

A Path to Freedom

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

Opening Words Rev. Anne Bancroft

Be not bound today,

Be not tied to worn patterns or old habits.

Try on something new this Easter morning,
a day of light and gladness.

Let your souls drink in the freedom of this season

and imagine **that** freedom in your heart,

Untested, unknown,

Sitting at the edge of possibility.

Reading: The Unexpected Stairway, by Barbara Rohde, *In the Simple Morning Light*, 1994.

My husband and I had been at a small hotel in Bergen for two days before we discovered the stairway.

We had known it was there, of course. We had seen the sign, if not the thing itself. But we used the elevator. Saved time, we thought, and the energy we needed for exploring that charming Norwegian town on misty October days.

After breakfast on the third day, when the elevator seemed slow in arriving, my husband decided to walk up. He was waiting at the elevator door when I – and the elevator – arrived on the fourth floor.

“Let me show you something,” he said, and led me back down the stairs he had just come up.

I was dazzled. Instead of the sterile, institutional look of most hotel stairways, this one had the warm beauty of an art-lover’s home. There were bright paintings on all the walls, and at each landing a rug in jeweled tones, a table with fresh flowers, an exquisite chair or two. When we reached the first floor, we walked up again, filled with energy, drinking in the beauty.

“We might have missed this,” I said.

“Have to be careful about saving time and losing life,” he said.

Meditation

Rolling Away the Stone Sara Moores Campbell

(628 – Singing the Living Tradition)

In the tomb of the soul, we carry secret yearnings, pains, frustrations, loneliness, fears, regrets, worries.

In the tomb of the soul, we take refuge from the world and its heaviness.

In the tomb of the soul, we wrap ourselves in the security of darkness.

Sometimes this is a comfort. Sometimes it is an escape.

Sometimes it prepares us for experience. Sometimes it insulates us from life.

Sometimes this tomb-life gives us time to feel the pain of the world and reach out to heal others. Sometimes it numbs us and locks us up with our own concerns.

In this season where light and dark balance the day, we seek balance for ourselves.

Grateful for the darkness that has nourished us, we push away the stone and invite the light to awaken us to the possibilities within us and among us – possibilities for new life in ourselves and in our world.

Sermon

A Path to Freedom

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Easter can be such a struggle for Unitarian Universalists. One wonders why we even worry about it, given our inclination to reject the idea of a bodily resurrection, though we often consider the IDEA of resurrection, of rebirth, in all kinds of metaphorical ways.

We consider the ways, for example, that we die and are reborn all the time, the Easter promise that whatever goes down will come up again. Spring, for example – all things buried find new ways to bloom again. Nature, like our hope, springs eternal.

We Unitarian Universalists have found other ways to acknowledge loss and celebrate the new rather than return to a story that, at the very least, is unsettling, and layered with images of suffering, too often a home to guilt and disease

But I think we do away with the Jesus story at a loss. In our haste to eschew the message that no longer serves us, of explanation of a mystery – the missing body – that would attach us to a miracle we can't accept, namely the resurrection, we lose the opportunity to consider the players – or, at least, the main player – what his goal was to begin with, and how the whole thing has been managed or shaped or changed by its history.

Throwing the baby out with the bathwater does not serve us.

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Some of you know I'm a fan of revisiting scripture – not because I believe the written word, but because I think it can help us understand ourselves and the water we continue to swim in. We'll be talking about that water more over the next few weeks or more, but today I want to focus on the understanding part.

I've mentioned to a few people a sign I noticed recently on a Facebook post. It was a picture of a young woman at some kind of protest or march, and the sign she was holding said something about justice and then, "Know your history." That's what stuck with me: know your history. If you want to understand the world we live in now and how it's working, or not, and for whom – know your history.

In this part of the world, we are a product of hundreds, thousands of years of biblical relationship of some kind or other. So much of our culture, our cultural assumptions, our practices and motivations come out of this tome of a book and the ways it has been interpreted and framed by everyone who has found value or purpose in it.

Can you get through life without it? Of course – many do.

But there is a particular path to freedom – of awareness, of insight – provided by understanding the impact of its stories, WHO has shaped them, WHY, and HOW.

It takes time and attention, but like our staircase travelers suggested:

We have to be careful about saving time, and losing life.

There is magical color, sparkle, and imagination in these stairways – venues to not just self-awareness, but system-awareness and growth.

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So, Jesus – because it’s Easter. He has certainly received a lot of attention over the last two thousand years or so . . . and there are infinite interpretations of the story of his life and death, not to mention the spiritual and political ramifications of the story.

In 1993, a book called *The Five Gospels*¹ was published based on the work of the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar. Their task was to parse away the layers of fog that surround Biblical verse to determine, as best they could, what Jesus really said. They color-coded scripture as follows: printed in black – Jesus did not say this; printed in gray – Jesus did not say it, but the ideas are close to his own; printed in pink – Jesus probably said something like this; printed in red – That’s Jesus!

The book is more than 500 pages long, and I could count on two hands the pages that had red ink on them. And this was six years of study – they were looking hard.

So if one gives credence to their work, there is a lot in the Bible that is attributed to Jesus that was not necessarily his. We’ve got an entire mythology built up around his life and death, and very little, apparently, to give him actual credit for.

And, it is telling, I think, that one of the red passages – one of the “That’s Jesus!” passages – has been represented for years as advice of passive response. In Matthew, chapter 5, verses 39-41, Jesus says: “Don’t react violently against the one who is evil: when someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well. ⁴⁰When someone wants to sue you for your coat, let that person have your cloak along with it. ⁴¹Further, when anyone conscripts you one mile, go an extra mile.”

Is this passage familiar to any of you? How many among you have interpreted the phrase “turn the other cheek,” as an exhortation to accept an act of aggression, to forgive and even to allow another? And, if someone wants your coat, to be so generous as to give your cloak, as well? And the extra mile, go further than asked or expected – I found an article that said, “go the extra mile and succeed in life!”

I suspect these are not uncommon interpretations of what the Jesus Seminar suggests are most likely messages Jesus would actually have offered – though likely not the message he intended.

Today – on a day when we consider the seed of life that might surprise us, when we wonder about taking the time to experience a hidden stairway full of wonder, let me offer you a challenge to the assumptions we have culturally embedded of these Gospel messages.

¹ *The Five Gospels – The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. New York: Pleridge Press, 1993.

Much of the thinking I want to share here comes from Walter Wink², professor of Biblical interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary, who helps us to understand Jesus speaking in response to power dynamics, asking the question of how we should respond to acts of evil or oppression.

When someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well.

In Jesus' day, the use of right and left hands was very prescribed. The left hand was for issues of cleanliness only. The right hand was the expression of capacity – the open hand of welcome to an equal, the back-hand of power to someone less-than. Jesus is clear that he is talking about a situation of power differential: If struck by the back hand of the oppressor, turn the other cheek, that is, force the oppressor to expose their palm – symbol of equality. It cost nothing, at the time, to strike an inferior, but the fine was high for striking an equal. Jesus' suggestion in response to evil was neither fight nor flight, but a nonviolent path of resistance, of defiance, exposing the evil, the offense, for what it was. Turning the cheek "robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate," (Wink, p.16) neither passive nor accepting.

Does that feel different from what you have understood?

The second example requires an understanding of borrowing and the costs of repayment. If you were poor and gave your coat as collateral for a loan, Jewish law required its return every evening at sundown, "for that was all the poor had to sleep in." (p. 17) If your creditor took you to court and you gave your cloak as well (as Jesus suggests), leaving you basically unclothed – that is, naked – imagine the public reaction. "Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and shame fell not only the naked party, but on the person viewing or causing one's nakedness. [Our Bible readers will remember this from the story of Noah and his sons.] . . . The creditor is revealed to be not a 'respectable' moneylender but a party in the reduction of an entire social class to landlessness and destitution." (Wink, p.20) Again, what Jesus recommends is neither passive nor accepting, but exposing oppression, evil, for what it is.

Wink tells the story of a group of women in apartheid South Africa whose shantytown was going to be destroyed. The soldiers waited until most of the men and women had gone off to work, and announced to anyone left that they had five minutes to gather their belongings before the bulldozers came in. "The women, perhaps sensing the prudery of the farm boys who largely made up the army, stood in front of the bulldozers and stripped off all their clothes. The army fled." (Wink, p.22)

And third – the extra mile. ". . . when anyone conscripts you one mile, go an extra mile."

² Wink, Walter. *Jesus and Nonviolence, A Third Way*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

It's so interesting how this one, also, has become something so entirely different from what it was likely intended to be . . . know your history, right?

Roman soldiers were limited as to the amount of forced labor they could impose on subject peoples, like the Jews. Mile markers were par for the course along the highways, and a soldier could require a civilian to carry his pack (Wink estimates 75-80 pounds of baggage) one mile, but only one mile. To go on meant severe penalties for the soldier under military law.

How brilliant is that? The soldier, not wanting a fine, says, "OK, now you can stop." The civilian says, "Oh, no, let me! Really, it's fine!" The question is not winning, it's providing a nonviolent way that the "oppressed can recover the initiative, how," Wink reminds us, "they can assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed."

"[This teaching] far from being a counsel of perfection unattainable in this life, is a practical, strategic measure for empowering the oppressed. It provides a hint of how to take on the entire system in a way that unmask its essential cruelty and to burlesque its pretensions to justice, law, and order." (Wink, p.21)

How is it, we wonder, that these ideas – a paragraph of so few to have been asserted as "That's Jesus!" – have been so misunderstood, so transformed as to imply powerless acceptance of the status quo?

Well, consider the source, and who has been in charge of framing the message for quite some time now . . . and, who of us stands to lose from an empowered oppressed community?

Yes, Jesus was a peacemaker – and we would have this house, as our choir reminded us, be a house of peace, of the love we strive for. But, Jesus was also an agitator, a fighter against a system that abused many for the sake of a few. That feels like the part of his story we often forget, because in many respects, we are among the few, right? Jesus was an advocate for a radical love that said we should all be on the same page in this life. He was an equalizer – and if we don't take the time to remember that, to experience that hidden staircase, to let the seeds of that mystery grow, we'll miss his message altogether.

Easter may be for us a day of awakening – a day of recognizing that we are not bound to patterns of inequality, that "loving confrontation can free both the oppressed from *submissiveness* and the oppressor from *offense*." (Wink, p.26 – italicized words changed/synonyms)

It's a radical kind of freedom and it's not the easy path. But it's a hopeful path – a path to freedom for all us if we're willing to stay on it.

Let's enter this morning with hope, with possibility, and with conviction. The sun rose this morning. Let us rise also – in body or spirit.

Morning Has Come – Hymn 1000