

# NO GREATER LOVE ...?

A Service by Fritz Hudson

Presented April 4, 2004

Opening Song: #266 "Now the Green Blade Riseth"

## Introduction

"Now the Green Blade Riseth" is a song about winter wheat, isn't it, the kind that is planted in the fall in the plains from here south and begins to show its green blades now as winter ebbs. The song's lyricist sees the rising grass as an image of how the love Jesus of Nazareth embodied awakened again following his death.

This week most "Christians", believers in Jesus as "the Christ," will remember his death, his execution on a cross on "Good Friday", and retell the stories of his body's transportation from its tomb to live again in another world on Easter Sunday. We won't join them in that remembrance. We reach the high point of our annual reconnection with Christianity's gifts to our faith today, Palm Sunday, the day of his triumphant reception in Jerusalem. Jesus' gifts to us are from his life, not from his death. And the green palms which the people laid down for him to walk on lead us now to turn to the earth which gave them life as our next teacher. We turn now to the season of reconnecting with the teachings of those closest to the earth - the gifts our faith derives from the most deeply rooted religious traditions of our human family, sometimes called "primal" or "pagan."

Jesus' great gifts tell us much to guide our life with one another - love your enemies, care for the poor and the sick, judge not lest you be judge. He gave almost no guidance on how to live with our earth and its other inhabitants, however. Twice in the gospel stories, Jesus goes out alone into wilderness - once for 40 days "with the wild beasts" (Mk:1.13) (Lk.5:15-16) - but he returned saying absolutely nothing to us of how to live in that world. In fact, he makes clear it is not his home. Once he told a follower on a road, "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Lk.9:57-58). The gospel writers portray him as focused on another world beyond this one. Still, he did appreciate the beauty of this world: "Consider the lilies of the field," he said, "Even Solomon (the king) in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." (Mt.6:28-29). He also understood the power of natural potential. "The kingdom of God," he said, is 'like a grain of mustard seed, which when sown is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet grows to become the greatest of all shrubs, where birds can make nests in its shade." (Mk:31-32). He also knew the power human partnership could bring to natural processes: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard;," one of his stories goes. 'He came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, "Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?" But the vinedresser answered, "Let it alone, sir, til I dig about it and put on manure. Let's look at it again in a year' (Lk.6:6-8)

One the four gossellers says that Jesus told as followers, as he set out for Jerusalem: 'It is time for the Son of Man to be glorified. (U)nless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears fruit. He who loves his life loses it, (but) he who hates his life in this world will

keep it for eternal life." (Jn.12:23-25). Do you think a wheat grain dies over the winter, before it pushes up its green blades? Do you think you that those who hate life in this world are better connected to eternity than those who love this life? As Paul, Jesus' most fervent early follower urged, we're inclined to "test everything" anyone says (1Thes.5:21), to seek more than one opinion in our search for truth and meaning. We sense we might do well to learn more about living with the birds and the shrubs and the wild beasts. In that spirit now we turn our ears to people whose thoughts are very well rooted. Over the next weeks we'll hear how the Akan of Ghana, and the Celts of Northern Europe, and the Lakota of North America, among others, have considered these questions.

### Sermon

We all now remember what "The Passion," this year don't we, thanks to Mel Gibson. It all takes place in Jerusalem, very soon after Jesus' triumphal reception there on Palm Sunday. It begins with Jesus' betrayal, by Judas, to the Jewish high priests, then moves through his trial, his condemnation before the Pilot, the Roman Governor, and his crucifixion as a insurrectionist. It ends with his body's disappearance from the tomb and his spirit's reappearance to his disciples. Ask Mel Gibson what his cinematic portrayal communicates, ask most orthodox Christians what this passion embodies, and they will tell you - it is the perfection of self-sacrificing love. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends," Jesus said to his disciples in John's gospel (15:13) "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (15:12) Why are we hesitant to go down this road with his other followers? Why do we get off the Jesus train like this, so close and yet so far away from what so many fellow-travelers see as the home station. Amidst Gibson's gory glory, this seems like a good year to say more.

We all have images in our mind of people who have laid down their lives to save the lives of others. The clearest is probably that of a soldier in war who throws himself on a hand grenade in order to prevent its explosion from spreading death and injury to everyone in his foxhole. Another, only slightly less impressive, is the image of the parent or other adult who throws him or herself in front of an oncoming car to push an unsuspecting child from harm's way. In the ultimate sense, love is the willingness to place greater value on other lives than on our own. When the others are many as compared to our one, or the other is a child with all of life before him or her as compared to an adult with most of his or her life behind, the purity and value of this love is evident, to anyone.

Was Jesus' sacrifice like these? Well, not in immediate human terms at least. The danger to Jesus friends and followers was the same that killed him - the priests' and rabbis' response to his radical ethic's challenges to traditional religious laws. But unlike the soldier or the parent, Jesus incited, even invited, that threat - to his followers as well as to himself. Moreover his sacrifice was not designed to reduce or eliminate the threat; he urged his followers to incur their own persecution after his was ended. Unlike the soldier or the parent, in addition, Jesus' sacrifice was hardly spontaneous. He foretells his fate before it even begins: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him." (Mark 10:33ff).

And that's because, in orthodox Christians' understanding, this is no simply human act of self-sacrifice. Jesus' prescience, and the justification for his martyrdom, arise, they say, from his suprahuman role in a cosmic family drama: God required compensation for humanity's disobedience of humanity he created us. As a perfect human being, and God's immediate son, Jesus, sacrificed, could provide that compensation, so God could extend his saving love, once again, to all humanity. When Jesus says, "The Son of man also came ... to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45), he is understood to know that his sacrifice is not just to save his friends on earth but to save all human souls for eternity.

If that all makes sense to you, you may well be a better cosmologist than I am. You're surely a much different theologian. My theology seeks to make sense of God in accessible human terms - and to evaluate possible examples of divine action according to their effects on immediate human life. So how might we evaluate Jesus' passion in that light? There is no question but that Jesus' advocacy of radical love cost him his life. And there is no denying that any person able to accept death as the price for his principles is an exemplar of great bravery. But is Jesus' self-sacrifice, to dangers courted and somewhat self-created, really an image of love? Please think more with me about this question.

Love, simply, is the willingness and ability to serve the interests of another, and to put one's own interests at risk in that service. Only rarely does it put our life at risk. But it can. Do you remember the story of Giles Corey, one of the last of those accused in the Salem witch trials of 1692? A *Smithsonian Magazine* account tells it this way: "Accused along with his wife, the bitter iron-willed man would lose his land and his children could not inherit it. But if he refused to testify, the court couldn't pass judgment. So the 80-year-old Corey remained silent. Laid beneath a wooden plank, he was pressed with heavy stones. Would you talk now, Giles Corey? More and more stones were piled on. After two days, with his tongue pressed far out of his mouth, his only comment was 'More weight.' Finally he was crushed to death, but his land stayed in his family." (Bruce Watson. 1992)

Corey's situation was quite unique. He knew, if tried, that he would have no chance of convincing the jury of his innocence. By the time he was accused they had already convicted and hanged twelve people who had protested theirs. He knew he was going to die. Only two questions remained: How would he die? and What would he leave behind? He was forced to choose between dying in relative comfort (hanging is not fun but it is quick) but leaving nothing of what he'd worked all his life to build for his family - or dying in the most slow and painful of manners, but thereby leaving all all his life's product. Faced with only those two alternatives, Corey showed both his bravery and his love by choosing the more painful death. To me his act sets the standard for a planned death as an act of love.

At first hearing a situation Joseph Fletcher presents in his *Situation Ethics* may seem similar:

- Your father's doctors say he has about three years to live. He can leave the hospital but needs to refrain from strenuous activity. Without his daily medication, he will die within six months. The pills cost \$100 a week, and his insurance company refuses to cover the cost.
- Your father has always prided himself on providing for his family: your mother, you, and your younger sister and brothers, who are not yet out of school. As the oldest child, about to graduate

from college, you do your best to shore up your mom and siblings.

- One day your father takes you aside and says, "You know what really bugs me? The company has me insured for \$200,000 double indemnity. That's all the insurance I have - it's all I can leave to your mother and you kids. If I take the pills and live past next October, then the policy will undoubtedly be canceled when it comes us for renewal. If I don't take them, at least my family will have some security." If I decide to borrow money to buy the pills, and then the policy lapses, you'll be left penniless and in debt so that even the house goes. If I don't take the pills I'm killing myself same as if I committed suicide with a razor or gas, seems to me."

- What should the father do?

Is this the same as Giles Corey's dilemma? In part, but I see one significant difference. Corey was doomed to die immediately no matter what he did. Fletcher's father is choosing between a life of six months or one of three years. My question would be: what will be of more value to his wife and growing children - his presence or his resources? In particular, would his younger children gain more from experiencing his appreciation of life, even while losing it, or from growing up with less of his time but more of his wealth? Indeed which would be the greater sacrifice on the father's part: to live with his fragility for six months or for six times that long? In my mind, he and his wife and perhaps his oldest child have much to talk over before he makes his decision. Planned premature deaths and love, at the very least, do not come easily together.

Feminist theologians Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock are both affiliated with our faith's seminary in Berkeley California, Starr King School for the Ministry. Two years ago they published the book *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us*. In it they expose the human cost of seeing Jesus' passion as the image of perfect love, particularly for women. They tell of deaths women have invited in their effort to embody that image by remaining in abusive marriages. They are but the most obvious and gruesome expression of a larger perversion which the passion model fosters: the perversion of love that proclaims that self-abnegation is always a greater service to the human community than self assertion. A century ago Charlotte Perkins Gilman, one of the most forceful of early feminist leaders, could still say "To bear and rear the majestic race to which they can never fully belong! To live vicariously forever, through their sons, the daughters being only another vicarious link! What a supreme and magnificent martyrdom!" By 1975, I suspect, I hope, all the world could see the tragedy of such vicarious investment in the image of Pat Nixon, wife of President Richard Nixon. After her husband's resignation, she said: "I have sacrificed everything in my life that I consider precious in order to advance the political career of my husband." (*Women at Work*.) What a supreme and magnificence waste!

In 1943 Ayn Rand, in *The Fountainhead*, was already crying out for correction. "The world is perishing from an orgy of self-sacrificing. ... In all proper relationships there is no sacrifice of anyone to anyone." But that is too much to say. By 1986 Carol Pearson, in her *The Hero Within*, captures the balance of wisdom, I think. She writes: "The capacity to sacrifice, like any skill, always needs some fine tuning. It is one thing to sacrifice briefly one's sleep to comfort a child with a bad dream. It is quite another for a mother to sacrifice her whole career for a child. It is one thing for a father to sacrifice his desire to go fishing today because he needs to go to work to feed the family; it is quite

another to work for forty years at a job he hates. ... Often such comes from an inability to discriminate between giving that is necessary and life-giving and giving that brings death to the martyr and hence to those around him or her."

For, while self-sacrifice is the essence of love, only in the rarest of cases, like Giles Corey's, is love best served by self-destruction. 99.9% percent of the self-sacrifice that serves love redounds to build up, not destroy, the lover. Love may at times call one to put oneself at risk. Perhaps once or twice in a lifetime it may even call us to risk our death. For almost none of us, however, will love ever be served by seeking out, or planning for our death. For almost all of us even entertaining that possibility is to avoid our the real challenge life makes on us. As black feminist Frances Beal put it, "To die for the revolution is a one-shot deal; to live for the revolution means taking on the more difficult commitment of changing our day-to-day life patterns." ("Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." 1969)

The Jesus I cherish is the Jesus of the gospels who did work at changing his and others' day-to-day patterns over the three years of his ministry - the one who was the Good Samaritan whose story he told, the one who shamed the stone-holding crowd into sparing the adulteress. In those acts he did "live for the revolution." When he says "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you," I take literally the tense of his verb. I feel commanded to love as he has loved his followers, before setting out for Jerusalem. I do not feel commanded to follow his example of self-destruction, for I can find in it precious little love.

What I find instead is evidence that as Jesus began to consciously pursue martyrdom it served only to undercut the power of his love. Early in his ministry he said his special role freed his followers from having to develop their own strength of spirit. While John the Baptist's disciples fasted, Jesus excused his disciples from that practice, saying, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." (Mk.2:18ff). Just before he departs for Jerusalem, he succumbs to self-importance in a way that totally undercuts one of his strongest teachings. A woman brings expensive oil to anoint his head, and his followers rebuke her saying she should rather sell it to give money to the poor, as Jesus had told them to do with all their possessions. But now Jesus says to them, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her. She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you will always have the poor with you me, he has already begun to lose himself.

As Jesus moves through the passion, this fixation on himself grows doesn't it? 'Peter, by the time the cock crows thrice you will forsake me' At our last meal 'This is my body and my blood, eat this, drink this in remembrance of me? Finally at its end, after all the suffering Mel Gibson say evidences his love, what do we see? - a man near his death who cries "My God. My God. Why has thou forsaken me." (Mk.15:34) Have you ever wondered where this question comes from. How can he ask it if he foresaw all that is happening? To me this cry may just be his moment of anguished self-confrontation. Is it perhaps that, for all its bravery, he recognizes that his self-sacrifice has failed to serve his love?

As we learn from his words and his acts to turn to our new paths, may our sacrifices serve our love in and for this life.