

“The Beginning of the End” April 5, 2009

This is the day that the church refers to as Palm Sunday, and it commemorates the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Our Bible passage gives us one version of that story, and the four Gospels—the books of the Bible that attempt to tell us the story of Jesus—offer somewhat different renderings of the same event. There seems to be some consistency in parts of the story that tell us that he came into the city on a colt, or perhaps a donkey, and that crowds of one size or another welcomed him. In the version we have, it simply says, “As he rode, the people gave him a grand welcome, throwing their coats on the street.” It’s “the people,” and yet we’re not totally sure who “the people” are. Yet another version of the story names “the whole crowd of disciples” as the ones who shouted praises. One gospel talks about spreading palm branches on the road, from whence we derive the name of this Sunday—Palm Sunday.

One thing is for sure: amid all the consistencies and inconsistencies of the four stories, not one of them gives us much of a clue as to what is to come during the days that follow. However, we now say this was the last week of his life, culminating with his death on what we refer to as Good Friday, which we will commemorate here at noon this coming Friday.

In between this more-or-less grand entrance into the city and his death, a lot of things happen. As I read and re-read the four versions of what followed his arrival, it became increasingly clear to me that Jesus was really pushing the envelope in the intervening days. We’re told he threw the money changers out of the temple, the holiest site in Judaism, saying they had turned it into a den of thieves. He was constantly bantering with the powers that be, and was pretty much “in your face” when challenged or questioned. All in all, as the end approached, the situation became more and more contentious.

Part of what I think was going on during that week was that Jesus was preparing to leave his friends and family, his followers and supporters. He was well aware that, if things kept going the way they were, the end was not going to be what everyone surrounding him might have been expecting. He knew it was in all probability the beginning of the end for him, and because he could sense that reality, he was experiencing the same kind of behavior and emotions that you and I do when we know an inevitable ending is at hand. Typically, when we know the end is coming, we tend to withdraw a bit, and we begin to let go of some of life as we have known it.

Endings are not uncommon for us. Actually if we stop to think about it, life is often a series of endings. We leave childhood, and enter adolescence, and then we leave adolescence behind, and become a young adult, then a middle adult, then an older adult. Each age

and stage of life brings an ending that we may or may not recognize.

William Bridges in his classic book, *Transitions*, tells the Riddle of the Sphinx, which you’ve probably heard. It goes like this: “What animal walks on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening, yet has only one voice?” The riddle is talking about human beings, who end the four feet of crawling and an age of dependency in infancy and early childhood, to move into a more independent phase of “standing on our own two feet.” That phase, too, ends as we acquire a cane that indicates the later years of our lives. With each phase of life, there is some part that has ended, something of which we’d had to let go.

Endings often bring us to crisis points in our lives. The relationship we thought was forever, instead, turns temporary as a loved one walks out. Our children grow up and leave home, filling us with a sense of emptiness that we can’t quite understand or explain. We begin the move toward retirement from our active work life, and there’s that need to protect ourselves from the inevitable loss and pain that accompanies this transition. A loved one dies, and we have to begin the ultimate work of letting go of life as we knew it.

Endings happen all the time in our lives, but most of us are not very comfortable talking about, much less actually dealing with those ending points. For instance, someone who instigates a divorce often focuses on the present and future, and is unwilling to look at what is past; nonetheless, it’s absolutely essential to recognize the end that has taken place in order to fully let go, and begin to move forward. A new mother wants to talk about the difficulties of adapting to the care of the infant in her arms, but doesn’t always realize that new arrival also means that some part of her life has ended, and she hasn’t acknowledged it.

In his books on transition, William Bridges uses five words to describe the various aspects of any natural ending experience that we go through as relationships or stages of life come to an end. Those five words are: **disengagement**, **dismantling**, **disidentification**, **disenchantment** and **disorientation**, and I want us to take a few minutes to consider what he means by those terms.

When we’re in a time of endings, one of the rather natural tendencies is to break with the familiar social patterns of our life as it has been. In some instances it’s forced upon us, and in others, we break away willingly. However it occurs, we become disengaged, detached from the activities, the relationships, the settings and the roles that have been important to us, as we realize that what once was no longer is.

Detaching and becoming unplugged from the old places is only part of the process and serves just to stop the old signals and cues from being received. However, it leaves behind it a residue of the ways we’ve responded to those signals in the past. Bridges says, “**The old habits and behaviors and practices that made you feel like yourself can only be ‘dismantled.’ They have to be taken apart a piece at a time.**”

For instance, we have a long-time friend whose wife died a few months ago. Obviously, he is grieving the loss of his lifelong companion, but his whole life has been rearranged. One of the things he said to me recently was how hard it has been to try to say “I” instead of “we” because it had been the two of them for nearly forty years. The life he had had and the life they had built remains in his memory, but has to be dismantled now due to the current reality.

Bridges uses the word “disidentification” to describe yet another aspect of any ending experience. This simply means that the old ways of identifying ourselves, of defining ourselves, don’t work anymore. One woman who had gone through an unwanted divorce talked about how she didn’t know who she was anymore. She was no longer someone’s wife, and her way of putting it was that she had “lost her mirror,” the one who had told her who she was.

I hear this same kind of loss of identity when someone loses a job, or retires. That which had been so defining seems to have disappeared, and nothing has shown up to take its place. That’s what William Bridges means by “disidentification.” In a sense, we no longer know who we are.

The next thing Bridges talks about is “disenchantment,” and it seems to me that sometimes, as we grow and mature, we become much more familiar with disenchantment. We discover to our surprise or dismay that one we thought was faithful was not, that leaders are corrupt, that idols turn out to be ordinary and perhaps even dull, and that organizations and corporations betray our trust. There’s some sense that we have to unlearn what we thought we knew, or we have to re-evaluate what we believe, because what we had thought was true does not seem to be at all.

Those aspects of saying good-bye, or dealing with an ending, really leave us in a state of “disorientation.” We feel lost, confused, reeling with uncertainty. There’s often a sense of emptiness, and maybe even despair. I often hear people at this place of an ending say things like, “I don’t get it, “ or I can’t understand what happened” or “I feel totally lost.”

I suspect that was pretty much the way those in the inner circle of Jesus felt as the week progressed, as things went from bad to worse. It’s also rather typical of how we feel when everything seems totally out of whack and out of control. We can try to ignore the signs, or deny them, or pretend they don’t exist, but that doesn’t change the reality. It is the beginning of the end, and that means we have to let go of what no longer fits in our lives, but letting go is never easy.

Letting go, saying good-bye is hard because of all the emotions. We’re sad; we’re afraid; we feel like a failure or rejected or abandoned. We become angry, claiming that this is not what we bargained for. We can do all those things, but it’s still necessary to let go of what has been.

In fact, we may have to find some symbolic way of letting go—maybe something like opening our hands, releasing that which we’ve been holding onto so fervently. Sometimes we need to find someone who is

more objective, to help us with the process of learning to let go. Some of us need to talk with a friend or a family member who can help us, and along the journey, we may find that we have to let go of our anger and bitterness, of the hurt and loss, in order to begin to begin to live again. It can be a long process, and yet it’s an important and necessary one.

The truth is that all of us have experienced endings of one sort or another, and we may even be going through one right now. Every ending requires some form of letting go—perhaps of the truths or the beliefs we’ve held onto, or the realities we once claimed. Sometimes we have to let go of our assumptions and outlooks, because they just don’t fit anymore. Sometimes it’s our hopes and dreams, our expectations and desires that have to be left behind. This morning, I hope each of us will reflect on the ending points of our lives, and begin the process of letting go. As painful as the journey may be, let’s walk on so we can once again live life.

Closing:

Chogyam Trungpa talked about the endings in our lives—about the harvest time when things come to fruition, and then he wrote, “**Finally, of course, there are times that are cold, and cutting and empty, times when the spring of new beginnings seems like distant dream. Those rhythms in life are natural events. They weave into one another as day follows night, bringing not message of hope and fear, but messages of how things are.**”

As we leave here this morning, let’s think on these things. I hope to see you all next Friday and Sunday—for the rest of the story.

Go in peace. Amen.

