

WELLSPRINGS OF OUR LIVING TRADITION: JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS

A Second Sunday Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro
December 10, 2006

[Scriptural Readings: Isaiah 58: 6-11 and Mark 12: 28-31]

This is the third installment in my monthly sermon series about the sources of the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. The topic for today is “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” I imagine that the use of Bible readings as a lead-in to the sermon may have reminded some of you of earlier worship experiences, which included passages from both the “Old Testament” (Hebrew scriptures) and “New Testament” (Christian scriptures). To be honest, preparing this sermon posed a special challenge for me as well, because it involved revisiting a faith tradition about which I am deeply ambivalent. I view the Judeo-Christian heritage as a source of both great **promise** and great **frustration**.

That confusing mixture of promise and frustration is mirrored in what might be called the **great paradox of American religion**. As the environmental writer Bill McKibben puts it bluntly, “America is simultaneously the most professedly Christian of the developed nations and the least Christian in its behavior.” In spite of our increasingly multireligious population, more than eighty percent of Americans continue to identify themselves as Christians. However, “only forty percent of Americans can name more than five of the Ten Commandments, and a scant half can cite any of the four authors of the gospels. Twelve percent believe Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife. . . . Three-quarters of Americans believe that the Bible says ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ That is, three out of four Americans believe that this uber-American idea, a notion at the core of our current individualist politics and culture, which was in fact uttered by Ben Franklin, actually appears in holy scripture. The thing is, not only is Franklin’s wisdom not biblical, it’s *counter*-biblical. Few ideas could be farther from the gospel message, with its radical summons to love of neighbor.” [Bill McKibben, “People of the (Unread) Book,” in Peter Laarman (ed.), *Getting on Message*, p. 13-14]

“In the days before his Crucifixion, when Jesus summed up his message for his disciples, he said the way you could tell the righteous from the damned was by whether they’d fed the hungry, slaked the thirsty, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, and visited the prisoner.” How do we as an overwhelmingly Christian nation measure up to those standards? We rank dead last among developed countries in caring for our poor, our children, and universal health care for all of our citizens. We Americans respond generously to specific catastrophes among our own people and others around the world, but we rank far behind other wealthy nations in terms of aid to underdeveloped countries as a share of our economic wealth. “Despite the sixth commandment, we are . . . the

most violent rich nation on earth, with a murder rate four or five times that of our European peers. We have prison populations greater by a factor of four or five than other rich nations (which at least should give us plenty of opportunity for visiting).

“Having been told to turn the other cheek, we’re the only rich nation left that executes its citizens, mostly in those states where Christianity is theoretically strongest.” Despite Jesus’s strong injunctions against divorce, our divorce rate is roughly three times the rate of our secular European counterparts. “Teenage pregnancy? We’re at the top of the charts. Personal self-discipline—like, say keeping your weight under control? Buying on credit? Running government deficits? Do you need to ask? [McKibben, pp. 14-15] Are we a nation of hypocrites? Bill McKibben answers, “Of course [we] are. But most people (me, for instance) are hypocrites. The more troubling explanation for this disconnect between belief and action, I think, is that most Americans—which means most believers—have replaced the Christianity of the Bible, with its call for deep sharing and personal sacrifice, with a competing creed.” [p. 15]

What is this competing American creed? In 1985 Robert Bellah and his colleagues published a classic study of the central values of contemporary American society titled *Habits of the Heart*. In this book they argue that there are two major strands in American culture. “One strand emphasizes the importance of community, based on biblical and classical ideas of covenant and civic virtue. The other strand emphasizes the individual. Both strands are important and can be combined, as they sometimes have been in American history and as they are in the biblical tradition. But according to Bellah and his colleagues, the individualistic strand has become dominant in our recent history, so that the core value or ethos of contemporary American society is **individualism**. Our quest—in our work, relationships, families, ambitions, organizations, often our religious practices—is the personal fulfillment of the individual—however we define that fulfillment.” [Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew*, p. 146] There can be little doubt that the centerpiece of contemporary American culture is the **self**.

Marcus Borg, who is a leading interpreter of Christianity and a member of the Jesus Seminar, says that the individualism of contemporary American culture “affects the way Christianity is understood. For many Christians, the significant religious issues concern the individual, whether those issues are salvation in an afterlife, or individual righteousness, or peace of mind, or personal spiritual development in the present. Individualism leads to an individualistic interpretation of the Bible. . . . Among the ‘religious right,’ the most visible form of Christian politics today, the central political issues concern individual behavior. Many involve sexuality: abortion, pornography, homosexuality. . . . The political vision of the religious right is for the most part an individualistic politics of righteousness, not a communal politics of compassion.” [Borg, p. 147]

The foundation for what Marcus Borg calls a “politics of compassion” is deeply embedded in the Jewish-Christian prophetic tradition, as illustrated in the biblical passages we read and heard earlier. Like Thomas Jefferson, I consider Jesus as foremost

a **great moral prophet** whose words and deeds directly challenged—and threatened—the domination system of his day. “Jesus rejected the sharp social boundaries of the established social order that legitimized it. In his teaching, he subverted distinctions between righteous and sinner, rich and poor, men and women, Pharisee and outcasts. In his healings and behavior, he crossed boundaries of purity, gender, and class. In his meal practice, central to what he was about, he embodied a boundary-subverting inclusiveness.” [Borg, 142]

The view of Jesus as a radical social **reformer** is only one of many interpretations of his life and teachings. A more popular interpretation views Jesus as a **personal savior**, whose sacrificial death and resurrection offer hope for divine forgiveness and personal immortality. This view is based mainly on the writings of Paul and the Gospel According to John, in which Jesus repeatedly proclaims his identity as the Messiah, the divine Son of God: “the Father and I are one; whoever sees me has seen God. There are the famous ‘I am’ statements: I am the light of the world; the bread of the world; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth, and the life; the true vine; and so forth.” [Borg, 96] **I, I, I . . .** That kind of confident self-assertiveness resonates deeply with a culture such as ours that revolves around the individual self and its claims to ultimate importance.

What I want to suggest is that the Jesus who stands firmly in the Jewish prophetic tradition is the one who lays down a simple but profound new commandment: **Love your neighbor as yourself**. This injunction to his followers—sometimes called the Eleventh Commandment—demands that those who would follow him must balance their **self-interest** with a deep and ongoing concern for the **Other**—in particular the “least of these my brethren.” Rather than focusing only on individual acts of charity, the Eleventh Commandment—the ethic of compassion—compels us to challenge the powerful social structures that create and sustain boundaries based on wealth, race, gender, or sexual orientation. It seeks “a **life-giving, inclusive** social order.” [Borg, p. 151]

There are members of our congregation who continue to identify strongly with the Christian tradition. To you I say, **Take heart. You are in good company**. My ministerial colleague and good friend Kathleen Rolenz has recently edited a book titled *Christian Voices in Unitarian Universalism*. It contains inspiring personal stories of folks who have retained or rediscovered their Christian faith within the wide boundaries of the Unitarian Universalist tradition. One of the most moving stories in this volume is written by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, a strong African-American woman who is currently serving as associate minister of the large UU congregation in San Diego:

“When I became a Unitarian Universalist more than twenty years ago, I was proclaiming atheism and was delighted to learn that there was a spiritual community for people like me. But when I took the course ‘Building Your Own Theology’ and other adult religious education courses . . . I began to realize that I had unnecessarily fallen into an ‘all or nothing’ mentality—‘thrown out the baby with the bath water.’ I had dismissed Christianity as irrelevant because I experienced it as dogmatic and oppressive. Indeed, the particular form of Christianity that I grew up with *was* oppressive! . . .

“So reconciling the interpretations of my Christian past with a progressive Unitarian Universalism was not just a challenge for me; it took serious commitment and

more than a decade to work through my issues and to embrace Jesus again. I am profoundly moved by the message of Jesus as I understand it: liberation and freedom from oppression, love and compassion, service to others, and radical inclusiveness. His life and ministry continue to inspire me.” [Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, “To Keep One’s Soul,” in Kathleen Rolenz (ed.), *Christian Voices in Unitarian Universalism*, pp. 110, 112] To this testimony I can only say: **Amen, Sister!**