

# **“Jesus, Riding a Donkey, Speaks out on the Separation of Church and State”**

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Unity Church–Unitarian**

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## **CALL TO WORSHIP**

In a time of great national turmoil, Frederick Douglass wrote fervently,

Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground.

They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters.

This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle.

Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will.

Is the agitation of which Douglass wrote always the path to success as we strive for social justice?

What from the teachings of Jesus can be instructive? Frederick May Eliot told us that if Jesus means anything to Unitarians it will be only because “we have discovered that his life and teachings can in a measure satisfy a *supremely important spiritual necessity*”.

Today let us gather seeking to satisfy a supremely important spiritual necessity and seeking, as well, the ways of justice.

Come, let us worship together.

## **RESPONSIVE AFFIRMATION:**

To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people.

*It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets, or robes.*

All peoples are members of the same body, created from one essence.

*If fate brings suffering to one member*

The others cannot stay at rest.

## **READING: from the Gospel according to Mark**

His friends brought a colt to Rabbi Jesus, and they threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on the donkey and rode into Jerusalem. Many people spread THEIR cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. They were shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord; Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor King David! Hosanna in the highest heaven."

Then Jesus entered Jerusalem, and went into the temple...

There he began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves...

He was teaching and saying: "Is it not written, 'my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people?' But you have made it a den of robbers."

## **SERMON**

The young rabbi paused on a hilltop, got off his donkey, looked out over the city, and broke down crying. Choking back the tears, he said 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 wept, and climbing back on his donkey, rode on into the city. There he would engage in symbolic protest, non-violent direct action we might call it, in a foolhardy attempt to usher in a new social order – to demonstrate, to display the things that make for peace.

How can you see the only way the world can be saved and not be forced to weep? And can we see it this morning, and shed our own tears? Will we recognize 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 punctuated by a powerful body of teaching and vivid images of courage and outrage. We could perhaps use a bit of that this morning: Power, courage, outrage.

Believe it or not, that was what I hoped when I gave a playful title to this sermon: "Jesus, Riding on a Donkey, Speaks Out on Separation of Church and State."

When I thought up the title I was reflecting on the recent Presidential campaign, 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 helped hand the election to the party of the radical religious right.

That needs some explaining.

Those of us on the progressive side in the campaign — and I confess to having been a low-level campaign operative, so I can say “we”, and invite you to include yourself in that if you fit — we tended to talk about issues like abortion, and marriage rights, and economic opportunity — in the most antiseptic and secular language we could possibly find.

When pressed, we sometimes said we were doing that because we believed in “separation of church and state.”

I believe that was 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 keep the government from running the churches 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, you may be asking, 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.

This past Christmas season, in a Massachusetts town that we shall call “Middletown,” residents passing by the old town hall were refreshed by the crisp air, and by the familiar seasonal display on the lawn of that town hall: a life size crèche, a depiction in moveable 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 said the crèche violated the constitutional separation of church and state.

And so there began an effort by the town mothers and fathers to save the nativity scene, and to stay out of court. City council members decided they could avoid a fuss if they somehow surrounded the holy family with a secular seasonal display. Everyone in town was invited to bring cast off decorations: Santa Claus dolls, reindeer, candy canes and all such. And to surround the crib of the baby Jesus, there were found several enormous, inflatable Winnie the Pooh balloons.

What was produced was described as “somewhat jarring aesthetically.” In other words: one hell of a silly mess.

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 asked: "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 line if not the 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.

In the first story, secularists who are, I am sure, well-intentioned, are inflating Winnie the Pooh dolls to protect their village from traditional symbolism associated with the Prince of Peace, the coming of hope into the world.

In the second story, a rabbi risks his life to stand against the economic system of enslavement. It is a difference in more than degree:

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. Jesus was concerned instead with destroying a million-ton temple that was bleeding the poor people dry.

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.

And those unable to pay the tax suffered in sin, 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. 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 saved, 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 the way 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 and even spiritual growth, it nevertheless had become too corrupt.

A moment if I may for counterpoint: Last year, the American Civil Liberties Union detected a tiny cross among many other historical symbols on the official seal of the city of Los Angeles, California. It nearly took a magnifying glass to find it, but find it they did, and then brought the considerable resources of the ACLU to bear to eradicate it. And they did.

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 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 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.

Among our brothers and sisters in faith in Transylvania, I have seen enough of the pain and legacy of laws that attempt to banish religion from the public square. It was called communism, was in fact totalitarianism, and it was an ugly thing that sought the most radical separation of church and state in history.

"Dear American Civil Liberties Union," my 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: not because he believed in social action, but because he believed in God. There he upset the tables of the moneychangers. These were not Thomas Cook kiosks: this was the central bank of a corrupt nation.

Next, he drove out the sellers of doves. For indeed, who bought doves for sacrifice? Only those too poor to bring a more substantial animal, the poorest of the poor. Then Jesus called attention to the widow who paid a penny in temple tax, hoping to win forgiveness of sin. Called attention to her not because he admired what she had done, but because he wanted all to see how widows were exploited.

To put it in contemporary terms: How would we feel about a destitute widow tricked into giving her last dollars to a wealthy television evangelist, who is often invited to the White House? When religion blesses exploitation, it becomes empty piety obscuring deception, far less than holy and little short of hell.

Fredrick May Eliot wrote that moral arrogance is a most deadly form of sin. If that is true, sin now abounds in America. Moral arrogance, Eliot argued, is constituted by rousing passion and action and determination—WITHOUT corresponding humility and self-examination.

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...

Go up on the mountaintop of your imagination, and look out over your city. 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 mountain top 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 go down the mountain, into the city, and join them.

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