

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY
Palm Sunday - April 4, 2004
Anne G. Cohen

Isaiah 50:4-9

Matthew 21:1-11 (John 12:9-19)

T'ai Chi Ch'uan: The Internal Tradition by Ron Sieh

For Our Reflection:

...I who have peered into
The meadows of his peace, sat
At the feet of his influence
And eaten disciples' bread,
Have not unlearned the old lessons,
The killing wisdom of the race.
There is no maze like the heart
That loves self, and hates that love,
And hungry, eats itself for food.

- from a psalm by Jim White, Campus Minister

The Moth and the Colt: The T'ai Chi of Being

T'ai Chi: Riding the wave before...the punch...is critical...
Before the hand comes a field, a wave of pressure that can
move the dodger ahead of it...[One must] cultivate[e] a quality
of lightness. [One] must be sensitive like a feather in the wind
yet firmly planted in the ground...continually listening to [one's]
partner. (p.95)

From the time that I was three years old - through my teen years - my
family spent many summer vacations at Red Rock Crossing in Oak Creek
Canyon near Sedona, Arizona.

Every day we climbed on the rocks and played in the creek.

Every day was very much the same and yet very different.

Every day the sun rose behind the black shadow of Cathedral Rock and, in
the heat of the day, we would make pools by moving rocks and we would
float in inner tubes down rushing channels.

Every afternoon at 3:00 a thunder storm would drive us out of bathing
suits and into town clothes; we would go into Sedona on the wet, red
roads to buy groceries for dinner and collect bottle caps from soda
machines.

And every evening, after the storm would drift away and the inevitable
sunset would catch Cathedral Rock on fire with its own color, after
dinner was cleaned up and the redhot coals of the campfire had settled
into the dirt, we would go to sleep in the deep, damp darkness - bright

with stars and the sound of crickets.

Every day the world of Oak Creek would change - affected by our play - affected in spite of our play.

We would move rocks - the water would shift them again, slowly taking away the rough edges and then the smooth ones - the rain would fall, drop by drop, on each leaf and stone carrying tiny pieces of the great Cathedral into the creek, tumbling with them down and down and down, surrendering to the natural motion - resting momentarily by our feet and then tumbling on down the canyon.

We may have noticed...from year to year...the abrupt appearance of delicate changes. But, if we noticed things at all, we noticed most the changes in ourselves from year to year. We noticed how fragile and small things looked because we were older or bigger or touched by important moments that had moved us from one state of being to another, from one consciousness to a new awareness.

One summer evening, when I was still very young, my brother Todd and I found a man down the road. The man seemed old to us, not much hair, and he was seated, working on something with his hands - close to the ground and to us. The man had stretched two ropes between two trees. Between the ropes he had stretched a flat, white sheet. Behind the sheet he had placed the brightest lantern we had ever seen. We were drawn through the trees to the large expanse of white light - much like the moths were drawn - to perch on the sheet and enjoy the curiousness of light in the center of the vast darkness and the sound of crickets.

What I remember most were the sizes and colors of the night moths that hovered on that square of light - huge moths - with cool pastel colors rippling across fragile wings that moved softly and silently in the light. I had always thought that moths were those tough little white things that ate our sweaters in the dresser drawer.

But these - these were beyond imagination - they were immense in my mind - in the light. And they flew with me into my future years and back into the past when I wandered there in search of identity and meaning and answers to the abrupt and delicate changes inside of me.

T'ai Chi: [It is sad but true that] having an enemy gives us credentials...a reference point. I know I exist because someone else is fighting me. Narrowly defined boundaries establish their existence; space is terrifying. (p.5-6)

There have always been conflicts, wars, people who considered other people their enemy. There is a certain sense of identity that comes from being in opposition to something else. Much of my early

theological identity, my ideas about God, were formed in opposition to things I was being taught in seminary. But how pale those ideas seem now in comparison to those that have shaped my consciousness since then...

Many centuries ago a man lived - a man who's sense of identity was shaped by his people, a man who's compassion and sense of justice went deep, a man who's response to oppression was personal AND communal, prophetic and poetic. He took on the identity of Israel and wrote these words from the exile of Babylon - as if Israel were he and he were Israel:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary.
Morning by morning he wakens, he wakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,
I turned not backward.
I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who
pulled out the beard;
I hid not my face from shame and spitting.
For the Lord helps me; therefore I have not been confounded;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me.
Behold, the Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty?
Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up. (Isaiah 50:4-9)

Israel had no power but the power of surrender. Within surrender was groundedness, an identity based not on opposition but surrender itself - surrender in relationship to God and to self and to one another. Once liberated from physical captivity and exile, Israel knew who she was. And her captors? The Babylonians found that the instability of power-over-others toppled them - they lost their balance and their identity, their groundedness, the integrity of the fabric of their being. "The moth will eat them up...." Israel said... those giant moths in the night that have no power but their beauty and their cover of darkness and their identity and their will to survive and their instinct to find the light. In her vulnerability, Israel survived...Israel was changed, but she endured.

T'ai Chi: When our partner "goes into reaction" over what we are doing or what we represent, we can steer him to his own defeat.

If we meet another's movement with resistance, we disclose what we identify with - that which is vulnerable - and give our partner the route that leads to it. The priority...is to not resist the intention of our partner...[but to be elusive and to disappear.] (p.91)

Five centuries after the fall of Babylon another man lived - a man whose sense of identity was shaped by his people, a man whose compassion and sense of justice went deep, a man whose response to oppression was personal AND communal, prophetic and poetic. This man identified with his ancestors in faith. Within him were Moses and David, Esther and Rachel, Zechariah and Isaiah - Isaiah of the Exile - Isaiah who pounded in his heartbeat - like an enormous moth in his chest - as Jesus approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus knew he would die - someday - we all do, you know. He knew he would die - but may not have known it would be in less than a week.

He may not have known that death was so near. But he knew that death hovers in every moment and that danger lurked in the shadows of that roadside, the shadowed streets of Jerusalem.

Jesus knew that his opposition to the occupation of his country by Rome and his historical claim to the throne had drawn the attention of an armed force that promised to annihilate him.

He also knew that his teachings had been unusual, that his actions had broken some traditional religious laws, that his miracles of healing and affirmation had startled some vulnerable members of the religious hierarchy - in occupied Jerusalem - into positions of defensiveness.

He knew that his inexplicable connection to God created fear in those who could explain everything but that.

Jesus knew that his cultic "raising of Lazarus from the dead" - his final and most desperate attempt to connect his friends, his people, his community to the sacredness of their own relationship with God and with each other - he knew that this ritual resurrection of Lazarus had created self-proclaimed enemies.

His own identity revealed - drove others to seek their identity in opposition - and he was now in danger.

His self-proclaimed enemies were projecting their own ugliness onto the one they feared, accusing him of seeking power over others, accusing him of undermining their established order, their sense of meaning and reason, their relationship to the holy and to each other.

It is understandable that, even if a point of view seems skewed to someone else, it can seem to be the foundation and rock and ground of being for the person holding that point of view. It is frightening to have that foundation rocked, challenged, shifted, pulled out from under

them. Identity and balance are lost - and in order to regain equilibrium, a person might find new ground, a new identity in opposition to the perceived enemy.

Jesus knew his danger. He listened well, he had heard his people deeply. Accused of seeking power, he lifted Zechariah's familiar words from their common past into their common present:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt, the foal of an ass. (Zechariah 9:9)

Isaiah pounded in his chest, "The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I turned not backward. I gave my back to the smiters..." (Is.50:5-6a) Zechariah's words pounded like wings in his mind. And Jesus surrendered to the attack of his self-styled enemies, grounding his power in humility, trading their horse and chariot for his baby donkey, a colt - arriving under their expectations and catching them off balance, off guard, without resistance, with his own identity intact.

T'ai Chi: Thich Naht Han teaches that if I am told by another that I am ugly or unworthy, I am moved...mere words affect me. Actions more so... Not that I AM ugly, but that another would try to hurt me so. We are connected, deeply; we are one being at war with itself. (p.98)

Those that would attack Jesus and those who praised him and called upon him to save them - were the same people. Many had been present at the resurrection of Lazarus. Some reported his influence and power in the community to their Roman superiors. Others were afraid and ran to report the blasphemous miracle to the temple. Some became believers and wanted Jesus to touch and heal them too, "Hosannah," they cried, "Save us too." All those present were moved, were changed. Each one was changed differently, minutely, imperceptibly, utterly. Each one was changed - all were connected, deeply.

The people of Jerusalem - those in the streets and those who stayed home, the temple hierarchy, Jesus, the disciples, the Roman soldiers - all of the people of Jerusalem at that moment were One Being - One Being at war with itself.

All were moved, changed, transformed - whether they noticed it or not. And the world itself shifted, creating new ways of being, offering new

perspectives,
a new relationship with God, a new identity based not at all on
opposition to another, not at all on resistance to that which is
different, not at all on weakness or inferiority -
but grounded in the strength of sacred Beingness, moving on fragile and
powerful wings toward the light through the surrounding darkness,
surrendering to a larger self that includes all.

T'ai Chi: A warrior can cut through the [garbage] and touch another's
tenderness, the part that loves children, feels pain, and would
rather be friends. To do so takes power... A warrior walks his talk.
We have to be in touch with that part of US that loves children, feels
pain, and would rather be friends...With the power of surrender I
need not kill or even hurt. Their flame will die all by itself. I
need not interfere. (p.102)

When Jesus entered Jerusalem sitting on the colt, the city stirred,
saying "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus
from Nazareth of Galilee." (Matt. 21:10-11)

Jesus knew who he was, he knew his power and did not have to prove it to
anyone any more. They knew because he knew. Jesus knew his power and
knew that he was connected deeply to all those who loved him and all
those who feared him and all those who feared loving him. He knew that
people are not only their present selves, but all history as well - that
the ways of ancestors become present instincts -
that ancient metaphors become the mystery of tradition -
that the will to survive is often twisted into the lust for power over
others -
that fear feeds itself -
that evil only grows in opposition to resistance.

Jesus knew that fire dies without fuel or air, that momentum is lost
when the ground is level, that survival is more likely in an atmosphere
of trust and compassion, that the past does not have to haunt the
present - the past can hover in the air around the heads of those who
look to God for identity and meaning - the past is where our roots reach
and where our power comes from - as long as we live in the present and
push with vulnerability and humility and joy - with one another toward
the future.

The self-identified enemies of Jesus could not prove their ungrounded
fears. Their accusations were left hanging like a white sheet in the
dawn, tattered and torn by time and the wing prints of a thousand
moths. The enemies of Jesus ate with him one night and slept among his
prayers in the garden. The enemies of Jesus walked with him to Calvary,

two trees -

as a mysterious, old man called to the night butterflies with his light and called two children who hovered like moths at the edge of his presence - two children, one of whom was changed forever by the fluttering wings of his words - the magic of his light - his deference to the ephemerality of moths - the humility of his being - his surrender to his love of life and beauty - and his longing to find language for the sacred, the holy, the human.

T'ai Chi: [One must] cultivate[e] a quality of lightness. [One] must be sensitive like a feather in the wind yet firmly planted in the ground...continually listening to [one's] partner. (p.95)

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought...the colt, and put their garments on [it], and he sat thereon. (Matt.21:6-7)

And somewhere in the heart of Jesus, Isaiah whispered:

Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me...
Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up. (Isaiah 50:8-9)

Let us surrender to silence and be in prayer:

God of light who draws us like children to your mysterious presence, be in and within us now. Let recognition of you pound like wings in our hearts and lead us through the darkness to a sense of our own identity in relationship to you.

God of delicate change and motion, change and move us. Open us to new perspectives and generous attitudes, broaden our sense of understanding of who we are until we are all persons, one person at war and at peace with ourselves.

God of fragility and humility, lead us to surrender our need for power, to find empowerment in surrendering ourselves to you, yielding to spirit and the sacredness of being human.

God of grace and peace, draw us into communion with you and with one another in the breaking of bread and the raising of the cup, finding within the darkness a new hope and a new light, a light we have been known to call upon as Jesus, Messiah, Sustainer and Redeemer. Amen.

Communion

Invitation

All are welcome at this table. No one is ever turned away. You do not need to be a member of this or any church in order to participate in this communion meal for all persons are members of one another, sisters and brothers with Christ, children of God.

Words of Institution

. On his last night with his friends, Jesus took bread from the table...

. After supper, he took a cup from the table saying, "This is the cup of the new covenant" - a covenant founded on justice and peace, compassion and faith in God's future. Take and drink from this cup...

Blessing of the Elements

God, before us are only common elements, bread and grape juice. But they symbolize for us the presence of Jesus Christ among us, his humility, his power, his subtle transformation of those who knew him, his awesome transformation of the world. Let these common elements work changes in us, let them guide us to your light, let them make us one body at peace with ourselves, identified and unified in the name of all that is Holy. Amen.

Sharing of the Bread and Cup

Through the broken bread we participate in the body of Christ.

Through the cup of blessing we participate in the community of the new covenant established in the name of Christ.

Come to the table for all things are ready.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

We give thanks that through the sharing of this bread and cup we find ourselves at table with those of every age who feel the Universe filled with the Spirit of God, who love and serve justice, who have been touched by God's loving and compassionate hands. Sustain us with these gifts that our hearts and spirits may be strengthened by Your presence. Amen.

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 (unison)

When the people of God gather for worship,
the whole earth trembles and the angels sing.

+ Hymn of Celebration All Glory, Laud, and Honor Hymnal # 216

+ Responsive Prayer

One: God we come to you in this quiet morning seeking
calm within, needing a place apart from our busy lives.

Many: The chaos and motion, noise and neediness, stress
and pressure, frustration and panic have found their way
into our very souls, stealing what peace and strength we
might have had before.

One: God we come to you in this quiet morning having
internalized our enemies, having become those things
which will surely exhaust us, which may destroy us.

Many: Deliver us, O God, save us from the darkness
of the world that creeps within and becomes our own darkness.

One: Deliver us, O God, save us from the hatred and
prejudice of others that creeps in and becomes self-hatred,
self-destructiveness.

Many: Deliver us, O God, save us from our willingness to
meet evil on its own terms becoming that which we wish
to fight against.

One: Deliver us, O God, save us from all the things we
would do that would keep us from being your righteous ones.

Many: Deliver us, O God, save us from the ignorance of
ourselves that makes us strangers to you.

One: Surround us with a sense of who we are, fill us with
the knowledge of your light and peace until we can become
that light and peace.

Many: Allow us to rest in your strength until we are strong
enough to face our enemies and not become them.

All: God, we come to you in this quiet morning looking for
new ways of being, seeking new paths to walk in this journey
toward our Jerusalem. We want new insights to make us wise.
We need new energy for the holy work of loving one another
and ourselves. Speak to us that we might hear you. Hear us
that we might hear ourselves. Lead us as you led Jesus into

his Jerusalem so long ago. We pray in his name and with the words that he taught us to pray.

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.

(Please be seated for a Time of 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)

God delivers us from death into life with every breath.

Sung Response - Choir - special music

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer
Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

All gifts have their origin in You, O God, the source of all creative and healing energy. We rejoice when Your love finds a faint echo in our lives. We sense our destiny when Your grace moves through us to touch another. Help us to learn to be open and vulnerable to the needs of Your world and to respond with the generous spirit of Christ. Amen.

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

Just Peace Reflection

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Gospels Luke 19:28-40

Sermon The Moth and the Colt : A T'ai Chi of Being

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

Celebration of Holy Communion

+ Communion Hymn I Come With Joy

Hymnal #349 (vv.1,3,5)

Invitation

Sharing the Bread and the Cup

Communion will be served to you as you remain seated. Please wait until all have been served before eating the bread - and again before drinking the cup - to signify our unity with one another and with all who eat and drink at God's table this day.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (unison)

We give thanks that through the sharing of this bread and cup we find ourselves at table with those of every age who feel the Universe filled with the Spirit of God, who love and serve justice, who have been touched by God's loving and compassionate hands. Sustain us with these gifts that our hearts and spirits may be strengthened by Your presence. Amen.

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

+ Hymn of Preparation for Holy Week Were You There? Hymnal #229

+ Commissioning (unison)

Go forth remembering.

Death abides not on a hill called Golgotha,
but in every heart that makes room.

Life abides not outside a garden tomb in Jerusalem,
but in every heart that makes room.

+ 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. 65

Commissioning Ibid. p. 92