Discipleship, Palm Sunday

Jamaica Plain, March 20, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

"Discipleship" is a hot topic in UU circles, thanks to author Mike Durall's book, The Almost Church: Redefining Unitarian Universalism for a New Era." Durall argues that we need to transform our movement's model from that of "autonomous individuals seeking truth" to one of communities deepening their spirituality through service. As part of a committed community, our liberal faith is more than spending an hour a week in church on Sunday, it's how we live our day-to-day lives.

We see a powerful example of discipleship in today's Palm Sunday lesson. Jesus goes to Jerusalem, following God's call and his understanding of the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God's love and justice, that he proclaims. Out of his sense of discipleship, Jesus sacrifices his own life, entering a Jerusalem where, in the words of Clarence Jordan's "Cotton Patch" version of the Gospel, he will be "lynched."

This Thursday, March 24th, when we will be celebrating communion for Maundy Thursday, is the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. Romero was shot while he was celebrating mass in the chapel of the Divine Providence cancer hospital where he lived. Romero has been an important spiritual influence in my life; I traveled to El Salvador in 1984 and 1985, staying with my journalist friend Chris Hedges. I saw the Metropolitan Cathedral where Romero was buried, a building which he left unfinished so that money could be given to the poor. At the Divine Providence Hospital, I saw the hammock that Romero slept in, and one of the patients told me, "Signor Romero is not dead, he is still with us."

Rutilio Grande, a Salvadoran Jesuit, had been an important person in Romero's deepening discipleship. For his work with the poor, Grande had been murdered on March 12th, 1979, two years before Romero's death, while driving in the countryside. An elderly man and teenage boy were also shot with the priest. In 1984, I visited the small church in the

village of El Paisnel where Grande and the other two victims are buried under the floor of the building. Small Christmas lights were strung across the memorials. Leaving the church, guerillas from the rebel FMLN appeared, 14 or 15-year-old boys with automatic weapons.

Moved by what I'd seen, I accidentally ruined the roll of film I'd just shot. In the background, I heard people shouting "Hallelujah!"; a nearby Baptist church was celebrating a baptism. Someone's boom box was blaring a current popular hit, Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time:" "You know, if you fall, I will catch you, time after time, time after time." I realized how small my loss of a roll of film was compared to the sufferings of the people around me, and felt called to witness to what I had seen in El Salvador.

Romero preached at his friend Rutilio Grande's funeral, and the shy scholarly man left the wealthy enclaves of the capital, San Salvador, to visit the poor in the countryside. He spoke out against their murder by government sanctioned death squads. Finally, in the sermon we heard an excerpt from today, he called for soldiers to disobey orders contrary to their conscience. A few days later he was shot while celebrating evening mass in the hospital chapel. I visited the chapel in 1984, and was struck that the huge, almost life-size crucifix that I had seen in photographs of the assassination had been replaced. Instead, now behind the altar was a simple gold cross with a mirror in the center of it. It seemed to me that after Romero's death, the light of God's love was reflected on those still living.

The cross with the mirror in the Salvadoran hospital chapel reminds me of a story I read once about a Greek man. I don't remember his name; perhaps someone here knows it? As a child, during the brutal German occupation of his country during World War II, his village was destroyed. From the ruins, he salvaged a piece of mirror. Years later, he worked to bring about reconciliation between Greeks and Germans. He still had the piece of mirror, saying that it reminded him, that "I am not the light, or the source of the light, but I can reflect the light."

In our Unitarian Universalist congregation, we may try to follow the path of Jesus, or the path of Buddha, or we may be looking for our path. We can all grow in discipleship by trying to reflect and bear the beams of God's love. We can help one another in community to focus our mirrors to light ways of justice, service, and compassion.

Now it's almost time to wave palms, after all it is Palm Sunday. So let's wave our palms for Jesus as he enters into Jerusalem…let's wave our palms for Oscar Romero as he leaves the wealthy enclaves and goes out into the countryside to talk with the poor…let's wave our palms for Unitarian Universalist homemaker Viola Liuzzo, who answered Martin Luther King's call to Selma, Alabama, where she was murdered 40 years ago this week…and let's wave our palms for our entry into deeper discipleship, and for our reflecting the beams of God's love.