

Commitment Matters When Things Are Difficult

Rev. Dawn Fortune

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Jersey Shore

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Piglet is my hero. Piglet is a very small animal who is afraid of a great number of things, and yet he managed to save the day when Owl's house was blown over in a storm. A lot of times I feel like the frightened version of Piglet. There is a lot in this world that I don't understand, that is foreign to me, that I feel utterly unprepared to handle. And yet, like you, I must figure out what to do when those challenges present themselves to me. Doing the hard thing is a lot of what being an adult is about.

In our scripture reading today we heard two pieces of story. First we heard Jesus foretelling his own death and resurrection, but in language his disciples were unable to comprehend. It was not the first time he had told them about his future, and yet the story was no more clear to them at the third telling than it was the first time.

When Jesus and his disciples were traveling to Jerusalem they were doing so to celebrate Passover at the big temple that was located there. It was important for Jews of that time to travel to the temple when they could to celebrate high holidays and Passover is indeed a high holiday in the Jewish year.

For those who might not be familiar, Passover is the celebration of the time when the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt and God brought down plagues upon the house of the pharaoh. One of those plagues was the death of the firstborn of all living things in Egypt. The Hebrews had been warned by God to mark their doorways with the blood of a lamb and when God's angel came to visit the plague to kill all the first born, he would pass over the houses that were marked, and so those families were safe from that horrible loss. It was that final plague that caused the pharaoh to finally let Moses and his people escape Egypt and return to the promised land.

So you can see why Passover is an important holiday. Jesus and his disciples and all of their followers (by then there were many) were all headed to Jerusalem for the Passover holiday. In the story of Jesus he is aware of what is facing him: that he will be killed and resurrected.

I think in the grand scheme of what might define "hard things," Jesus probably had the hardest thing. And yet he did it.

Now whether you believe the mythology of Christianity or the mythology of Judaism or the mythology of any other deities or pantheon of divine beings, the lesson here is still applicable. Sometimes we have to do the really hard thing to serve the greater good. Now, to tie this in with pledge season seems dangerous at best.

I am not asking anyone to make that kind of sacrifice to help support our annual budget. But I would like us all to think about the greater common good that is this religious community, this congregation of souls, and the important work it does within and beyond the walls of our center and the confines of this electronic room. In every journey on which we embark there will be times when we are enthusiastic and passionate and excited; and there will be times when we are tired, when things are uncomfortable, when we desperately would like a break.

I remember a year ago we were frightened about the pandemic, but there was a certain degree of excitement that came with the challenge: how do we do this new thing? How do we have church online? How do we meet online? How do we raise money online? Now, after a year we are somewhat less enthusiastic, I would say. The thrill has gone out of this particular adventure, and we're eager for it to be over.

And yet we know that we can't just walk away and ignore the lifesaving precautions that are still recommended and take off our masks and go eat in full restaurants. That kind of behavior would endanger us and the public and the ones we love. So we do the adult thing, which in this case is the hard thing.

In the story leading up to Jesus' arrest and murder he spends some time in prayer during which he asks "if there is a way for this cup to pass me by let it be." But of course it had been prophesied that the cup would not pass him by, and so he did the hard thing and did what was required of him to save the world.

In a workshop I attended one time about the process of ministerial development and formation, there was a conversation about how it is normal for emerging ministers to go through seasons if you will, or cycles of enthusiasm followed by dread followed by enthusiasm. There were times when we would be so eager to get started in ministry to go and do the things that make our hearts sing, and there would be times when we would wish that somebody else got called for this duty. We would wish that the metaphorical cup of ministry would pass us by without us having to drink from it.

I think we all feel that way at one point or another in our lives. We look around and say "isn't there somebody else who can do this?"

This calling can be uplifting and it can be crushing at the same time and so we have times when those things happen, and as just illustrated in our story this morning, sometimes we have to do the hard thing.

Commitment when things are difficult: I think that might be the definition of commitment. Participation in a project when everything is easy and pleasant does not require commitment. It does not require sacrifice or work or thinking beyond the pleasure of the experience. Commitment happens when things get challenging. Commitment happens after we've been stuck inside for a year and we're still in community. That is commitment.

Sometimes we hesitate to commit, fearing we are not prepared, not sufficient to the task. Like Piglet, we can be frightened. What if I fail? What if I get hurt? What if I let people down? Embarrass myself?

The modern mythology around the Jesus story is that he was perfect. But the reality – or perhaps more accurately, the record – of his actions and words do not show that. He was scared, he got frustrated, he bent and broke the rules and told society to quit being hypocrites.

Jesus had a radical agenda, and he wasn't always polite or politic about getting things done. He called for an end to wars; he suggested that programs to end homelessness, poverty, and hunger would be in order; and he taught his followers that it is better to fight your oppressor with your brains instead of your brawn. People around him said he and his friends were all crazy. Irresponsible. Dreamers and idealists lacking a firm grasp on the world's reality. That kind of stuff is just not going to happen, people said.

Sort of like today. We rail against injustice: hunger, poverty, homelessness, economic injustice, worker exploitation, abuse, violence, war. At times it feels like it's too much, too overwhelming, impractical to even try.

I'd like you to imagine what it must have looked like when Jesus entered Jerusalem: he was riding on a borrowed or perhaps stolen donkey, surrounded by disciples and the roughest of society's margins. He was loved and adored by sinners, fornicators, tax collectors, sex workers, and all those who were unloved by society.

And so here comes this guy being adored by the riffraff as he rides a pony into Jerusalem and people are calling him the son of God. Is it any wonder that he was arrested? He challenged the systems of power in the temple.

And when they came for him, when Judas betrayed him, and Peter denied him, and the soldiers arrested him and he was condemned to die, that's when most of his friends ... dissolved. They disappeared, afraid that they would be targeted as well. Only the women in Jesus's world followed him through the passion as he carried the cross to Calvary. It was the women who knelt and wept as he died.

Now to be fair, women in ancient Hellenistic culture were largely invisible; they were non-entities, not viewed as fully human and so were not seen as a threat to law and order; truly they weren't really seen at all and thus permitted to do those sorts of things: weep in public and care for others. And it may have been that invisibility that permitted them to accompany Jesus on that journey, but at any rate most of his disciples were unable to do the hard thing.

And I think honestly, I think most of us are probably like that. It takes an enormous amount of courage to put yourself physically on the line, to offer up your body for abuse in the mission of a larger cause.

I'm not asking anybody to offer up their body in sacrifice. I'm not asking anyone to do something that will hurt them. What I ask is that you remain committed to this congregation, to the work that it does, to the resource that it is, to the sanctuary that it provides from a world that often seems hostile.

This is the last time that I will preach about stewardship. This is the last week we're going to do it. By next Sunday, we hope to have the drive all wrapped up, and I hope we will have reached our goal. But in any case, next Sunday I'll be preaching about Easter because it's Easter. For now I'm asking you to commit. And I know it's not easy after a year of being separated to remain committed to a thing that we can't put our arms around. It's not tangible. We can't hug one another.

But I want you to remember that you belong, and I want you to remember your commitment to this congregation, and this congregation's commitment to you, when things get tough. This congregation shows up and helps. That's what you do. Most of you know already that I pledge and I do. I don't pledge as much as I would like, but I pledge as much as I can, and I try to increase it a little bit each year.

Some days we are the ones that we've been waiting for. We are the only ones who can do the thing that needs doing. We are the only ones who can get through the letterbox and go get help from Christopher Robin. We are the ones who must do the thing that needs doing to save the world.

I hope you'll join me in supporting this congregation. It means an awful lot to an awful lot of people, and it is my prayer that the spiritual practice of generosity will be all of our practice and all of our prayers today and going forward.

Amen.