Sunday and Passion Week were in Jesus’ hands.

If I make the change in my own life, then I can look for others who believe in the same change. Together we can live for it, and nothing in this world can prevent it. So I am singing *Hosanna!* again, and I hope you are too.