

**“Siding with the Stranger”**  
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
March 28, 2021

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.*

## Reading

[Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 21, Verses 1-14](#)

## Sermon

When the pandemic emerged over a year ago, people in our community without stable housing faced particularly difficult challenges. Homeless shelters became health risks for the spread of Covid-19 given the close and shared quarters. Social service agencies and the state grappled with the question of how to meet the need for a safe housing option for those experiencing homelessness.

The Hilltop Inn on Airport Road in Berlin up near the hospital became one of the motels across the state utilized for emergency housing as an extension of the state’s motel voucher system. Currently, there are about 2,700 people living in one of 75 motels across the state.

With the support of Another Way on Barre Street, guests of The Hilltop Inn and other area motels organized an event last month to share their stories. They called it the Motel Guest Freedom and Unity Forum, and it was designed “to highlight the stories, challenges, and opportunities” of the 100 people living at The Hilltop Inn and other motels. The event was “an opportunities for concerned allies to bear witness to these stories and to provide support for empowerment through respectful listening and offerings of support.” The gathering was “grounded in the principle that those in the best position to advocate for needs are the people living the experience.”<sup>1</sup>

I was able to attend much of the day’s gathering for a few hours in person and also virtually using Zoom.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the printed Forum program

One of the main organizers of the event - someone who has been “hotel-housed,” as she called it, for most of the pandemic, described feeling as if she and others had “become invisible.” Meanwhile, she noted the community that has also formed at the Inn and other motels - a community of mutual care and meaningful engagement unseen from the outside. That feeling of invisibility motivated her to want to organize the forum.

One motel guest shared how homelessness has become a chronic condition for him as he has dealt with ongoing mental health issues that have made it difficult to maintain employment. He is actually from a different part of the state, and while getting set up with a room at The Hilltop was good from a housing perspective, all of his emotional support - friends, counselors - was left behind. He shared a sentiment that probably resonates with many of us, though for different reasons. He said, “ I don’t know what tomorrow brings.”

After the session in which this particular guest spoke, I made my way outside towards my car, as it was lunchtime, and I wanted to return to my church office for that meal. I passed this guest as he stood outside smoking a cigarette and thanked him for sharing his story. He thanked me for listening and also reiterated that his only option is to use his voice, to speak out, and that he’s been doing it for so long.

For those of us who can rely on stable housing day in and day out, it can be easy to remain unaware of or to ignore the pressing needs and life experiences of those in our broader community facing housing challenges and homelessness.

Attending the forum last month, I became more acutely aware of my own physical and social separation from those who are currently hotel-housed. Along with some of you, I have been somewhat active with Vermont Interfaith Action’s campaign over the last several years to end homelessness in Washington County. This group has made steady progress in their organizing and continues to do so today. Even so, I began to wonder how I could possibly address this separation and what any of us who feel committed to serving human need could be doing differently.

I believe that Jewish and Christian teachings, which we are especially lifting up in today’s service, point towards the ongoing need and religious calling to examine the systems and practices that keep an underclass in place of those deemed “other” and

“stranger.” These teachings invite us to ask ourselves how we can work towards the possibility of flourishing for all.

Rabbi Deborah Waxman says this of Passover: “More than ever, we must remember that we were redeemed from slavery in Egypt to serve the highest principles, which we must constantly seek to discern. We were freed in order to enter into a covenantal relationship with each other and the divine. Our work is to ensure the liberation and well-being of all people.”<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Waxman is speaking specifically of Jewish people as the “we” in this reflection, and yet I believe all of us can be inspired by this call to serve the highest principles and ensure the liberation and well-being of all people.

Today, we also recognize Palm Sunday and the Christian Holy Week. Within this story, we can also find wisdom for addressing the social concerns of our time.

The ministry of Jesus, as short as it was, threatened the political and religious powers of his time. His storied entry into Jerusalem turned conventional wisdom on its head. Here was a man who was both feared and also mocked for being prophesied to be a new “king.”

Some of you who were raised in Christian churches may equate Palm Sunday as a triumphant moment, but Jesus’ entry atop a donkey could also be understood as a comic mockery of Pontius Pilate’s entry into the royal city - an absurd and ironic commentary on power.

Debie Thomas, a Christian scholar writes: “As Pilate clanged and crashed his imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east, looking (by contrast) ragtag and absurd. Unlike the Roman emperor and his legions, who ruled by force, coercion, and terror, Jesus came defenseless and weaponless into his kingship. Riding on a donkey, he all but cried aloud the bottom-line truth that his rule would have nothing to recommend it but love, humility, long-suffering, and sacrifice.”<sup>3</sup>

I think it’s telling that after the spectacle of the procession into Jerusalem, Jesus goes to the temple. There, he is said to have driven away those looking to make a

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/news/ensuring-liberation-all-people-passover-message>

<sup>3</sup> Debie Thomas, “Save Us, We Pray,” Journey with Jesus: A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church, March 21, 2021. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

profit on the steps of that important religious site and, instead, made room for those on the edges of society who were in need of healing.

One of the messages shared at the Motel Guest Freedom and Unity Forum was an encouragement to make the effort to pay attention to the stories and life experiences of those who are or who have experienced homelessness. For some of you, this isn't too hard. This may be your own story, or that of a loved one or friend. It may be your life's work to provide services to those living on the economic margins. Others of you may have to stretch a bit and go out of your way to know these stories. This can be especially true during the pandemic while we aren't able to open our church doors to whoever may show up for Community Lunch in the Vestry or for worship on Sunday morning.

It takes commitment to continue to keep at the forefront the needs of those who might be deemed "other" or marginal due to their housing or economic status, to keep centering those who are living the experience and who are being directly impacted by decisions and policies out of their control.

Commitment as it shows up in the story of the Exodus and in the life and ministry of Jesus is not an easy path. Commitment of this magnitude transforms lives. There is no going back despite the uncertainty of the journey ahead.

This commitment to freedom and justice shows up in very real and ordinary ways.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote: "...the teaching of Judaism is the theology of the common deed. The Bible insists that God is concerned with everydayness...The prophet's field of concern is not the mysteries of heaven, the glories of eternity, but the blights of society, the affairs of the market place."<sup>4</sup>

This theology of the common deed is being lived out through the work of people in our local community seeking solutions to the affordable housing and homelessness crisis. As I mentioned earlier, Vermont Interfaith Action, of which the Unitarian Church of Montpelier is a member, has been partnering with other groups to bring about policy changes to create more permanent housing options. This is very much the

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<sup>4</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

work of “the common deed” as Heschel describes with research into funding and budgets and talking with legislators and listening to the stories of those who have been without housing for far too long.

I invite you to mark April 15th on your calendar for a virtual public action on this topic. VIA will present the results of their research, our neighbors who have experienced homelessness will share their stories, and together we will ask for legislative commitments to establish permanent housing options that are affordable and supportive. There are more details in this week’s E-news about the event.

This Passover week, this Holy Week, I invite you to reflect on your own commitments and how you are being called to live with love and humility in service of the stranger.

May each of us from our own place of inner truth and wisdom and sustained in community be agents of freedom, liberation, welcome, and justice.

So may it be.