

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from March 28, 2010

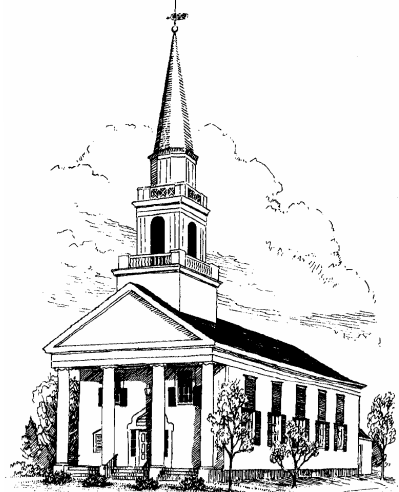
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Failed Suppression”

Scriptures:

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Luke 19:28-40



I don't know how people do it. For me, it's just about impossible. I always need help with it no matter how hard I try, no matter which technique I use. I don't know how people fold up, roll up, pound down and stuff a 5- or 6-foot long sleeping bag into its itty-bitty carry bag!

My husband Doug did mine on Friday last weekend before I left the house for the Confirmation retreat up at Silver Lake, but upon packing up on Sunday to come home, I did try, really, but just ended up throwing the sleeping bag in the back of the car with the itty-bitty carrier bag thrown in alongside it. That thing just refuses to be stuffed and contained.

Human feelings seem to behave the same way. We can try to stuff them, to punch them back down, but eventually they erupt. I found that out also on the Confirmation retreat. It is very difficult to suppress laughter. Oh, you can try all right. You can hold your breath, purse your lips tightly shut, stare straight ahead or down at your feet, but if it's genuine hilarity, soon the shoulders begin to shake, the body bends over in two, maybe the legs cross, the tears begin to brim in the eyes, the mouth twists; and, if you try to cover it, the laughter sputters right out of your nose!

Holding back sorrowful tears is similar. For whatever reason, when we don't want to be caught crying, we go through similar attempts of lip-biting, of keeping eyes wide open so as not to blink out any watery tears, of avoiding speech that will betray our quivering voices, our choking up, revealing what our lips really want to do. We try to offer a weak smile and sometimes it works and the feeling passes, but we all know that if we do that too often, we are only procrastinating the eventual meltdown. And if we do it long enough, it will affect our health.

The same goes for anger. Our mouths are involved in swallowing anger, too. Here we bite our tongues, perhaps clench our fists under the table, or enter into an internal dialogue about it's not being worth an argument or it won't do any good anyway to speak up. If anger is not expressed in constructive ways, that's when we hear the expression that "it comes out sideways" in bitter sarcasm, mean spirits, sometimes in high blood pressure and in heart attacks.

All of these expressions of our humanity need to be just that—expressed. But if you have been dealt the unfortunate hand of living under oppression, all of that is suppressed. You

carry around repeatedly swallowed anger at your oppressors. Underneath that anger is the sorrow and tears which build and build as your life and the lives of the people you love are beaten down again and again. Laughter is rare and hidden and suspicious.

It happens when your country is occupied by an unwelcome foreign power, both militarily and governmentally—like Jerusalem by the Romans. And all it takes is a big festival like Passover when more and more of you show up in the city to celebrate past liberation for the lid to start to come off all that stuffed down emotion and pent up anger. New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe to us another procession coming into Jerusalem that day on the other side of the city to keep that lid from flying off and trouble from bubbling up all over.

The reinforcements are arriving for the week: Pilate and his troops from Rome. Borg and Crossan write: “A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.” Quite a contrast from the man on the donkey on the other side of town with a few noisy followers laying their cloaks on the ground.

It is important to look closely at Luke’s version of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as compared to that of Mark and Matthew. In Luke’s version it’s all disciples who secure the colt, place Jesus upon it, throw their cloaks on the ground and call him “the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” No general crowd who comes out and later turns against him – only his multitude of disciples. No palms, no branches, no hosannas, no mention of King David, all of which, as one commentator explains, belong to parades and festivals with nationalistic overtones. No, in Luke’s version, we hear “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! *Peace* in heaven...”

Peace in heaven.

Still they’re noisy enough, “joyfully praising God with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen,” that some Pharisees tell Jesus to order his disciples to stop. Make them be quiet the way they were before—silenced by disease, by demon possession, by poverty, by fear of their oppressors—make them stop, because you’re going to get hurt, or they’re going to get hurt, or we’re going to hurt, or all three. Make them stop or there will be repercussions.

Jesus replies: I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out. Things are so bad, and what they have learned and seen in me is so good, that no one can squash this. No one can stuff it back down. No one can keep the lid on this one.

Friends, in our own time we know God’s love and God’s truth eventually rise to the top, from the depths of oppression. We have witnessed children who kept their abuse at the hands of adults a secret for 20, 30, 40 years break their silence, and pain hidden for decades shouts out from the stones of school buildings and institutions and churches and even their own homes. The weak, empty smiles of women twist and turn in shame as they finally reveal the true reason

for their bruises, silent no longer. Our disabilities, our sexual orientation, our gender, our race, ethnicity, culture, religion—all can be misunderstood and held in contempt by others, preventing us from celebrating who we truly are. Word comes to us despite foreign attempts at censorship of genocide and starvation and torture. Even our silent, majestic earth cries out now to be heard, to be rescued.

And we, as Jesus' disciples, are called to break all those simmering silences. In leafing through a recent annual report of the organization Doctors Without Borders, who provide volunteer medical care all over our hurting world, I read this: "We are not sure that words can always save lives, but we know that silence can certainly kill." It is up to us to allow the truth to come up and out, to open our mouths in protest to injustice and in defense of those whose laughter and tears and anger have been reduced to hollow eyes, stiff upper lips and broken backs. Our turning away, our keeping quiet, our swallowing hard and continuing on is counter to the love of God which cannot be contained.

Jesus said as he made his way towards Jerusalem in the weeks and months preceding this day of entry: Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. And here on this day he responds to the Pharisees who would squelch this loud demonstration: I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.

Friends, as we move from Palm Sunday now through Holy Week, through Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, and death to finally celebrate his Resurrection, we will be reminded again that no one can contain the goodness of God. No one can cover up the truth forever. No one could ruffle Jesus' faith. As he breathed his last on the cross, when his disciples who had praised God joyfully just days before stood in dumbfounded, grief-stricken silence, the stones *did* cry out—the earth quaked, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, the sun's light disappeared.

And they learned to their amazement just two days later that you can't keep God down. We might be able to suppress our laughter or our tears or our anger once in a while, but just as the truth of who we are and how we are eventually erupts, so, too, does God's powerful love. You can't squish it into a bag, you can't squelch its joyous expression, you can't bury it in a tomb, you can't squash the good news of its infinite miracle and eternal life. This Holy Week let us cry out for the pain of the world and let us also sing out as the disciples did for all the deeds of power we have seen. Amen.

