

The Pig's Advantage

Mark 11: 1-11 (Matthew 21: 1-11; Luke 19: 28-40; John 12: 12-16)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009
Redlands First United Methodist Church

When I was a child, between the ages of 6 and 13, my family moved around a lot, so we didn't belong to any particular church. I remember going to various churches primarily around Easter and Christmas! Through my very young ears, it seemed to me that most of those sermons at Easter-time were about death and our facing our own death with a trust about what happened afterward. At that age, I was not interested in that topic. I thought to myself, "Why would anyone worry about death?" I sure didn't.

When *do* humans begin to think about our own deaths? When does this awareness come to us? We're all different—probably some of us are aware of our finitude at age 5, while others of us are about 95 before we think about death as it relates to us.

We *can* enjoy life a whole lot when we just take life for granted without giving life much thought. However, after we truly grasp our finitude, we still can enjoy life a whole lot. It's just that then we need to add one ingredient to our lives: *courage*. Theologian Paul Tillich called what we need, in the face of non-being: "The Courage to Be."¹

I recall a telephone conversation I had with a soon-to-be son-in-law of a friend of mine, just a week or so before his wedding. I was in Ohio at the time, but my friend encouraged her soon-to-be-son-in-law to call me, for this young man, who was in his mid-twenties as he was about to marry, was suddenly exceedingly anxious about dying. I also recall that this young man had forgotten about the 3 hour time-difference between us. Since it was midnight in California, it was 3:00 a.m. in Ohio. Nevertheless, this was an emergency. He was very anxious about dying and missing out on the wonderful married life he was about to begin. As we talked, it became clear that it was precisely because life had become so precious, that its fragility was so obvious to him.

We are going to hear now a scene from Tennessee Williams' play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, with the help of Luvi Avendano, who is going to be Big Daddy. It is Big Daddy's birthday. He had thought for months that he was dying with cancer. (This play was written decades ago when so much of our current cancer treatment had not been invented.) While Big Daddy was ill, he had not talked to his family about his thoughts or his feelings. As this scene begins, Big Daddy had just been told that he would be fine.² So, at this particular moment Big Daddy's in a rather jubilant mood. Now, thinking he had a new lease on life, he is *uncharacteristically talkative*, in fact, he wanted very much to talk with his favorite son, Brick. I'll be Brick.

Brick: Big Daddy, you're on a talkin' jag tonight.

Big D: Yes, sir, that's how it is, the human animal is a beast that dies . . . did you say somethin'?

Brick: Yes. . .

Big D: Yes, sir, boy, the human animal is a beast that dies and if he's got money he buys and buys and buys, and I think in the back of his mind he has the crazy

hope that one of his purchases will be life everlasting! –Which it never can be. . . The human animal is a beast that. . .

Brick: Big Daddy, you sure are shootin' the breeze here, tonight. . .

Big D: Why are you so anxious to shut me up?

Brick: Well, sir, ever so often you say to me, 'Brick, I want to have a talk with you,' but when we're together, it never happens.

Big D: Brick?

Brick: Huh?

Big D: Son, I thought I had it.

Brick: Had what? Had what, Big Daddy?

Big D: Cancer!

Brick: Well, Big Daddy, you kept a tight mouth about it.

Big D: A pig squeals. A man keeps a tight mouth about it, in spite of a man not having a pig's advantage.

Brick: What advantage is that?

Big D: Ignorance—of mortality—is a comfort. A man don't have that comfort. He's the only living thing that conceives of death, that knows what it is. The others go without knowing, which is the way that anything living should go, go without knowing, without any knowledge of it, and yet a pig squeals, but a man sometimes, he can keep a tight mouth about it. Sometimes he—can keep a tight mouth about it. (Exiting during last line)

Brick: Big Daddy?

Big Daddy said, "Ignorance of mortality is a comfort. A man don't have that comfort." A man don't have the "Pig's Advantage"; a pig knows nothing about death coming sometime in its future. Big Daddy was very aware.

The fiancé who called me because he was so anxious about dying was facing the bigness of life, which led him to experience what psychologists call *existential anxiety*—anxiety about his own existence. Once he acquired anxiety, he needed something to balance that—*courage*.

What do *you* think? Is *awareness* of our own mortality a disadvantage? Would it be better to be like a pig?

Or, does awareness of our finitude serve a *creative function* in our lives?

Jesus was *acutely aware*. He knew death was part of life. As he made the decision to enter Jerusalem, he was taking a *courageous* step. He had been relatively safe teaching on the outskirts of the big city. But, Jerusalem, Jerusalem? In the city the people would disagree strongly about *who* he was and what his healing and teaching meant. He could be killed if he entered into Jerusalem. However, to be recognized as who Jesus indeed was, he had to enter.

This entrance into Jerusalem is told in all four Gospels, but with some variations. In **Matthew** the crowd shouts "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" The whole city is described as being in turmoil, asking "Who is this?" Matthew wants to be sure we the readers get that answer right, so he gives the answer to us straight up: "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

In the Gospel of **Mark**, the crowd shouts "Hosanna!" but Mark does not mention any turmoil.

The shorter version of the story in the Gospel of **John** portrays the disciples as baffled, not understanding what's going on.

All four Gospel writers describe Jesus as *riding* into Jerusalem, but in two [Mark and Luke] he is on a colt, whereas in John, he's on a donkey. That doesn't seem too strange—not being sure whether it was a colt or a donkey. But something very interesting occurs in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew wanted to match every event in Jesus' life with an earlier prophecy about the coming Messiah [of David, Isaiah, or Jeremiah from 500 to 1000 years earlier]. In one Hebrew prophecy the word 'colt' was used, then as Hebrews often did in their poetry, the word was repeated, but with a slight variation. This time the word was 'donkey.' Matthew took that poetic prophecy more literally than the Hebrews had intended, so Matthew has Jesus riding in on *both* a donkey *and* a colt.³ He wrote: “they brought the donkey *and* the colt, and put their clothes on *them*, and he sat on *them*”!

However Jesus rode into Jerusalem, and however much his entrance fulfilled prophecies of previous centuries, Jesus DID know that he could be in trouble if he entered the city. Jesus did NOT have the pig's advantage. He knew he could die.

But he went. He entered Jerusalem. He journeyed triumphantly, joyously—*courageously*.

Luke tells us that some devout Jews [Pharisees] who wanted to protect him said to Jesus, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop” singing “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” because that singing is endangering you. Jesus' response was this: “I tell you, if these were silent, even the stones would shout out.” This answer shows the intensity of Jesus' purpose, his sense of the rightness of his journey, and his courage.

Jesus was jubilant; the people were jubilant. Yet, certainly Jesus had existential anxiety, that anxiety Big Daddy had a sudden urge to talk about with his son, that anxiety that seemed boring to me when I heard sermons around Easter when I was young.

We all know that some anxieties can be cured.

Imagine someone named Francine who is anxious about asking Max on a date. (Actually, I don't think people go on “dates” today; they “hang out together,” or “?”) It's possible for Francine to be “cured” of her anxiety. Francine could think of strategies to reduce her own anxiety. For example, she could tell herself, “It's okay if Max says ‘no.’ In fact, if I ask Max out and he says ‘no,’ then I'll give myself a special treat. I'll buy myself a bouquet of flowers for my kitchen.” There are lots of possible ways to “cure” anxiety about asking someone on a date (or whatever that's called today)

Many anxieties are able to be “cured.” Not so with existential anxiety. We live *with* existential anxiety. We humans do not, cannot have the pig's advantage. We cannot be *cured*. (Oops, no pun intended—it really is better not to be a pig, I guess.) Other anxieties we can truly leave behind. This one we cannot. Once aware, what is required is Courage—Courage to Be.

We humans have a different advantage, though— we can *turn what seems like this curse of awareness, into a creative advantage*. That is exactly what Jesus did.

If I have no fear about asking someone out, then I need no courage to do so. If I have no fear of speaking in public, I just speak. If I have anxiety over speaking, then I need courage to speak.

When I was 10 years old I did not need any courage *to be*. I didn't have existential anxiety—I did have, in a sense, a lot in common with a pig. I didn't worry.

The fiancé hadn't needed much courage to get out of bed every day until each day with his future wife turned exceedingly precious—then he needed to enlist creative courage.

Big Daddy gathered courage—didn't he? He gathered courage to communicate with his son, courage to be vulnerable.

Jesus took a path, figuratively as well as literally, into Jerusalem.

However he entered—on a colt, a donkey, or both—with people shouting or wondering; fulfilling many prophecies or none—Jesus did not just enter with courage—he entered joyously! —

What are you entering into? Are you entering into parenthood? Are you entering into High School? Are you entering into a relationship? Are you entering into a nursing home? Are you entering into a vocation? Are you entering into a deeper understanding of God? Are you entering middle age? Are you entering into reconciliation with an estranged friend?

Into whatever we enter, we do not enter alone.

The Christ enters with us wherever we go. We don't have the Pig's Advantage, but we do have the Creative Advantage—we have what God provides for us, the companion to awareness—*courage* and, when fully enlisted, that *courage spawns joy*.

¹ Tillich, Paul. *The Courage to Be*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1952

² Actually, he is told erroneously.

³ We need to go back to the prophecy of Zechariah to understand why Matthew would do this. That prophecy reads “Rejoice greatly. . . O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he; humble, and riding on a donkey, [and] on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” In Zechariah the final phrases were repeated for poetic effect, which was typical of the Hebrew literature: “riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Matthew was so determined to match the event with the prophecy that he actually has Jesus riding on both a donkey and colt.