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Sermon
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Reading: from Theodore Parker's sermon on "The Permanent and Transient in Christianity," 1841

"In actual Christianity -- that is, in that portion of Christianity which is preached and believed -- there seem to have been, ever since the time of its earthly founder, two elements, the one transient, the other permanent. The one is the thought, the folly, the uncertain wisdom, the theological notions, the impiety of man; the other, the eternal truth of God. These two bear perhaps the same relation to each other that the phenomena of outward nature, such as sunshine and cloud, growth, decay, and reproduction, bear to the great law of nature, which underlies and supports them all. As in that case, more attention is commonly paid to the particular phenomena than to the general law; so in this case, more is generally given to the Transient in Christianity than to the Permanent therein. . . .

"Now the solar system as it exists in fact is permanent, though the notions of . . . Ptolemy, [and] Copernicus and Descartes about this system, prove transient, imperfect approximations to the true expression. So the Christianity of Jesus is permanent, though what passes for Christianity with Popes and catechisms, with sects and churches, in the first century or in the nineteenth century, prove transient also."

Christianity and Shame

Today is Easter. This week we remember the last week of the life of Jesus, 2,000 years ago – his triumphant journey into Jerusalem, driving a donkey, his troubles there, the kiss of death and the arrest, the show trial, the crucifixion, and the fugitive reports of resurrection. It is a solemn time, and a disturbing time.

What was it like after the death of Jesus? What would have influenced the people who became responsible for how people came to understand Jesus after that?

I think that Christianity got off on an awkward footing, and has been trying to compensate, awkwardly, ever since. Some of the doctrines that have arisen have become so hard to accept that they may blind us to the real message of Jesus himself.

Christianity started in shame, I believe, and is still smeared with it. In Jesus' time and place, shame was the keenest social sentiment imaginable. Jesus came into the world probably an illegitimate child. In a terrible act of violence, he left the world on a cross, a condemned criminal.

These would have been deeply shameful facts to his followers, and therefore required explanations. Some of the myths that have grown up around his birth and death, from the virgin birth to the resurrection, can be traced, I believe, in part to the violence of his dying, but mostly to this primal shame.

This morning we'll look at some of these myths and doctrines, including, besides the virgin birth and resurrection, Biblical inerrancy, vicarious atonement, and the second coming. And we will try to locate the parts of Jesus' message that have stood the test of time.

It is hard for us today, to conceive of a modern equivalent of Jesus' death.

If you had been a disciple, after the crucifixion, surely you would have been in shock. Angry, and helpless as a child.

How to make sense of what happened? How to explain things to family and friends, and inquisitive strangers, and posterity? There would be a lot of explaining to do -- quickly.

The disciples had to manage all this, while themselves remaining alive. They must have been terrified. For if they can do that to him, they can do it to anyone, including you – and, by the way, What did you say your name was?

No wonder the disciples went underground immediately.

They had their own shame to deal with. Often in Jesus' lifetime, they did not understand him. After his death, some of them must have looked back and said, If only we had listened more carefully, understood more, dared more.

Some shame was personal. Two nights before Jesus died, Peter proudly assured him that, come what may, he would always stand by him: "Even if all fall away [he said], I will not."

Jesus replied coolly that Peter would deny him three times before the cock crowed. Mk 14:27 (TCRB)

Early the next morning, as Jesus was being tried before the Sanhedrin, two servant girls noticed Peter, and one after the other said to him, You were with Jesus.

Twice Peter denied it: I don't know what you're talking about! he said. I don't know the man!

But others approached him and said, You are one of those people; your accent gives you away. Peter swore again, I don't know the man!, and it was then that he heard the cock-a-doodle-doo.

". . . [H]e went outside [we are told], and wept bitterly." Mt 26:75 (TCRB)

The mark of shame spread well beyond Peter.

Matthew's account of the crucifixion ends, "Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons." Mt 27:55.

The synoptic gospels also tell us, who was not there.

All the men.

Every single one of Jesus' disciples abandoned him in the end. Oh, many, many explanations were called for.

One explanation began in denial. "He didn't really die." He was resurrected after death, and he ascended into heaven. For many people, the resurrection of Jesus is a critical part of their belief system. But it just doesn't seem reasonable. In the world I live in, dead men stay dead.

The numerous reports of sightings after his death don't seem any more reasonable than Elvis sightings do today. Sometimes you can want something to be true so badly, that pretty soon it actually begins to seem true. The Jesus sightings feel like desperate, wishful thinking, born of anguish.

And what of the theory that, even if Jesus really died, God intended it that way, all along? We'll take that up in a moment.

And, finally, the notion that, even if he did die and went away, he's coming back – soon. For 2,000 years now, some of Jesus' followers have predicted his return, any day now. Their everlasting disappointment seems heartbreaking, somehow.

Well, how do we find the good stuff, in the midst of all this baggage that Christianity has carried since its beginning?

The good stuff is at the core, and the other stuff is around the edges. The good stuff is what Jesus himself said and did. He is the primary source. The not-so-good stuff is what others later said and did about him. Those are secondary sources. Their purveyors have had their own motivations. With Jesus, however, the motives ring truer: what you see is what you get. No more sincere human being ever lived.

The real Jesus is really-- something else.

For 20-plus years, a group of scholars who call themselves the Jesus Seminar has been trying to separate the real Jesus from the fake – to separate what Jesus probably said and did, from what others said about him afterward. To be with Jesus, not about him.

We can see such a separating process at work in the so-called Jefferson Bible, that solitary Unitarian's cut-and-paste job on the Gospels. Jefferson said: "There is internal evidence that parts [of the Gospels] have proceeded from an extraordinary man, and that other parts come from very inferior minds. It is as easy to separate those parts as it is to pick out diamonds from dunghills." Quoted in Stephen Mitchell, Jesus: What He Really Said and Did (New York, HarperCollins, 2002) at xxi-xxii.

What a phrase-maker!

And, maybe it is really that easy -- if you're Jefferson.

Jefferson's Bible tells the story of Jesus without angels, genealogy, or prophecy, without the miracles, or any reference to the Trinity, or the divinity of Jesus. Jefferson was looking for the real Jesus, without the frills.

It's a really, really short book.

The real Jesus was tender, as we know, and also tough as nails. Take the story of the rich young man.

"[T]here came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?

"And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God. . . . [Jesus was a one-God fellow, maybe a Unitarian?].

"Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me.

“And [the young man] was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions.” Mk 10:17-22 (KJV).

What Jesus asked, cost unbearably much.

There is a theory that the peripheral doctrines, the stuff about Jesus, began to flourish in order to distract from Jesus’ real message, which, like the sun on a bright spring morning, may be too strong to be looked at directly.

A whole series of Christian doctrines, starting from the crucifixion, have long distracted from Jesus’ message. The five articles of baggage that follow originated with the Nicene Creed, which we have already looked at. They are the essence of a group of pamphlets, first published in 1910, called “The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth,” which gave us the term “fundamentalism.”

First article of baggage: Biblical inerrancy – the assertion that the Bible is absolutely, literally true, every single word of it. This breathtaking dogma reflects a deep desire for certainty in an endeavor where, alas, certainty is simply not to be had.

The Bible is a human product, of its own time and place. We all know that human beings don’t do perfection. The higher criticism of the last 200 years, including the work of the Jesus Seminar, considers inerrancy simply unreasonable.

Second: the virgin birth of Jesus, at the crossroads of sex and Christianity. As a child growing up, I just could not make sense of the virgin birth. When I asked how exactly did all this happen, the grownups’ response was, in effect, Child, don’t ask, don’t tell.

We don’t have to follow that path. The wonderful adult religious education class called Parents as Resident Theologians is meant for parents whose children are beginning to ask awkward questions, like Can you explain the virgin birth? As you may have noticed last Sunday, our Lucky 13 class of newcomers has a fistful of children, and they are the future. Keep an eye out for that class.

Some of the ancient Greek and Roman myths that I learned as a child seemed just as unreasonable as the Christian stories, and yet, somehow, it didn't matter so much. Unlike Christian mythology, the Greek and Roman myths were just charming, delightful tales, not to be taken too seriously, or too literally, and nothing important depended on whether you believed them or not.

For instance: Zeus, the number one Greek god, was married to Hera, but Zeus was always fooling around, mischievously, like some Hollywood cartoon character.

Later, a darker interpretation has emerged from these stories, as past societal attitudes have been rethought. Still, aspects of lightness and liberation have appeared too. One of Zeus's many lovers appears to have been someone named Ganymede.

Ganymede, it turns out, is a guy.

If Biblical inerrancy and the virgin birth seem unreasonable, so does the vicarious atonement of Jesus, for all the sins of the world, past, present, and future.

How would that work, exactly? We know the text: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16 (KJV). In other words, God intended that Jesus' death should happen.

This explanation makes God responsible for the death of his own son. On earth, that is a crime. What kind of God would do that anyway? As modern feminist scholars have pointed out, this view of God has also been used to justify domestic abuse – Jesus took it, why can't you?

After a while, this accumulation of unreasonableness begins to feel oppressive.

Fourth article of baggage: the "bodily resurrection" of Jesus following his crucifixion. He didn't really die. He went up to heaven and sits at the right hand of God.

Certainly few of us want to die. We can squirm all we want, but the evidence that death will happen, and happen to us, remains pretty strong. To deny that is unreasonable – again, wishful thinking.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's pioneering work on the stages of grief begins with denial: "It can't be happening." Perhaps the resurrection of Jesus is an expression of this early stage of grief called denial.

5. Fifth and last of the tenets of fundamentalism is the second coming of Jesus. Even if he really did die -- sort of -- he's coming back, soon, and some will be glad, and others really, really sorry.

As we have seen, some religious leaders have calculated exactly when Jesus will return. None of the guesses have panned out. In 1843, a man named William Miller predicted Jesus' return, and his followers gathered all over North America. When nothing happened, he said, On further review, maybe I was one year off. One year later, when nothing again happened, it was conjectured that Jesus really had come back, but -- only in heaven, which explained why we couldn't see it here.

Two cheers for clever rationalizations, but oh those poor, poor people!

None of this seems remotely reasonable. Deane Wm. Ferm, *Contemporary American Theologies* (NY: Seabury Press, 1981), p. 9.

I would argue that all these fundamentalist doctrines are just peripheral distractions – the second coming, the resurrection, the vicarious atonement, the virgin birth, Biblical inerrancy. There's a lot of make-believe in the air, a lot of scrambling.

The core stuff, the good stuff, is what Jesus actually said and did. That's the stuff that endures.

For an example of a story that endures, consider the Good Samaritan. It begins with a lawyer asking Jesus how to inherit eternal life – apparently many people asked that in those days. Jesus, being too adroit to get into an argument with a lawyer, tosses the question right back at him: What is the law?

“And [the lawyer] answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.” Lk 10:25-27 (KJV).

That is the heart of Jesus’ message. All the rest is commentary.

A rabbi named Hillel, Jesus’ contemporary, was asked by a potential Gentile convert, for a brief summary of the Jewish religion – the colorful expression used was “a summary while standing on one foot.” Hillel replied, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow human being: this is the whole Law; the rest is [just] . . . explanation; go and learn.”

We can also understand Jesus’ core message through his life, and in the responses of others to it.

Consider the martyr Stephen, who was stoned to death for his beliefs. One historian writes: “Upon the death of Jesus, Stephen began to work hard to spread what was then called The Way. He preached the teachings of Jesus and participated in the conversion of Jews and Gentiles. The book of *Acts* tells the story of how Stephen was tried by the Sanhedrin for blasphemy, and was then stoned to death by an infuriated mob encouraged by Saul of Tarsus, the future Saint Paul.” Wikipedia. Acts 7:56 (KJV).

When Christianity was struggling to survive, this public steadfastness in the face of death impressed many Romans, including some higher-ups. The Roman Emperor Constantine, as we have seen, converted to Christianity on the eve of the battle of Milvian Bridge on the outskirts of Rome, in the year 312. After that, Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, and church and state have making strange bedfellows ever since.

A millennium and a half later, the Church of England drove some of our spiritual ancestors, the Pilgrims and the Puritans, out of England and into the New World, where they became the state religion for the next 200 years, and, of course, oppressed everybody else. In the early 19th century, the churches of the Standing Order in New England broke into a liberal wing, the Unitarians, and a conservative wing, the Congregationalists. Part of what they struggled over was who would be the official, state-sponsored church of any given community. That, and which faction would get the silver communion set when the church split in two. (Honest!)

Meanwhile, the Universalists, tenacious believers in universal salvation, were opposing the whole state religion idea that financially supported the Unitarians. You may recall how the Universalists had split off from the Methodists, who had split off from the Anglicans, who had split off from the Roman Catholics, who had split off from the Jews at the time of Jesus. “Wanderers, worshipers, lovers of leaving,” that’s us.

Critics of the church-state alliance have pointed out how organized religion, and especially Christianity, has followed the flag. Professor George Tinker’s book Missionary Conquest discusses how priests and ministers assisted government efforts toward the subjugation, even the genocide, of aboriginal peoples.

Fairly or unfairly, Christianity has acquired, ever since the violent death of Jesus, a reputation for being intolerant, even pugnacious.

Apart from its savage beginnings, why does Christianity attack so much? Why do right-wing preachers run around saying, “Oh, they deserved it, those bad, bad people!” when something unfortunate happens in the world? And how can they expect us to be charitable, when they lay down their microphones for the last time? If we choose to be charitable, it will be for our sake, not for theirs.

This chip-on-the-shoulder aggressiveness sometimes takes the form of pronouncing Christianity “the only way.” In the Gospel according to John, Jesus famously says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” John 14:6 (KJV). Yet four verses earlier, Jesus has said, “In my Father’s house are many mansions.” John 14:2 (KJV).

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, stressed absolute obedience in his Exercises: “If we wish to proceed securely in all things [he wrote] we must hold fast to the following principle: What seems to me white, I will believe black if the hierarchical church so defines.”

In UU churches and fellowships, Ignatius’s black-is-white statement would surely challenge the limits of our tolerance.

Many have shied away from faith traditions that bend people into theological pretzels. In Unitarian Universalism, we have no creed, and we

invite individual human beings to work out their own understanding of what to believe and how to behave. If you want to be a pretzel, it's your call.

So shame, and to a lesser extent the heritage of violence, have given the origins of Christianity distortions that still exist today. The faith that many of us grew up surrounded by has many beautiful things in it. But it also has things that stretch our credulity. That is where the reason that we've been given comes in handy.

So what finally can we do about all this Christian baggage that seems so unreasonable?

Unitarian minister Theodore Parker provided a suggestion when he distinguished between "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity." Seek what endures, he said -- the permanent, as he called it.

Thomas Jefferson said, pick out the diamonds from the dunghills.

And in our time the Jesus Seminar has focused on what Jesus most likely said and did, the primary sources, and lets the rest of it go.

That's a fair start. We like to think of ourselves as reasonable people, capable of using the brains we have been given.

We are Unitarian Universalists, after all, and that means above all else that – we have choices.

May we may make them, and make them wisely.

Amen.