

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY
Fifth Sunday in Lent - March 28, 2004
Anne G. Cohen

John 12:1-8

For Our Reflection:

Love remembered and consecrated by grief belongs, more clearly than the happy intercourse of friends, to the eternal world; it has proved itself stronger than death.

- W.R. Inge, Personal Religion and the Life of Devotion (1924)

Grief and Spirit

I've known Jeshua most of my life. His family came to Jerusalem from Galilee for one of the Holy Festivals when we were quite young. They stayed with us for several weeks and that was the beginning of a lifetime.

Our parents were of the same social class and our fathers were business associates. More than that, our parents held similar political views -

deep resentment toward the military occupation of our country by Rome,

thorough disgust with an economic system that held so many landless and destitute while others of us flourished financially,

passionate anger for the lack of compassion human beings seem to have for one another,

serious disagreement with religious purity laws that shunned people because of their ill-health or bad luck or living conditions or even their time of the month.

These are the things our parents and their friends would discuss around the dinner table - the women adding comments as they served a variety of food for physical and mental digestion - the children alternately listening and demanding attention or slipping away to play outside. Once we had turned thirteen we were allowed to sit at the adult table. It was not hard to hear the depth of feeling and belief in the voices of our parents, see the intent on their faces.

We were also allowed to study Torah - girls along with the boys. We knew that this was forbidden in most Jewish families - which made it all the more exciting and intriguing. And Jeshua, having started HIS studies soon after he learned to talk, amazed all of us with his insights and ability to make modern sense out of the ancient texts. He was destined to be a Rabbi.

Jeshua and I grew up together in this extended family of Zealots and social change agents. We were children of privilege with working class values and soft hearts. I wasn't surprised when Jeshua joined forces with his cousin and committed acts of civil disobedience. I wasn't surprised by how quickly he rose to leadership within the movement and gained followers from all economic strata and any number of ideologies. He was always a persuasive speaker and a great storyteller. He was smarter than most. He had chutzpah and charisma - and he wasn't afraid of being judged for his idiosyncrasies.

When we lost our fathers, within a year of each other, we became closer than ever. My brother, Lazarus, took Martha and me - still unmarried - into his household. Jeshua's brothers - some of whom were more economically stable than Jeshua - took his mother into their's.

And then it was our generation's turn to step up to the table, host the gatherings of our dissident extended family, mind the children, feed the clan and join the flow of conversation between kitchen and fireside and front yard.

And it was our turn to plan political insurrections, organize the working poor and laboring classes into forces to reckon with, protest the desecrations of our holy places, the rapes of our women and the murders of our compatriots by crude and cruel Roman soldiers and madmen like Pontius Pilate.

That evening, a week before Passover, I knew what the guys were planning to do. Lazarus was offering the use of our donkey, James and John were talking excitedly about getting support in the street from several Zealot groups and labor unions. I knew the risks they were taking by enacting the retaking of Jerusalem by her rightful priest-king - one descended from the House of David. And I knew that there was an excellent chance that I'd never see Jeshua's face again - unless it was hanging from a Roman tree of death - or appearing to me in a dream from the depths of my memory.

When my father was dying, I'd had several months with him - taking care of his bodily needs, sitting with him and reading scripture to him. I would bathe him and calm him when fevers would take his mind to unholy places. And I would rub his hands until his breathing became even and he would fall asleep.

When he died, Martha and I prepared his body for burial. We were generous with the oils and careful with each detail. It was our last chance to honor him, to show him how much we loved him. It was an extension of the grief we had been expressing for months by caring for

him as our mother might have done.

All of this was crowding my mind that evening as I heard the men planning their street action.

Jeshua wasn't the only one who had a flare for the dramatic.

So, knowing full well that I might be perceived as wasteful or foolish - and knowing full well that the only time one has to show someone that you love and honor them is while they are alive and breathing and in the same room with you -

I acted deliberately and with emotional clarity.

If Jeshua was going to ride into the City as King, then I would anoint him so that he might reign - however briefly - with God's blessing.

If he was going to walk right into the face of his own execution, then I would prepare his body for burial right now - even though burial was a rite denied crucified prisoners whose bodies are left to predators and the elements.

Knowing full well that I was losing him - my life long friend and brother, compatriot and soul mate - I could NOT stand by and say nothing or do nothing. I found the jar of perfumed oil - the one we had not needed for our father's burial. And, without a word (unusual for me), I anointed Jeshua - Priest/King and beloved dead brother. There was a silence that fell in that room and I didn't dare look up.

My hair got all tangled in with my apron as I wiped the oil from his calves and feet. By this time I was crying - overwhelmed by anticipatory grief and a sense of helplessness in the face of what must be done by ALL of us. There was a feeling of inevitability that took us over that night. And all I could do was hold his feet and let the tears scar my face on their way to the floor.

The rest you already know. Judas was disgusted with me for wasting a year's wages for a laborer on a symbolic act. I kind of agreed with him - but I couldn't undo what I had done. And I know NOW that it HAD to be done - and Judas had to work out his own sad response to the impending demonstrations in Jerusalem.

I am left with a confusing mixture of emotions.

I feel grief at the loss of Jeshua's physical presence in my life - the emptiness of our house without his laughter and intensity and rage for justice.

I feel pride - knowing that for one day, the rightful King of Jerusalem ruled - temporarily deposing the Roman puppets - and proving that God's covenant with our tribes was alive and active in the hearts of Jews - even in the heart of occupied Jerusalem.

I feel gratitude for having been a part of such an important time in the history of our people - and such a meaningful time in our family. And I do not regret having shown Jeshua my heart and my tears before he left us behind to deal with the aftermath.

I feel empty and full, grateful and grief-stricken, proud and exhausted, broken-hearted and hopeful. And I am convinced, now more than ever, that Ruah - God's Spirit - God's Breath - was embodied here - in all of us - in these times - in these places - in these beating hearts - as we tried to make a difference.

BULLETIN

WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship

When the journey gets too hard,
when we feel depleted,
when our compassion turns to complaining,
when our efforts toward justice and mercy
seem to get us nowhere,
it's time to remember the humility part -
that it is God who has made us and not we ourselves;
that the saving of the world or even one part of it
is not on our shoulders.
It is then we can come unto God, and God will give us rest.
With rest we'll remember
what it is we are about.

+ Hymn of Our Tradition There Is A Balm In Gilead Hymnal # 553

+ Lament Psalm (unison)

O God, have you forgotten my name?
How long will you leave me in this pit?
I sang hosannas all the days of my life
and waved palm branches greened in the new spring world.
Rich only in promises from you, I followed - believing,
and then they killed him
whom I loved more than my own life (even that you taught me).

They killed him whom you gave to me.
They killed him without a thought for justice or mercy,
and I sit now in darkness - hosannas stuck in my throat.

Why should I wave palm branches
or look for Easter mornings?
O God, why did you name me Rachel?
A cry goes up out of Ramah, and it is my cry!
Rachel will not be comforted!
Don't you hear me, you whose name is Emmanuel?
Won't you come to me?
How long must I wait on this bed of pain
without a candle to ward off the night?

Come, Holy One,
feed to me a taste of your shalom.
Come, lift to my lips a cup of cold water
that I might find my voice
to praise you here in the pit.
Pull forth the hosannas from my parched lips,
and I will sing to all of your everlasting goodness,
for then the world will know that my God is a God of promise
who comes to me in my darkness.

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)
Creator God who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the kingdom and the power
And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

Our God is a God of promise who comes to us in our darkness.

Sung Response "Hallelujah. God be praised!" (CSB #5 Refrain)

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

Just Peace Reflection

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Gospels John 12:1-8

Solo *O Divine Redeemer* Gounod
Bob Erickson, vocal * Rebecca Dekker, piano

Sermon Grief and Spirit

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response In Solitude Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts to **ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING**

Offering Hymn The Gifts That You Gave Me CSB # 68

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

Were the whole realm of nature mine,

That were a present far too small;

Love so amazing, so divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all.

+ Sending Hymn These Hills CSB # 92

+ Benediction (unison)

God of All, I will walk by the river of hope,

and you will find me there,

and you will reach out your hand

and push the heavens back into place,

and I will kneel and give thanks,

for you will be with me.

You will put the stars back in the sky.

+ Sung Response (we gather in some semblance of a circle)

Hymnal #433 v.3

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;

In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.

In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,

Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

+ Postlude

WORSHIP NOTES

Call to Worship is by Ann Weems, Kneeling in Jerusalem (p.58)

Lament Psalm One is by Ann Weems, Psalms of Lament (pp.1-2)

Prayer of Dedication is from the Pilgrim Hymnal (#177, v.4)

Benediction is by Ann Weems, Psalms of Lament (pp.70-71) adapted