

## **Homily – The Wisdom Cycle (Palm Sunday)**

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When you live in a place long enough you learn the rhythm of the place. The weather patterns, the cycle of local festivals, the traffic patterns. You learn about the places to avoid during tourist season and you learn when your favorite grocery store is likely to be crowded or empty. Jeff and I have lived here in Arroyo Grande about six years, and we have learned about some, but not all of the ordinary, day-to-day rhythms of this place.

Many of the ordinary rhythms have to do with the calendar – winter, spring, summer, and fall. Or, here on the Central Coast it would be winter and summer. The calendar also gives us baseball season, football season, basketball season, and hockey is somehow in there too. In most parts of the country you have planting season and harvesting season, though again here in California it seems like it is always growing season. And, in the church we have the rhythm of our liturgical calendar that starts with Advent and Christmas, cycles through Lent and Easter and finally gets to the long season that we call ordinary time. We associate a color with each of these seasons and you can see that today, with Palm Sunday and the start of Holy Week, we have red.

Our calendar gives us a lot of the ordinary rhythms that we have in life, but there is another grouping of rhythms or patterns that is based on the wisdom cycle. Holy Week and Easter are all about this cycle. It is the cycle from order, to disorder, to reorder. Let me repeat that - order, disorder, and finally reorder. In classical mythology this would be journey, fall, and return to a new home. In philosophy this would be thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. In twelve-step programs this would be innocence, addiction, and recovery. The famous Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, has grouped the Psalms into psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of reorientation. In Christian theology we often talk about the pattern of birth, sin, and rebirth, but there is an even more central Christian theme for the cycle of order, disorder, and reorder. And, that is life, death, and resurrection, or in the instance of our God who became man we have life, crucifixion, and resurrection. Today, on Palm Sunday, we have the first two of these order and disorder – life and crucifixion.

The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem shows Jesus at the top of his game. Things are going pretty well. The people put there cloaks and leafy branches in the street for the procession of Jesus on the colt. They proclaimed, “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” Jesus is at the top of his game and he is surrounded by his loyal followers. Life is pretty good, until it’s not, for it is not long before Jesus is arrested,

mocked, convicted, rejected, abandoned, tortured, and finally killed on the Cross. Order fell into disorder. Orientation spun into disorientation. Day became night. Summer cycled into winter. Wisdom shows us that the flow from order to disorder to reorder is part of the very essence of God, and it is an essential pattern of the universe. That is why I am focusing on it today.

First we begin with order. This is the initial stage in which we build the container of our lives. Throughout history all cultures have emphasized order. We value law, tradition, custom, family loyalties, authority, boundaries, and morality of some clear sort. While they aren't perfect, these ordered containers give us the necessary security, predictability, impulse control, and ego structure that we need, before the chaos of real life shows up. Our human psyche cannot live with everything changing each day, everything a matter of opinions, everything relative. There has to be solid ground, trust, and shared security, or we cannot move outward in our spiritual journeys. There is great benefit to having order in our lives, but at some point we will have to fall.

A few years ago, here at St. Barnabas we studied Richard Rohr's book, "Falling Upward." In that book Rohr points out that most of us are never told that we can set out from the known and familiar parts of our ordered lives. Our institutions, including our churches, encourage, support, reward, and validate staying in the container building stage of the ordered first half of life. However, if we are being honest our ideally ordered universe will eventually disappoint. Sooner or later, some event, person, death, idea or relationship will enter our lives. Most likely, the catalyst will have to do with what Rohr calls the Big Six – love, death, suffering, sexuality, infinity, and God. The disorder will take us out of our comfort zone and into deep waters which we simply cannot deal with using our present skills set, acquired knowledge, or strong willpower. Spiritually speaking we will be led to the edge of our own private resources where we let go of our egocentric preoccupations, and move into the further and larger journey.

There will always be at least one situation in our lives that we cannot fix, control, explain, change or even understand. Normally a job, a fortune, or a reputation has to be lost, a house has to be flooded, an illness has to be endured. Some kind of falling is programmed into the journey. By denying our pain or avoiding our necessary falling, many of us have terminated the journey and kept ourselves from our own spiritual depths. It is normal that we still want some kind of order and reason, instead of suffering life's inherent disorder and tragedy. And part of the lesson of this time of disorder is that we are not in charge. Rather than willfully and forcefully moving ourselves back into the old ordered way of being, we must be open to the disorder. Be warned that the ego and false-self will try to regain control. But unexpected weaknesses, failure, and humiliation force us to go where we never

would otherwise. We must stumble and be brought to our knees by reality. We must actually be out of the driver's seat for a while, or we will never learn how to give up control to the Real Guide. It is the necessary pattern of movement from order to disorder.

Now, the universal pattern of transformation from order to disorder to reorder is not limited to religious or spiritual growth. Nor is it only individuals who are invited to make the journey. Whole churches and even cultures experience times of disorder and disruption. In the United States, many of us are discovering that a large number of things we believed to be true—about our nation and ourselves—are not entirely true. Sometimes we recognize this pattern as the dance of two steps forward and one step back. I believe this is a necessary dance that we must take for the sake of healing and justice in our nation and in our world—no matter how “disordering” and even disorienting it may be.

A few years ago, when I was a chaplain at Stanford Medical Center, I went to a talk by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen. Dr. Remen is a teacher of integrative medicine and her most well-known book is “Kitchen Table Wisdom.” She writes that there may be nothing more disordering than to be diagnosed with a terminal or chronic illness. It upends our lives and yet, it can also be the doorway through which we “grow up” and discover our life's purpose and meaning. At a young age, Remen was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, which affects all aspects of her life, but ultimately led her to her life's work: helping doctors integrate their heart and soul into their clinical practices for the sake of healing their patients and themselves.

Remen writes “the view from the edge of life is different and often much clearer than the way most of us see things. Life-threatening illness may cause people to question what they have accepted as unchanging. Values that have been passed down in a family for generations may be recognized as inadequate. Lifelong beliefs about personal capacities or what is important may prove to be mistaken. When life is stripped down to its very essentials, it is surprising how simple things become. Fewer and fewer things matter and those that matter, matter a great deal more.”

Unfortunately, the wisdom pattern never moves from order to reorder. There is no nonstop flight that does not go through the connecting hub of disorder. For meaningful spiritual growth this journey from Order to Disorder must happen. It is not something just to be admired in Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Job, Mary Magdalene, or Jesus. Our role is to listen and to allow, and at least slightly to cooperate with this almost natural progression. We all come to wisdom at the major price of both our innocence and our control. Few of us go there willingly. Normally, it must be thrust upon us.

Now, before I end today, I want to give you some practical things you can do to embrace the cycle of order, disorder, and reorder. While we may not be able to control if or when we are taken into a period of disorder, we can prepare ourselves for it. We prepare ourselves not by tightening up our mental security system, but by releasing our need for control, and adopting a mindful presence in which we are open to the working of the Holy Spirit.

Being present, even during times of disorder and chaos, means that one is paying attention to what is happening in the moment. This does not mean forgetting about the past or future, but rather fully attending to what is taking place right now. Being present also means being observant, listening carefully, not judging the situation, and being less occupied with thinking and more engaged in consciously being with whatever is occurring. It also means being embodied which does not mean that one must be aware of every physical sensation at the time, but simply conscious of inhabiting one's body. What is most useful in supporting this mindful awareness is the breath. Breathing deeply assists us in centering ourselves in the physical body and staying in the moment as opposed to becoming lost in the mind. An especially helpful preparation tool is body work. Our bodies or moving centers are a key underappreciated knowledge center, and body work can range from everything from martial arts, to yoga, to Rolfing, to Reiki, to bioenergetics, and more. Simple daily exercise, although extremely beneficial for the body, is not the same as therapeutic body work focused on fine tuning the body-mind connection.

Unfortunately, during times of disorder, disconnection from our bodies weakens our ability to cope with emotions that will be evoked amid chaos. Conversely, grounding ourselves in the body is an extremely useful, even necessary skill, when dealing with the upheavals of a world in crisis. When we are grounded in the body, we are more likely to be present to our own emotions and to the emotions of the others around us.

All of the great spiritual traditions recognize the wisdom cycle of order, disorder, and reorder, but as followers of Jesus we have a particular emphasis on this pattern that God has created into the universe. From before the beginning of time, God preordained the coming of Jesus into the world as a baby boy. The life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus was not a fall back plan. Humans didn't screw things up so much that God had to move to a plan-B. I invite you to follow the cycle that is shown to us by Jesus as we move from order to disorder and finally into reorder. Let go of control, and let God take you through this essential pattern of the universe.