

“The God Jesus Knew,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill  
on Sunday, March 28, 2010

When I was in fifth grade, my parents took me out of school for a couple of days to visit Washington, DC. I thought everything about that trip was cool, even something my parents didn't plan on. We were there during the 1971 May Day protests, the last big protest against the Vietnam War. I remember looking out the window of our hotel room and seeing soldiers with rifles on the rooftops. The protesters had been camping out just down the street, around the Washington Monument, and were trying to shut down the Federal government. To avert this, soldiers with weapons and tear gas herded them through the streets of DC. Over 12,000 people were arrested, the largest mass arrest in our history.

Today is Palm Sunday, which marks the day when Jesus and his followers entered Jerusalem for the festival of Passover, and the start of what's called holy week. When I try to imagine what that procession into Jerusalem was like, I see it as a dusty Mediterranean version of what I witnessed in Washington in 1971: a ragtag group of protesters coming to the seat of power, where the authorities were determined to use any means necessary to maintain their control. Jesus must have known that things weren't likely to end well. And he went anyway. How come? Why didn't he just stay out in the country, where the crowds liked him and he had a successful ministry?

Almost two thousand years later, Martin Luther King and his new wife Coretta were living in Boston, Martin finishing up his doctorate at BU and Coretta her music studies at the New England Conservatory. They liked the freedom of living in the north, but decided to go back to the segregated South because, King writes, they felt “something of a moral obligation to return—at least for a few years.”<sup>1</sup> There was work to do there.

And they never left. Fourteen years later, in 1968, King went to Memphis to support the sanitation workers there. And that's where he was killed. On the night before he died, he said “Like anybody I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up the mountain. And I've looked over. And I have seen the promised land. And I may not get there with you,” he said, “but I want you to know, tonight, that we as a people will get to the promised land!”

Why would you go to a place where you know it's dangerous, where you might even be killed? Why did Jesus go to Jerusalem, and King to Memphis? Why do soldiers go off to war, and police and firefighters go to work? I imagine they would answer, in one

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*.

way or another, “because I have to.” “It’s my job,” or “It’s my calling,” or “They need me.”

I don’t think Jesus went to Jerusalem because he thought his death was part of God’s plan. I don’t think it’s ever part of God’s plan for there to be suffering or human sacrifice. Jesus went to Jerusalem because he couldn’t not go. His ministry was about standing with those at the margins and loving them, and about speaking truth to power. Martin Luther King went to Memphis for the same reason, because there were poor people there who needed his help. Doing God’s will meant standing with those in need, using his power to help others.

Jesus was one who felt particularly close to God. He was able, more than most of us, to be a conduit for God’s love. He was what Marcus Borg calls a “spirit person,” a holy person, one “to whom the sacred is an experiential reality.”<sup>2</sup> That’s where his power came from. It’s what made him so attractive to some people, and so threatening to others, those interested in preserving their own power. But he wasn’t the only one. There are people in our own day—Desmond Tutu, Thich Nhat Hanh, Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama—come to mind.

Some of you will have recognized the story I told a few minutes ago as a story that Jesus told, called the parable of the prodigal son. Back then, like now, there were folks who were primarily concerned with the rules, with doing things right. They believed God was like that—that God was a judge and disciplinarian, an angry man up in the sky. Some of us grew up with that idea too.

But that was not Jesus’ experience of God. He told this story, and others like it, to show people that God wasn’t anything like they imagined. The God that Jesus knew was close and present, like a loving parent. Not a distant judge, but one who longed to be in relationship, one who was always calling people to come to their senses and to come back home. Like those parents in the story I just told—who were overjoyed when the one who was lost had been found.

Do you know what ‘prodigal’ means? “Spendthrift or extravagant to a degree bordering on recklessness.”<sup>3</sup> It’s been said that the real prodigal in the story is not the child, but the parent, who gives love freely, whether it is deserved or not. Jesus said that is what God is like.

If we have trouble believing this, it’s because we have not known much unconditional love. We live in a world that is always keeping score of right and wrong, counting the cost, telling us where we stand in the pecking order.<sup>4</sup> But Jesus saw a different country, where you can always go home, and be welcomed with open arms. No matter

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time*

<sup>3</sup> Microsoft Encarta® World English Dictionary.

<sup>4</sup> I’m grateful to David Lose, at [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org), for his essay, “The Prodigal Son and the Country of God,” which helped inform my thoughts for this sermon.

how long you've been gone, no matter what you've done, no matter who you've disappointed or failed or hurt. The God Jesus knew is the God who is always calling us to come to our senses and come back home. To take responsibility for our actions, to make amends if necessary—but not to dwell on the past or be imprisoned by it. This is the same God Martin Luther King knew. When the society said, “You are a second-class citizen because of the color of your skin,” he knew that was not true, because his God had said, “I have made you in my image and you are precious in my sight.”

That's the God I choose to give my heart to. The one who is more loving and more generous than we can imagine; who is always calling us to come to our senses and to come home.

When you know that you are loved, just as you are, when you really know this, then you are capable of some extraordinary things. You can be good to yourself. You can reach out in love and concern for others. You can stand up for those who are not able to stand up for themselves. You can even, sometimes, put your life on the line. Martin Luther King went to Memphis. Jesus went to Jerusalem. Not because it was part of some grand plan, but because they each knew where they needed to be, and who they needed to be standing with. And they were willing, if necessary, to pay the cost.

If I had only one sermon to preach, it would be this: “God loves you. So please, start acting like it.” Please trust that, even if you can't sense it right now, there is a presence in the world that is on the side of love and of justice and that is rooting for you. This church exists to proclaim that love, and not only that, to help you put that love into action. To create a place where you can feel its presence, where you can get an infusion of that love, so you can take it with you wherever you go.

A few years ago I heard a story. It's told by a man<sup>5</sup> who, when he was in college, was trying to be an artist. He had a small studio in one of the buildings on campus, and he would go there at night and work. Many days, he said, he wondered why he did this. His art wasn't particularly good, he didn't seem to be making any progress, nor did he have much hope that anyone else was ever going to notice his work. But he kept on going to that studio. Through a long winter, he'd trudge through the snow, go up to that room, turn on the lights and work, all alone, for a few hours, before he'd go back to his dorm and go to sleep.

Finally spring came. One day, walking across campus, another student stopped him. “Hey,” the other student said, “aren't you the guy who has a studio in the building at the edge of the quad?” The artist said, “Yes, that's me.” “Well,” the student said, “I need to thank you. You see, this year I've been really depressed. I wondered at times why I kept on going, and I even thought of taking my life. I live in a dorm across from your studio. And plenty of nights this winter I sat there, alone and sad, and wondered ‘What's the point?’ But every night, around the same time, I'd see the light come on in

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<sup>5</sup> My recollection is that this story was told by Daniel Pinkwater on National Public Radio.

your studio. I knew you were there, working, being productive, staying late. And this gave me hope. If there was one person who had the faith to keep plugging along, then I had some hope that all wasn't lost, that maybe, someday, I could find my own work, my own purpose. And things are better now. I'm getting help. So thank you. You helped save my life."

That is why we are here. This church exists to be a beacon of hope for those who are lost and trying to find their way home, a place that reminds people who they are, and who God is, and who their sisters and brothers are. We don't always get to know what kind of impact we are having. Sometimes it may seem we're not making much of a difference at all. But that's why they call it faith.

The truth is, we plant seeds that one day will grow. We do our part, knowing it is incomplete and imperfect, but it is a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.<sup>6</sup> There is a force at work in the world. It is more loving and more generous than we can imagine.

Our job is to know that we are loved, and then to share that love with others. As the hymn says, "We are builders of that city."<sup>7</sup> That's why we're here--to join hands and do our part to heal and bless our world.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> These words from "The Romero Prayer," by Bishop Ken Untener.

<sup>7</sup> "Hail the Glorious Golden City," words by Felix Adler, #140 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.