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From the dawn of time, humans have been trying to get right with God, or the gods. Some few have decided it is not possible, and a few others concluded it was not necessary. The rest of us have known that it is necessary, but often we have gone about it in strange, partial, or ineffective ways. It is nevertheless true that the effort to be right with God has been the most outstanding and lasting signature of all past cultures and civilizations. Shrines, altars, codes of behavior, pyramids, ziggurats, art, music, architecture, literature – the framework and values of the community, and indeed of civilization itself, have all been shaped and defined by the effort to be right with God.

It is another way of talking about becoming whole, integrated, fully human, fully alive. To be “in tune” with the Creator – to be in right relationship with God – is the winsome hunger and terrifying call that drive all of our longings and efforts to go beyond the level of mere temporary, physical survival. Down through all recorded history – from ritual spells to Bach cantatas, from human sacrifice to baptism, from monastic orders to gathered churches – humans have hungered for God’s forgiveness and approval, and for some way to live lives more pleasing and more fitting to the Creator’s will and WAY.

All civilization, until modern times, has been built on and around the presupposition that pleasing God – being right with God – is the purpose behind our structures, and the reason from which all our lesser reasons come. And yet the human race is soul-sick to some degree, most of the time, because it does not take this “need to be right with the Creator” seriously enough. That is, the marks of our awareness of the Creator are everywhere throughout past history, but so is the evidence of our willingness to ignore, or at least partially ignore, our Creator when worship interferes with getting what we think we need or want.

To be sure, we look back and see that religious institutions have made strange and serious blunders. Sometimes they seem downright evil. Those looking back at *us* will doubtless wonder what we were thinking – if we were thinking at all. And the true God, beyond *all* our imaginings, must often sigh in humor or in sorrow to see the strange antics by which we hope to please or appease – to win some special favor or gain some special request. And how often does God find

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among us a simple, constant, daily devotion? If you married somebody, would you rather have a huge party and a terrific gift once a year on your anniversary, or some evidence every day throughout the years that you are loved and cherished? How thrilled our Lord must be by the evidence of all the appreciation and support He receives ... on Easter. That is not how it is in *this* church, but it illustrates the point. It is how it is on our planet.

In the Christian Faith, we believe that peace with God comes in *receiving* forgiveness. And this peace with God is sustained if *we* become *forgiving*. Every faithful Catholic, before every communion, makes confession, has penance set, receives absolution, fasts and prays – before going to the table fellowship with our Lord.

What is your system? Are you a great forgiver? Do you still have your own list of unforgivable sins? As a Congregationalist, you don't like to fit into the molds of vast religious structures; you are an individualist – you accept the responsibility of having the freedom to design your own spiritual path. But that does not mean you escape the necessity of turning your life over to God. So what is your system? How do you keep recovering from the anger, the pain, the isolation – the debris of experiencing life in this broken world?

“And when he reached the descent from the mount of Olives, the whole company of his disciples in their joy began to sing aloud the praises of God for all the great things they had seen, saying ‘Blessed is he who comes as king in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, glory in highest heaven!’ Some Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, restrain your disciples.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if my disciples are silent, the very stones will shout aloud.’ When he came in sight of the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If only you had known this day the way that leads to peace. But no; it is hidden from your sight.’”
(Luke 19:37-42)

I like to think that the drama of Palm Sunday is clearer to most of you than it is to casual Christians. This was not an incidental or accidental little party. This was the culmination of Jesus' ministry, the high point of the movement He began here on earth. He did “storm the walls” of Jerusalem (so to speak) and take over the temple, clearly declaring Himself the rightful King and God's Messiah and making an uncompromising appeal for all faithful Jews to rally to Him – to grant Him their allegiance and declare His right to rule their people. Only, this insurrection – this coup – was a peaceful one. Unlike many of

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His followers, Jesus would not kill people to save them. They must acknowledge and receive Him – they must welcome and declare Him of their own free will – or He would not be their King. There are strange new restrictions, principles, and methods if you represent a Kingdom of love and grace instead of a kingdom of coercion and domination. It is hard for us to grasp such a different approach even still.

Nevertheless, it was clearly Jesus' purpose to initiate a New WAY of Life on earth. At the very heart of this New WAY was reconciliation with God: forgiving God, and receiving God's forgiveness. This in turn must lead us to begin forgiving one another. Peace with God comes in *receiving* God's forgiveness. *Learning to forgive* sustains our peace with God. That is the core and central purpose. From this comes all the power and possibility for all the rest.

So Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, knowing that they will not receive Him as their rightful King – they will not receive the peace and forgiveness He has come to bring. The end of that, as always, will be their destruction. It is not a destruction He brings or wants. He is not angry; He is terribly sad. It is a destruction they bring upon themselves. You have noticed, I assume, that we humans bring destruction upon ourselves? Apart from forgiveness and peace, all things are ultimately destroyed.

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Once upon a time, a very great, noble, and handsome Prince fell in love with a country maiden. Though he wooed her, brought her many gifts, and told her many times of his undying love, she was so flabbergasted by his attentions and felt so awkward and unworthy in his presence that she began to wonder if he was only toying with her. Perhaps he meant merely to tease and shame her. Or maybe he only wanted a little fling while far away from his own castle and kind.

Though she grew quite cold and distant, he continued to woo her – showing up at odd moments and catching her by surprise as she went about her normal affairs. So persistent was he, so patient and gentle – yet insistent that his love was true – that finally she began to waver, letting herself imagine what it would be like to go with him ... letting herself wonder if it might actually be possible. Could it really be that his love was true? Each time she started to think this way, it seemed so preposterous that quickly she regained control and turned away from him with greater resolve. (Are you weeping yet? He was.)

As the years went by, the cycle continued. The Prince kept expressing his love, and the maiden allowed herself brief moments of hope followed by fierce rejection – until finally the maiden realized that the Prince had no intention of giving up. Then was she truly distraught. The Prince really did love her, but how could she possibly go with him? She was so uncouth. Her language was so common. She did not know how to behave at court – had no clue about all the manners and customs. She had no proper clothes nor any way to get them. Yet secretly she had been falling in love with the Prince more and more. But to go with the Prince was more unthinkable than ever. She could not bear the thought of shaming him or of having him ashamed of her – of his being disgraced to bring such a common wench into his great castle. The thought of meeting his parents and his friends, of being beside him at the great gatherings and affairs of his kingdom – the mere thought of it turned her face white and her heart cold.

But now she knew she really loved the Prince. And the next time he came, she told him so. “I know,” he said. “I could feel it all along, even though you would not admit it to yourself.”

“Nevertheless,” she said, “I cannot come with you. I cannot abide the thought of being such a country bumpkin in the halls of your great castle. I would die of shame.”

And though he urged her with every reassurance of his love and patience – though he tried to tell her that his parents and friends were not haughty and judgmental like she imagined – yet she could not hear him and could not believe it. Finally she agreed to consider his proposal of marriage on one condition: that he send tutors to instruct her – to show her all the details of protocol and behavior appropriate to his kingdom – and that he leave her alone for however long it would take her to learn it all, that she might be ready and worthy to go with him.

Finally the great Prince agreed, promising to send the tutors and instructions, and promising to return when her need was great enough or when she felt ready and worthy to come with him. She promised she would work diligently every day to master all the things she needed to know, for truly there was nothing else in all of life that she wanted more than to be able to be with him. She did not see the strange, sad smile this brought to his face. But he nodded and let her have her way.

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Many times over the years, the Prince tried to persuade her that she had learned enough – that she could come with him if only she would trust his love. But he did this discreetly, in deference to her wishes. Never did she feel worthy or ready. (Naturally, and of course. We never do.) Meanwhile, she had told all the people in her village why she was studying so hard and practicing all the manners and customs she was being taught. Many laughed at her and told her she was imagining it all. But many others thought it quite interesting and even tried to learn and practice the lessons with her.

After many years, the Prince knew he had to make his move. She had learned as much as she could and practiced long after it would do her any good, and now the preparations had only turned into a long, unending list of excuses. So he rode into her village one day in broad daylight, in full royal regalia. He came as the custom and mythology demanded: riding a donkey, with palm branches waving and people shouting “*Hosanna!*” (“Blessed is he who comes as king, in the name of the Lord!”)

And he said, “Marry me! Marry me now! Trust my love! You can learn no more on your own. We can wait no longer. The time is now. Come with me!”

Everybody got very excited. The whole village was buzzing with the news and there was a lot of talk about the upcoming wedding, for the whole village had known for years about the preparations. But they had their own ideas about what the wedding should be like – and besides, they didn’t want anybody taking the now-famous maiden away from them. After all, it was her preparations and her practicing all the lessons that held the village together. Their whole way of life now revolved around the lessons and the practicing. Who wanted or needed the reality? Besides, this man must obviously be an imposter. No great Prince would actually want to marry a simple country maiden. Ridiculous!

So they grabbed the Prince, dragged him outside the town, and murdered him as cruelly and painfully as they could. “That will teach outsiders to come messing around in our town, disturbing the peace, and interrupting our ways,” they said. Then they went back to learning the lessons and practicing the preparations for the coming of the Great Prince.

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Unlike most normal humans, Jesus is not dissuaded from His purpose by knowing human nature. The fact that He cannot “win” at this time, in this world, does not make Him conclude that the truth is futile or that living for it will accomplish nothing. Most of us tell ourselves such lies a dozen times a day. But Jesus knows that truth set in motion will have its impact and effect. Even though it will not be evident in the next ten minutes or even in the next ten years, truth set in motion will have its effect. So He will march into Jerusalem anyway. And when all the repercussions of that are over, it will sink the new truth and the New WAY so deeply into the hearts and minds of His followers that they will begin to carry it for Him – haltingly at first, to be sure, but nonetheless. They will carry it for Him through Hell and high water; through hunger and success; through common days and turmoil and persecution; through plague and death – generation after generation until finally they hand it on to you. Some of you do not think so yet or do not see it yet, but I believe they are hoping that you will carry it too. I believe HE is hoping that you will carry it too.

There is only one week left now for us to get ready to receive afresh our Risen Lord. One week to finish whatever God’s mercy will allow of our cleansing, of our putting off all old hurts and resentments, of our getting ready to be open channels (again – or at last) of God’s love and purpose and grace. God be with you in your preparations.