

# One More Redeemer

Palm Sunday  
April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009

The great beat poet Charles Olson wrote:

*Love*

*(down, to my soul:*

*assume your nature as yourself,*

*for the love of God*

*not even good enough*

*Stories only the possibility of discrete men and women*

*There is no intelligence the equal of the situation*

*There are only two ways:*

*Create the situation (and this is love)*

*Or avoid it. This also can be Love.*

We decided to “create the situation,” and so our first child was born. As is the custom among us the time came for him to be dedicated. The ceremony was included in a Sunday morning service at the first congregation I served. Janne and I asked a dear colleague of ours to preside at the ceremony. Having chosen to name the child, Jonah, I chose the psalm from that story as the reading by which to frame his naming. The psalm is a cry for help. I chose it to express, in part, I have to confess, a certain reluctance I felt mingled with my gratitude, excitement and pride at becoming a father.

*Out of my distress I cried to Yahweh*

*and he answered me;*

*from the belly of Sheol I cried,*

*and you have heard my voice.*

*You cast me into the abyss, into the heart of the sea,*

*and the flood surrounded me.*

*All your wave, your billows washed over me...  
But I, with a song of praise,  
will sacrifice to you.  
The vow I have made, I will fulfill.  
Salvation comes from Yahweh.*

And then we held him in our arms, that little Prince of Peace, one more redeemer. As our beloved colleague Jon, spoke Jonah's name and blessed both him and us, my reluctance was washed away by a love far deeper than any love I had ever previously known.

It's not by accident that today marks the beginning of a month of services focused on redemption. Today we join our Christian friends in marking Palm Sunday the day set aside to remember how Jesus turned toward Jerusalem despite the fact that he knew it would cost him his life. Today marks the beginning of the week the Christians call the Passion. The name fits these days well. These days and the stories retold in their passing each year touch us in our soul-deep places. We see the faces of the people rushing out to lay down palm fronds on the road to welcome him. We anticipate the tender scene at the Last Supper when he kneels down to wash their weary feet. We shudder at the memory of betrayal. We bow in silent witness as the prisoner passes by. Would that you and I might find the strength when he stumbles to pick up and carry that cross. Then, as the Passion deepens we find ourselves at, Calvary, at Golgotha and then as we stand before the tomb. And in the morning Easter comes, new hope, new possibilities and we are each and all redeemed.

The concept of redemption is closely allied to the notion of salvation. The Unitarian Universalist Christian tradition rejects the notion that Christ died on the cross to redeem us

from our sins. We have seen the damage done by the concept of redemptive suffering. It has been used to justify all manner of oppression. Given the agony Jesus suffered on the cross who are you to complain, you women, you Jews, you slaves. But there are other ways to understand redemption and we would be wise to consider the concept at depth.

The Hebrew word, *go'el*, which is usually translated as “redemption,” is found in context to mean, “to buy back one’s relatives from slavery.” Though Jesus knew that turning toward Jerusalem would cost his life, he did so anyway not to fulfill some cosmic plan but to declare the Jubilee. He turned to Jerusalem to buy us back from slavery. He stood in the line of the prophets. Despite his reluctance to give up the life he obviously loved, he turned toward the city to declare an end to slavery, to set the people free. The central message of the gospel is that, in the name of love, each and all of us are called to be redeemers. That is to purchase the freedom of our relatives, or might we say, the freedom of our neighbors all of whom live, to some degree, in spiritual slavery and far too many of whom still live bound in chains of poverty and oppression.

When we turn toward Jerusalem ourselves we are choosing life. The reluctance I felt when I first became a father I know now grew out of the existential reality each of us ultimately must reconcile. How do we live with the fact that having been born we will inevitably die? How can I hold my newborn son in my arms, knowing even he will die and still despite that knowing find my way to joy? When we woke up from the long nightmare of redemptive suffering it dawned on us that joy had suddenly become a holy obligation.

*Earth, off from work, lucky one, play now  
with us children. We want to catch you,  
jubilant earth. The most joyous succeeds.*

The scene in Mark 10 when Jesus reprimands the Disciples for shooing away the little children is more than just a charming moment. “For I tell you solemnly,” he says, “anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” This passage points to what I mean when I say that joy becomes a holy obligation. Little children have no idea they are bound to die. Their faith in the world is born of their innocence. The faith that sets us free, the faith that gives us the courage to turn toward our own Jerusalem is born of joy not bred by duty.

Unitarian Universalist theologian, Sharon Welch, writes in her classic *A Feminist Theology of Risk*: “We are moved to moral action by love and hope, not by guilt or duty. It is painful to learn that we’ve caused others harm, either as individuals or as members of a dominant social group. Change occurs when the response to this knowledge is not guilt but repentance, a deep commitment to make amends and to change patterns of behavior. Such changes are not losses but gains, opportunities to live out our love and respect for others. (she goes on) Mary Daly (one of the pioneers of feminist theology) describes this process as “learning innocence.”

Learning innocence is welcoming the kingdom of God like a little child. It is not denial. Death will come. It is rather the simple and powerful understanding that the Holy is not acting on us from beyond but something acting through us from within. Just as we reject the notion of redemptive suffering, that we are somehow saved by Jesus’ suffering on the cross, we also reject any singular image of God as

inherently idolatrous. Welch writes: “I affirm...the plurality of images of divinity and experiences of divinity, a plurality best acknowledged by referring to divinity, not as a noun or even a verb, but as an adjective or adverb. Divinity then connotes a quality of relationships, lives, events, and natural processes that are worthy of worship, that provide orientation, focus, and guidance to our lives.”

Each child born is one more redeemer. When Welch suggests that we embrace “the plurality of images and experiences of divinity” she is affirming that the spark of the divine is in you and me and everyone. “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” What once was called the kingdom of God we now call the Beloved Community. And you and I who long to enter it, you and I who long to turn toward new Jerusalem, toward the realm of mutual respect, will need to cultivate a studied innocence. Though we will have to find our way together there are ways in which each of us will also walk alone. We cannot afford to wait for the messiah but neither can we afford to imagine ourselves less powerful than we actually can be.

Kate Rushin, an African-American feminist poet, clearly knows something about the dangers of self-aggrandizement and of idolatry and the particular power that is in us. She writes:

*I am not a Black Goddess,  
I am not a Black Goddess,  
Look at me  
Look at me  
I do what I can  
That’s about it  
Sometimes I make it. Sometimes I don’t...*

*I still get Night Terrors  
And sometimes it takes me weeks to  
Answer a letter or make a phone call  
I am not a Black Goddess  
I am not a Black Goddess*

*Once though I was Harriet Tubman*

May it be so and let the people say, amen.