

Staying humble in the tough places and remembering the journey  
Reflection for Palm Sunday  
Mar 28 and 29 2015

Holy Week is a sacred time of remembrance. It is a time of profound intentionality re prayer, fasting, almsgiving and service.

To remember we need to think back on what we have lived and connect with our journey. Today our readings have taken us on a journey.

As we gathered at the entrance of our church, we heard John's account of Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem. In this reading, it appears that the disciples have not organized this – none of them went ahead to get a room or find a donkey or let the people present for Passover know that Jesus was coming. And yet the crowd 'heard' Jesus was coming to Jerusalem and went out to meet him. A young donkey seems to appear at the right moment. It all just falls into place. Can you imagine the disciples talking about this in the following weeks and years and becoming more and more aware of the synchronicity of these events? Do you suppose those reflections helped them to recognize Jesus as the Son of God? It is often after an event – when we take the time to reflect on what was lived – that we become aware, draw inferences, see links to what was lived then and its impact in our now. We become aware of the ripples that continue to impact our lives, our world.

Our next reading is from Isaiah and it is our first reading every Palm Sunday. This reading is fulfilled in the passion and death of Jesus. Jesus lived what he was called to live with the assurance that God was with him; God was supporting him.

And in Paul's letter to the Philippians we are likely hearing a pre-existing text that Paul inserted to encourage the members of the community in Philippi to be humble. There is a suggestion that if the people are humble and obedient, they, too, may be taken by God and made holy. I have to tell you that this idea of absolute humility intrigues me. And, I have been thinking about it for days and days. What does it mean to be humble? Who do I know that is truly humble?

How is that person accepted by others? What does he or she do or how does he or she live that is qualitatively different than those I might not judge as humble?

Definition of humility – a modest view of one’s own importance; the quality or state of thinking that we are very much like other people; that we are not better than others. In Biblical terms, being humble has to do with lack of pride or arrogance, knowing that we are very small and we are loved limitlessly by God, we have God-given talents and gifts that are to be used for the well-being of the community and ourselves.

Keith was a model of humility. I want to share a bit of his journey with you. Keith was in his late 50’s when I met him and he lived in a large institution in SW Ontario which had housed more than 1000 adults with intellectual disabilities at one time. Keith was there because almost 40 years previously he and some friends got into a bit of adolescent trouble in their small town. Because Keith had an intellectual disability, the citizens of the town thought his behavior would only grow worse and put members of the community at risk. The police and several religious leaders urged his parents to put him in this large institution ‘where he would be safe’. It is interesting to note that the other young men were not charged with any crime and were not shunned by their community.

Keith was about 6 feet tall and strong. He had a ready chuckle and kind brown eyes. He liked maple syrup, homemade strawberry jam, farm fields and the machinery used to plow, plant and harvest. He liked sunsets and dogs. He walked around the grounds of the institution picking up litter with a device he made. It was a stick with a nail attached to one end with duct tape. He liked raking leaves and planting and tending gardens – all things in their seasons.

The institution was closing and Keith wanted to live somewhere that he could own a dog, a large one if possible, and be near a few friends (Sandra and Joanne) that had already moved. I was to help him do this. Keith and I become friends quickly. He came to my home, ate at my table, shared stories and loved my dog, Casey – yes she was gentle and big. Sometimes when I would go to the institution to meet others I was planning with, Casey would come along. Keith would meet us in the parking lot and take her on his rounds to the gardens or just around the

property. He also took her to meet his friends. He beamed when he had Casey with him and she did lots of tail wagging and prancing.

Keith and I travelled to small communities in SW Ontario to meet organizations that were interested in support him. As Keith became more ready to leave the institution, he asked for 2 things: he wanted the option of having a dog and he wanted to live in the same community as a couple of friends who had already moved from the institution. Being close to Sandra and Joanne was especially important to him. Things were going very well and it looked like Keith's dream would happen. And then he got sick. His cancer from several years before metastasized and was now very aggressive. The agency that committed to welcome him backed out.

Keith knew his time was short; the doctor said 3 months. He decided that he would die at the institution. He still had many friends there including the on-site doctor, one of the nurses in the infirmary and the chaplain. He asked me to continue to spend time with him. I asked him once if he was angry or disappointed about not moving. He said, "Oh, I guess it was never really up to me." "I want to die where I am known, where I am loved." Keith died in the infirmary in the institution where he had lived for more than 40 years. I was sitting by his bed, holding his hand, reading a chapter of a Laura Ingalls Wilder book to him. The chapter title was "The Big Black Dog". He squeezed my hand and left. I felt a presence of light and love travel around the room and then he was gone. His funeral was packed; people came from across the province and celebrated his life. This humble man who was institutionalized for more than 40 years had touched so many so deeply.

I can see Keith's story has touched many of you. Jesus' Passion and Death touches us. It is not easy to remember and stay in this place of deep feeling, loss, and grief. . .

Let's try to stay here. Let's not jump to Easter. Let's feel what we feel and be humble and gentle with ourselves and those close to us. These spaces of brokenness can transform us and help us be the person God calls us to be. And

for the next few days let's try to stay in the place of longing and remembering as we live this week in prayer, fasting, almsgiving and service.

As Patricia Campbell Carlson writes in a letter to a friend "Grief and gratitude are kindred souls, each pointing to the beauty of what is transient and given to us by grace."

Let's be intentional about living this week in love and humility.

Donna Rietschlin  
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Some additional readings that might be useful for reflection.

#### The Paths to Peace

In the vision of the journey to peace that Jesus opens, there are three complementary roads, three paths of humility that lead people beyond their own ego. The first path to peace refers directly to [Jesus]... from the death of Jesus a new presence will spring...the gift of the Holy Spirit.

...The second path to peace has to do with our compulsions... We have to give up wanting to have the last word to prove that we are better than the rest...

The third path to peace is to serve Jesus in the poor, to live among them. The Lord said, through Isaiah, "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is humiliated and lost." (Isa 57:15) In every culture, there is the presence of the "lowliest." ...Welcoming one another in the rich diversity of our religions and cultures, serving the poor together, prepares a future of peace.

*Jean Vanier, Signs: Seven Words of Hope, Novalis, 2013, pp. 80-82*

#### Love, Not Atonement

Friday, March 20, 2015 Richard Rohr – Daily Meditation

The common Christian reading of the Bible is that Jesus "died for our sins"--either to pay a debt to the devil (common in the first millennium) or to pay a debt to God the Father (proposed by Anselm of Canterbury, 1033-1109). Anselm's infamous *Cur Deus Homo* has been called "the most unfortunately successful piece of theology ever written." My hero, Franciscan philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus (1266-1308), agreed with neither of these understandings. Scotus was not guided by the Temple language of debt, atonement, or blood sacrifice (understandably used in the Gospels and by Paul). He was inspired by the high level cosmic hymns in the first chapters of Colossians and Ephesians and the first chapter of John's Gospel.

After Anselm, Christians have paid a huge price for what theologians called "substitutionary

atonement theory"--the strange idea that before God could love us God needed and demanded Jesus to be a blood sacrifice to atone for our sin-drenched humanity. With that view, salvation depends upon a problem instead of a divine proclamation about the core nature of reality. As if God could need payment, and even a very violent transaction, to be able to love and accept "his" own children--a message that those with an angry, distant, absent, or abusive father were already far too programmed to believe.

For Scotus, the incarnation of God and the redemption of the world could never be a mere mop-up exercise in response to human sinfulness, but the proactive work of God from the very beginning. We were "chosen in Christ before the world was made," as the hymn in Ephesians puts it (1:4). Our sin could not possibly be the motive for the divine incarnation, but only perfect love and divine self-revelation! For Scotus, God never merely reacts, but always supremely and freely *acts*, and always acts totally out of love. Scotus was very Trinitarian.

The best way I can summarize how Scotus tried to change the old notion of retributive justice is this: *Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity (it did not need changing)! Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.* God in Jesus moved people beyond the counting, weighing, and punishing model, that the ego prefers, to the utterly new world that Jesus offered, where God's abundance has made any economy of merit, sacrifice, reparation, or atonement both unhelpful and unnecessary. Jesus undid "once and for all" (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10) all notions of human and animal sacrifice and replaced them with his new economy of grace, which is the very heart of the gospel revolution. Jesus was meant to be a game changer for the human psyche and for religion itself. When we begin negatively, or focused on the problem, we never get out of the hamster wheel. To this day we begin with and continue to focus on sin, when the crucified one was pointing us toward a primal solidarity with the very suffering of God and all of creation. This changes everything. Change the starting point, change the trajectory!

We all need to know that *God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good.* Nothing humans can do will ever decrease or increase God's eternal eagerness to love.

Adapted from *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*, pp. 183-188