

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
March 28, 2010~~Palm Sunday
Luke 19:28-40

“Caution Tape and Crash Helmets”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

One morning in early March, the day after a big rainstorm with fierce winds swept through the area, I climbed Mt. Tom. Near the summit as my route passes next to the small visitor’s center, I heard a crackling noise. I looked up and saw a severed power line dangling from a pole—and sparks were shooting out from it. Stunned, I froze in my tracks. While I stood there wide-eyed, a long, scary ribbon of fire burst out from the severed power line. That’s when I turned and started running down the mountain. Thankfully that day I had brought my phone with me. Running and breathless, I called 911 and described what I had seen. The dispatcher said they would send a fire truck and the power company to Mt. Tom immediately. And, he said, get off the mountain!

The next morning, assuming everything had been repaired and I would be safe on my beloved mountain, I climbed Mt. Tom again. When I reached the little visitor’s center, I was surprised to find the entire building cordoned off with bright yellow caution tape. Clearly something had shorted out and the visitor’s center was unsafe. Giving the cautioned-taped building a wide berth, I continued on up to the summit and the view I love from the fire tower.

As I descended the mountain, passing the cautioned-tape visitor’s center with care once again, I found myself thinking about my first few visits to the Haydenville Congregational Church in May of 2005. When I came to this Church to give my candidating sermon, the front doors of this building were draped with yellow caution tape. This is true: the front steps and the front door of this Church had caution tape across them.

That’s an interesting way to welcome to visitors, I thought to myself. I had heard that this congregation was eager to grow, to recruit new members.....but yellow caution tape across the front door did not send a warm and inviting message to visitors.

When I came for my candidating sermon and during the next few visits, I ignored the caution tape. I just won't ask I thought.

But once I was safely and securely hired as the pastor of the Church I asked one of the long-time Church members, "What's with the caution tape across the front of the church?"

"Go look," was the only answer I got.

And so I did.

And there I found old, rotting (there is no other word) front steps with holes a small dog could fall through...not to mention a foot or a child.

When I came back in the Church the old-timer said to me, "It's a law suit waiting to happen. We thought caution tape would at least warn people."

As some of you know and remember, soon after I came to the Church as your Pastor we replaced those broken old, dangerous, holey front steps with new steps that came pre-made on a big truck. The new steps were installed under Connie's watchful eye. And the caution tape was removed from the front of the Church.

BUT here it is, Palm Sunday, and I have been thinking that caution tape across the front of the Church is a GOOD idea.

I have been thinking that maybe we should wrap the entire Church in caution tape. I think the old-timers had the right idea: put caution tape across the doors and the steps. In fact, put caution tape around the whole building.

I think people should be warned that Christians who really follow Christ, Christians who are living his message of peace, compassion and extravagant love, Christians who are wildly welcoming, decidedly open and affirming, profoundly justice-seeking and thoroughly inclusive are dangerous.

I think people should be warned.

I think we should wrap this church in caution tape.

I think ANY church that seeks to understand, live and share the "good news" (which Rev. Peter Gomes defines as "get ready, change is coming") is subversive. I think any church that tries to develop true disciples rather than just recruit new members is threatening.

I think any church that takes Jesus' words to heart, hears what he was really saying, listens to his stories and his lessons, recognizes what a radical, revolutionary guy this Jewish peasant really was will disrupt the status quo.

I think those churches should be wrapped in caution tape.

In today's reading from the Book of Luke, Jesus' entourage is creating a terrible ruckus as Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey riding down the Mt. of Olives. People are waving palms, spreading their cloaks on the road like a red carpet, shouting and carrying on. Some of the Pharisees in the crowd say to Jesus, "Order your disciples to stop!" And Jesus replies, "I tell you if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is explosive, his message is life-changing, his lessons challenge the social, political and economic structures of the time, his witness is powerful, his communion with God is profound, his disciples are deeply committed! Jesus, a world-altering figure, is entering Jerusalem—even if his followers stopped carrying on, the stones would shout out.

Jesus did not come to tinker on the edges of society, he did not come to make a subtle shift in accepted cultural norms, he did not come just to bring comfort and to heal, Jesus came to do nothing less than transform the world—to change our ways of thinking completely.

Jesus came to encourage the poor, empower the outcast, find the lost, love the sinner.

He came without weapons to stand up to armies, without money to chastise the rich, without power to lead a revolution.

Jesus' presence in our personal lives can be warm and soft and comforting. But his presence while on this earth was anything but. He was brave, confrontational and counter-cultural.

Any church filled with true Christ-followers,
any church filled with contemporary disciples,
any church filled with people who are taking Jesus' work, words and witness seriously is a dangerous place and should be wrapped in caution tape.

Annie Dillard was right.

Listen to these words from her book, Teaching a Stone to Talk:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT.... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

Our churches are places where we are talking about the radical message of a nonviolent warrior of change.

We're too polite.

We're too calm.

We're too quiet!

Annie Dillard is right. We should have ushers at every door issuing life preservers when you enter, handing out crash helmets, and lighting signal flares.

Plus we should be lashing you to your pews.

And if I am truly preaching the Gospel on Sunday mornings, this pulpit should be wrapped in caution tape.

The message would be watch out, get ready, change is coming—in this Church we think Jesus really meant what he said and what he said was nothing short of transformational.

Fasten your seat belts, here comes the sermon.

If I preach the Gospel faithful to the life and message of Jesus, this PULPIT should be wrapped in caution tape.

And, if we truly understand that Communion is the re-enactment of Jesus' Last Supper, that we are taking his words and his witness into our own bodies when we share the bread understanding that we are called to continue his work, then this ALTAR should be wrapped in caution tape.

Jesus gave us a holy meal to re-enact after his death, a ritual to remind us that we are now his body, his hands and face, he is counting on US as his heirs to continue his legacy.

Whoa. Better wrap the altar in caution tape.

If those of us who worship in this Church were so steeped in Jesus' message, so committed to continuing his work,

so aware that our actions, our lives are the ways we are preaching the Gospel, so much on fire with the message of the "good news"

then when WE were not in this building even the pews would shout out.

Just as Jesus told the Pharisees, if the disciples were silent, the stones were shout out.

Maybe if we were so filled with the Gospel, with the transforming power of Jesus' message and his light then when we fell silent the pulpit and altar would shout out.

I hiked up Mt. Tom on Friday and the caution tape still encircles the visitor's center. I have come to rather like it.

When I pass it in the morning it reminds me of my earliest days at this Church and how I found caution tape of all things across the front door and the front steps.

On Palm Sunday when Jesus announces that his message has so filled the world and inspired his followers that even the stones would shout out, the image of caution tape BACK on the front doors of our Church gives me a thrill.

Like those signs on some people's front gates and front doors that say: "beware of dog." Caution tape on our front door would signal: "beware of Christians."

We think Jesus actually meant what he said in the Sermon on the Mount.

We think Jesus actually expects us to carry on his work.

We think a radically inclusive, gay-affirming, feministly oriented, peace-loving, justice-seeking, compassion-filled, mission-focused, raucous church is what Jesus had in mind. Beware.

We are talking serious Christianity here.

And so when you come to our Church, we'll meet you at the door with a Bulletin, and a hug, and a crash helmet.

Amen.