

The Fifth Smooth Stone: An Attitude of Ultimate Optimism

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein ©

Today is Palm Sunday in the Christian liturgical calendar. Palm Sunday, that glorious day when Jesus and his disciples made their triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Jesus riding on a donkey, palm branches strewn at his feet. Hosannas filled the air. High energy, high spirits, high hopes. Then just a few days later, disaster! Jesus arrested, tried, convicted and put to death. The disciples in shock, scattered in fear and shame; grief stricken and confused and disappointed. All of that leading, of course, to a most unlikely bit of good news just a week later. More on that next week at our Easter service.

Back to that Palm Sunday scene. It was crowded in Jerusalem because it was the time of Passover in the Jewish liturgical calendar. Many Israelites travelled to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover with family and friends. As Jesus and his disciples, observant Jews all, intended to do. The Passover is a ritual remembrance of the events of the Exodus. You could say that the Exodus text is also a story of highs followed by lows followed by unlikely good news. When Moses and his followers finally make the decision to leave their lives of enslavement, packing quickly and stealing away in the night, they must have felt a burst of adrenaline. And then, at the Red Sea, when the waters parted and they dashed to safety and watched the mighty army of the Pharaoh disappear under the water, well . . . they danced and sang and celebrated. High energy, high spirits, high hopes. Then, just a little while later, reality set in. They were nowhere. They had no food, no means of supporting themselves, no homes. They lost faith. They even suggested that it would have been better to live in slavery than die of hunger in the desert. But Moses and the people persisted, until eventually they arrived at the Promised Land.

The time between Palm Sunday and Easter was only 7 days. The time between fleeing Egypt and entering the Promised Land was 40 years. But both of those stories are stories of people who, in the face of calamity, fear, disappointment, loss, and confusion opted for an attitude of ultimate optimism. They had faith – in their God, in their leaders, in each other – faith that allowed them to persist and ultimately to prosper.

Let me tell you about another holiday that is coming up in about 7 weeks: Whitsunday. Whitsunday is the beginning of the Christian liturgical season of Pentecost, which is also a Jewish holiday. It comes 7 weeks after Passover, and Jewish tradition teaches that on this day, the Law, the Torah, was given to the people. As the apostles of Jesus, still observant Jews, gathered for Pentecost, it is said that the Holy Spirit descended upon them. The Book of Acts says, “And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Pretty dramatic stuff, and confusing too, at least at first. Some assumed that those speaking in strange languages were drunk. But Peter set them straight by pointing out that, “Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.” Peter knew it was the fulfillment of a prophesy, a time when God would pour out God’s spirit upon all flesh, a time when “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

The Pentecost, for those early Christians, was an experience of having their eyes, minds and hearts opened to the amazing potential of lives lived with the guidance of the Spirit. This was good news indeed for a group of people who were

frightened, disheartened, confused, and somewhat directionless after the death of their beloved leader.

You might say that the experience of the disciples on Whitsunday was the first uniquely Christian experience of the idea that revelation is continuous. The good news they received on that cacophonous and joyful day was that the death of Jesus did not mean the death of access to the wisdom and will of God. They would receive further instructions on the building of their emerging religious movement. Revelation is continuous!

Of course, we Unitarian Universalists believe that with all our hearts and souls. The continuity of revelation is the First Smooth Stone – the first core value affirmed by James Luther Adams. Remember Adams? The twentieth century Unitarian Universalist theologian who wrote the essay on the Five Smooth Stones of liberal religion that I've been preaching about on and off since last summer? To review, the reference to the Five Smooth Stones comes from the story of David, the shepherd boy who goes out to slay Goliath armed only with his slingshot and five carefully chosen stones. Adams used that image to remind us that when times are hard, when it seems like human progress is in trouble, we too have to go out and face the scary giants armed with the five smooth stones of liberal religion: the good news that revelation is continuous (from last March; I cannot believe I started this sermon series a whole year ago and am just getting around to finishing it!), the affirmation that all relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not coercion (from last June), the creation of just and loving community (from last July), the power of organization and the organization of power (last month), and finally, today, having an attitude of ultimate optimism.

The ability to be ultimately optimist rests partially on our faith in the continuity of revelation. By believing that Pentecost can and does happen over and over again – albeit in somewhat less dramatic fashion – we can trust in change and

progress. Now, the idea of continuing revelation is not unique to us, it is rather, the emphasis we give to it that is unique. We give it the largest place, to use Frederick May Eliot's words from our earlier reading. Furthermore, we give the largest place to human agency - our confidence comes not just from our belief that we will continue to receive instructions from the universe but from the belief that we can and will act in a positive way on those instructions. James Adams said, “. . . (religious) liberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism.”

Note that he uses the term ultimate optimism, as opposed to ‘immediate optimism.’ He cautions us that the state of the world at any given time may not bear out our belief that humans can, with the right attitude, think and work our way out of the morass and into a better world. Adams was not naïve, he had seen the worst that the 20th century had to offer, up close and personal, and felt it was essential for us to acknowledge the terrible evils perpetrated in the name of God and country across the globe. As I said in my sermon a year ago, Adams was in Germany studying theology when Hitler began his run for the throne. He knew evil first hand and the power evil had to corrupt people. But he was equally convinced that it was worth trying for better, and that it was possible to bring about a better world.

Adams believed that placing an attitude of ultimate optimism among the foundational ideas of Unitarian Universalism was justified because that attitude grows out of the other ideas – the other anchoring stones. It seems logical that if we believe as an article of faith that revelation is continuous there is reason to believe that things are meant to get better. But it is the other basics – those other three smooth stones – that really reinforce the cause for optimism. The three

essential principles and practices which intentionally create and sustain liberal religious communities:

- first our churches are true voluntary associates based on mutual and free consent. We constantly try to achieve a balance between radical individualism on one hand and authoritarianism on the other. We honor the inherent worth of every person without allowing ourselves to be torn apart by the competing needs and opinions of every person. We consent to sacrifice some of our own stuff for the common good.
- second our churches ought ideally to be oriented not inward but outward; mission-based congregations dedicated to bringing into being the community of justice and love. We don't come to church just to be comforted, though there are times when comfort is what we most need. We also come to be reminded that we cannot remain in our comfortable cocoons when others around us are suffering from poverty or injustice.
- third our churches understand that to be effective, they must have form; they must learn to embrace and not shun the organization of power and the power of organization. One of the greatest achievements of your leadership over the past few years has been to adapt their practices of policy governance in order to create a more nimble, responsive, open and transformative infrastructure. This has led to a great flowering of volunteerism, of a new wave of activism for environmental justice and human rights, of a hugely expanded ministry to young people aging out of foster care.

All the building blocks are here. So let's think for a moment about what it would mean to live out an attitude of ultimate optimism? It means feeling and sharing the joy of this faith. We are at time too fond of saying that Unitarian Universalism is a hard religion. It takes work. This is true – nobody hands us a set

of beliefs or even a set of behavioral guidelines. But the work is worth it because what we do with our lives ultimately matters. And that is such good news! So, when we talk about our hard religion, let's talk about the joy and affirmation in that religion as well. Let's not complain about this hard path – we chose it, with relief and with gratitude. What we believe, and what we do matters.

In terms of a personal spiritual orientation, being an optimist means approaching life with a sense of openness. Waiting expectantly, always, for a glimpse of truth or glory. It means being ready. Ready to receive, to process, to act. And it means being willing. Because we are all volunteers. Volunteers in service to the ultimate unfolding of the kingdom of God, or whatever you would like to call that better world waiting to be born into our hands.

Maintaining an attitude of ultimate optimism requires that we live with some awareness of and appreciation for history. We know that we didn't invent these ideas, this faith, or these principles. We reap, in other words, what we did not sow. And it requires that we live also with some awareness of and love for the future in which we will not live. We are, as optimists, obligated to sow anew so that others who come after us will reap as joyfully and fruitfully as we have.

This is true not only in our personal lives, but in our communal or congregational orientation as well. There is strength in numbers, and our ability to be effective agents of change and progress depends on our ability to work together to build the kind of community that can affect the course of history. Adams sums it up thusly. "In response to the primary question of whether history has a meaning and a demanded direction or not, (we) answer, finally, 'Yea'. This is the issue that cuts through all others. It cuts through the ranks of those who believe in God as well as through the ranks of unbelievers. The affirmative answer of prophetic religion, which may be heard in the very midst of the doom that threatens like thunder, is that history is a struggle in dead earnest between justice and injustice,

looking towards an ultimate victory in the promise and fulfillment of grace. Anyone who does not enter into that struggle with the affirmation of love and beauty misses the mark and thwarts creation as well as self-creation. Thus, with all the realism and tough-mindedness that can be mustered, the genuine (religious) liberal finally can hear and join the Hallelujah Chorus – intellectual integrity, social relevance, amplitude of perspective, and the spirit of true liberation offer no less.” Hallelujah!