

Preaching to the Choir

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Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister to North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) in Woodstock, Vermont. Today is Sunday, March 28th. The title of this morning's reflection is Preaching to the Choir, a challenge that I often present to fellow Unitarian Universalist ministers. Let's see if I survive my own critique. I somehow doubt that I will but I'll do my best.

Today is Palm Sunday...which is the final Sunday of Lent. It is the first day of Holy Week, marking seven days before Easter Sunday on the 4th of April. It's a beautiful day today and I am glad to see you. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is good to be together."

"Save us, now, we pray!" I don't think I fully realized what they were singing...the choir that sang as they walked along with Jesus. I didn't realized what they were singing as they laid their cloaks and palm fronds down before him—"they," the disciples of Jesus...his "half-witted fans" who got out of control and 'they,' those crazy "blockheads" who walked along with him. "Half-witted fans" and "blockheads" ...these harsh words are not my own. I did not write them. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice did...for their rock opera of 1970, Jesus Christ Superstar.

At one point in the story, the guardians of Jerusalem refer to the followers of Jesus this way. The followers of Jesus danced and sang as they approached the city...

Jesus Christ, Superstar

Tell us that you are who they say you are

Hosanna! Superstar!

Hosanna means "Save us, now, we pray!" I don't think that I fully realized that when I was younger.

The guardians were afraid of Jesus. They were afraid of his followers. They didn't know what to do with them. Jesus rode in on a donkey which is a gesture of peace but the guardians of the city were uncomfortable. They were confused. They had mixed feelings. They asked,

What shall we do about Jesus of Nazareth?
Miracle wonder-man, hero or fool
No riots, no Romans, no fighting, no slogans
One thing to say for him, Jesus is cool

“Half-witted fans” and “blockheads.” That’s what the guardians of the city called the followers of Jesus—the choir of disciples that walked beside him, singing his praises. The guardians dismissed them all and they talked about killing Jesus...to defend the holy city—Jerusalem, which means dwelling-place of peace.

For many of us, this is nothing new. Rather, it is central to the deep foundation of faith. For some of us, this is ancient, bedrock understanding and basic to the meaning of Palm Sunday...but it is foundational, basic, common, central, bedrock, why should we proclaim it, year after year? Isn't it pointless? Isn't it futile? Isn't this just preaching to the choir?

No. Of course, this isn't simply preaching to the choir and yes...yes, of course, it is. Both of these are true but this is not obvious. It isn't all that easy to explain.

Let me try by making a strange approach. Let me come at this contradiction in a different way...in a way that has to do with leadership and limitations and a lion in the realm of international sports. I'll bet you didn't see that coming.

I don't know if you saw this but the White House released an interesting statement last week. It delighted me. I smiled with curiosity. The Biden-Harris administration just made a proclamation. To begin to deal with gender inequity, they just declared Equal Pay Day.

Equal Pay Day is a reminder of the work that still remains to advance equity and ensure that all Americans have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

It's symbolic but it's so important. It's bound to overturn a table or two.

I like it. I feel proud of us when we do good things like this—foolishly proud, perhaps, I don't mind. It's a small step but it's a good step. It gets us further on the road. They say that we grow by inches and it's true. We slowly become more wise, we slowly become more brave...one, small step at a time.

I'm proud of that...and I'm proud of us...and I'm so proud of Megan Rapinoe. You recall who she is, right? Do you remember her? Megan Anna Rapinoe. She was born on the 5th of July. Megan is the outspoken captain of the American [soccer](#) team that claimed victory in the World Cup in 2019. She's fantastic—her athletic ability, her personal integrity, her politics... She is very impressive woman and I respect her greatly. She's just so very smart and charismatic and she knows how to use the media...and she uses it so gracefully. She's strategic. I really love that about her.

Rapinoe was in the news last week because of Equal Pay Day. She spoke out on the subject...on the subject of women's empowerment. She made a proclamation of her own. She said, It's just unacceptable that we're still fighting for equal pay. And I feel like...we've done everything. You want stadiums filled. We filled them. You want role models for your kids, for your boys and your girls and your little trans kids. We have that. You want us to be respectful. You want us to perform on the world stage. You want us to take the Stars and Stripes, the Red, White and Blue, across the entire globe and represent America in the best way possible. We've done all of that. And simply, there's no reason why we're underpaid, for the exception of gender.

So powerful. She makes this issue so plain and so simple for all of us. It's hard to argue, her logic is so sound...and she's so

winsome and so fabulous and all... She wins. That's what she has trained herself to do. It's good to have someone like Megan on your side. It's good to be part of her team.

Now, I believe that, as community of seekers, we are a relatively awakened. I like to think that we have a healthy perspective on the world. We are thoughtful and fairly progressive and if I'm right about what I think, then talking Megan Rapinoe is riskless. It is not edgy. I mean, she's already a superstar. She's already a hero to so many of us. So, singing her praises is just like preaching to the choir, isn't it? Or is there another way to think about all of this?

It is common to believe that preaching to the choir is just a senseless act. It is common to think it's just an exercise in futility. Preaching to the choir usually reveals the weakness of certain leaders, the weakness of those who turn away from the heat of genuine engagement and turn toward the tepid, peddling of commonly accepted ideas. They seek to convert the already converted for the choir is already on board, its members are already demonstrating their faith...by lifting their voices, by singing so beautifully.

It can be a shallow thing...it can be a callow thing to preach to the choir regularly, in this way. To be shallow is to be naïve and to be callow is to be immature. Good leaders have neither of these qualities.

I want to preach to the choir in a brand new way—not by taking the low road and not by choosing the easy way and not by picking only the low-hanging fruit. Let's choose otherwise. Shall we? It's worth it...because a far more beautiful world awaits...and because a more perfect world, awaits us.

Let's preach to the choir in a brand new way. Let's spin the meaning of this idea around and around until it's beautiful. I wonder where this will lead us.

Now, I am still proud of Megan Rapinoe—foolishly, perhaps. I am still proud of what she has to say...but I'm

learning now to honor my pride more beautifully. I'm learning to preach to the choir in a different way?

It's so important—every now and again—to explore newer ideas, to try on different energetic clothes, to try out different thoughts, to entertain fresh possibilities, to do things passionately and for the very first time. Novelty keeps the mind and spirit young and fully engaged. Novelty keeps the soul from getting stuck in muddy ruts.

President Bartlett told us a story some time ago—not President Biden, but President Bartlett, the made-believe president played by Martin Sheen on TV—the fictional West Wing president. President Bartlett told this tale. He said,

You know the story about the guy whose cars gets stuck in a muddy hole. A farmer comes along [with his tractor] and says he'll pull the car out of the mud but he's going to have to charge 50 bucks 'cause this is the tenth time he's had to pull a car out of the muddy hole today. The driver says, "God, when to you have time to plow your land, at night?" The farmer says, "No, no. Nighttime is when I fill the muddy hole with water."

Pride is often like this. Pride can be a muddy rut in which we commonly get quite stuck. When we get stuck, we end up preaching to the choir. I know. I've been there.

Here's the thing. The muddy ruts that pride can make, they don't feel like muddy ruts. They feel comfortable. We tend to feel good in there. We feel special...and safe...and right...and sometimes, even chosen. So, it is useful—and fortunate—that the farmer comes along with a tractor to quite literally help us out—help us out of our ruts, to pull us out of our holes. It's troubling, though, to know that the farmer was expecting us...or was trapping us.

Pride can be like a muddy rut, a muddy hole within which we get stuck. So, we have to be careful with pride. If we feel pride sometimes, if we are so proud when our government does good things, if we are proud of outspoken Megan Rapinoe,

are we getting stuck in ruts? Are we getting stuck in muddy holes? How can we know for sure? How can we tell? I think that we can know and I think that we can tell by trying something new.

I used to dislike the idea of preaching to the choir. I judged myself and others harshly when we did that. Now, I feel differently. Now, I like the idea. I like the idea of preaching to the choir in a brand, new way.

I'm learning to act differently...and I'm learning to think in brand, new ways. I've been newly inspired by an old cartoonist named Gary Larsen. Gary Larson is the artist behind the comic strip series called *The Far Side*. It ran for 16 years, from 1979 to 1995. Gary Larsen taught me—and taught us—to think differently about the ways of the world. He is such a powerful artist. He's is still so influential. One of my favorites cartoons of his was a three-frame comic strip that featured four cows in a field by the roadside on a beautiful spring day. In the first frame of the comic strip, the cows are all standing upright, like human beings, casually talking with one another on the near side of a hill. Suddenly, the look-out cow—the scout-cow, if you will—spots a car approaching in the distance. Calmly, the look-out cow, the scout, alerts the other three upright-standing cows with a single word, "Car!" That's the first frame of the comic strip.

In the second frame, the cows crouch down—newly on all-fours—and they pretend to eat the grasses beneath their hooves. Of course, the car speeds by unaware of the transition and its occupants observe what the cows in the field are doing...or rather, what the cows are pretending to do. The car-travellers take in the bucolic scene, appreciatively.

In the third and final frame of the comic strip, once the car has passed, the cows once again resume their original activities. They return to their previous upright and standing

positions—as if, unbeknownst to humans, standing upright is more natural to them.

I love that comic strip. There is another one that I enjoy a lot. It features a duck walking into house, having opened the front door. The duck walks down the hallway and is approaching the living room. In this living room, an older couple, married for years, is sitting quietly. They are reading together on the couch. The husband is reading the newspaper and the wife is reading her novel. The wife notices the duck walking down the hall but is in no way surprised. She turns to her husband and says quite clearly, “Here he comes, Earl. Remember, be gentle but firm...we are absolutely and positively NOT driving him south this winter.”

Now, I’m reading into this but it seems clear enough to me that this couple had done it before. I think that the couple said yes to the duck the first time and things had not gone well, not that they duck knew anything about their troubles. I know this duck—good-natured but a bit a oblivious. Truth be told, I am this duck—at least, I have been in the past. The duck seems pretty clueless. You can kind of tell by the cavalier attitude. I don’t know. Maybe I’m wrong but that’s what I see.

The point is that Gary Larsen is inspiring. Through humor, he forces us to think in different ways. Gary Larsen inspired his teachers. He inspired his followers...and even inspired his peers. So much so that one of my favorite “Gary Larsen” cartoons wasn’t drawn by Gary Larsen. It was drawn by another artist named Glenn McCoy. Thinking differently is something of a tradition.

The Glenn McCoy cartoon that I like features four lions, two males and two females. Like the duck cartoon, it has just one frame. A group of three lions—one male and two female—encounter the fourth in an open field. The fourth lion (the other male) is curious, dour, disapproving and judgmental. The two males meet face-to-face, the way men do. The two

females in the group of three lions are behaving ridiculously. They're acting like half-witted blockheads, blindly following their leader. They stand behind him, unladylike...and unlionlike—squinting, squawking, dancing, and mockingly prancing around. One of them is cross-eyed and the other is sticking out her tongue. The male lion in the group of three recognizes the other male's disposition and addresses him, explaining their behavior reassuringly. He gestures at them and says, you know, "It's just my foolish pride."

The joke is clear enough, I hope—the double entendre, the double meaning of "foolish pride." This cartoon made me think in brave, new ways. It's wonderful.

I think that's what Jesus was trying to do...when he made his way to Jerusalem on the back of donkey. I think that he was trying to make us think differently, trying to make us think for ourselves again. I think Jesus was trying to free our minds. And he was succeeding. This is why he was so dangerous...to the power structure in the city of Jerusalem, to the power structure in the abode of peace.

This Sunday, this Palm Sunday, we remember these stories. We remember that Jesus' choir was prayerfully singing, "Hosanna!" Save us now.

Recent events have made us ripe for saving...not in the city of Jerusalem but in the city of Atlanta...and then, again, in the city of Boulder. Recent events have made me long for Jerusalem, not for the city on the other side of the world but for that sacred place within us—Jeru-salem, shalom, salaam. I long for this inner abode of peace. I long to share it and I have, I am and I will.

Save us now, we pray. Save us from violence and from fear. But let us but all be more than saved away...saved away from violence and saved away from fear. Let us be proactively saved, saved TO sanctuary and saved TO love and saved by love...and by good humor, that force, that grace the buoys us.

Jesus approached Jerusalem, the dwelling-place of peace...which means for me, 'We move forward—slowly, bravely—toward the deepest places within ourselves'...which is to say that we grow old and wise by inches. They laid palm fronds before him...which is to say that we beautify our paths. And we sing out to the heavens, even though it angers the powerful...even though they tell us to stop singing. Try as they may, the powerful song is rising in all of us, even within them. It's like the sun. There isn't much that anyone can do to stop its rising.

And there isn't much that anyone can do to stop our singing. Through the tumult and the strife, we hear the music ringing. It sounds in distant places and sounds an echo in the soul. How can we keep from singing?

Lo, the day of days is here
Bringing light and hope and cheer
At the south-wind's genial breath
Nature wakes from seeming death, Alleluia

Maybe this is the brand-new way. Maybe this is how we might learn to preach to the choir—not by taking the low road and not by choosing the easy way and not by picking only the low-hanging fruit...not by appealing to lowest common denominators but by striving for highest human value. God of many names and great spirit beyond all naming, love and bless the eighteen souls we've lost in recent times. Grow our soul enough to seek and find peace in the challenging times.

Rising in the root beneath the bedrock and the stone
In the wind and sand and sea and tender sunrise
Rising from the brutal force of love past blood and bone
Sing us through this journey, make us wise

Preaching to the choir can mean all of this and more. May we find the humble means to nurture this. It matters not how

proud we are. It matters that we become the pride, that choir
the sings the good world into being.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.