

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Disciple's Prayer, Part II

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
February 14, 2010

Scripture Reading: John 14:1-4; 18-19 (*The New Oxford Bible*)
World Scripture: Chandogya Upanishad

I think the commentary that has been most helpful to me over the years in terms of understanding the Bible has been scriptures from around the world. Even when I was in Seminary, I was taught a worldview that really sounded like Jesus was Presbyterian...and American...and it just feels like it needs to go deeper than that. So if you're ever wondering how I get from the scripture that you see to the sermon that you hear, part of it is reading the scriptures of the world – not New Age Americans writing about Buddhism, but actual texts from Buddhism, texts from Hinduism, texts from Taoism – the great texts from around the world I think are the best commentary, and what you realize is God has actually spoken to other people, too, besides Presbyterians...not as loud, of course (*laughter*).

When you read world scripture, it's very obvious that you recognize a voice that sounds very familiar. This text is from an Upanishad. Those are like the Psalms in our scripture. In this story, I don't remember if it's a teacher talking to a student as though it's a son, or if it's actually a father speaking to his son, but the father has taken the son to the ocean and said, "God is like the salt that you find. He had the son taste the ocean here...there. Over here, and it was salty all through, and the father said, "God is like that – heaven is like that – the sacred is like that. It's distributed throughout your experience. The taste is more like a quality. The son asks for more lessons and leads us to our second reading:

"So be it, my child. Bring me a fruit from this banyan tree."

"Here it is, father."

"Break it."

"It is broken, Sir."

"What do you see in it?"

"Very small seeds, Sir."

"Break one of them, my son."

"It is broken, Sir."

"What do you see in it, my son?"

"Nothing at all, Sir."

Then his father spoke to him: "My son, from the very essence in the seed which you cannot see comes in truth this vast banyan tree. Believe me, my son, an invisible and subtle

*essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is reality.
that is Atman. (The great self) THOU ART THAT."*

When most people talk about heaven, it is when they begin to think about it when someone who has died. We don't realize how much of our idea about heaven comes from our fear of death. The way to spot this in your life is if you have that kind of religion that you think of when times are really hard and scary and then you forget about it when times are good. Probably, you have been taught traditional religion which is really based on hell and not on heaven. If your ideas of hell are very sharp and distinct, and your ideas of heaven are very cloudy and foggy, probably the religion you've been taught is the energy of fear. I'm not saying to throw those symbols away, I'm saying the same symbols, if approached again through the eyes of love, will then take you to a very important place.

The reason hell sounds so boring is that it's been taken over by a theology of fear, and not just in Christianity...there's a story in Judaism that says, "In the world to come, there is no eating or drinking, or procreating, or business, or jealousy, or hatred or competition. But the righteous sit with crowns on their head, feasting on the radiance of the spirit." Sounds like fun, huh? The scientist Isaac Isamoff said "whatever the tortures of hell can be as bad as the boredom of heaven." Mark Twain also made fun of the traditional notion, saying, "Go to heaven for the climate...go to hell for the company." (*laughter*)

Now, what I want to suggest is if we take the symbols back up with an attitude of love and curiosity, it will take us to a very different place than what we were possibly taught as children. The symbols and our ordinary experience take us deeper into our understanding of who we are, until we feel ourselves as an expression of something really fundamental. That is what they are intended to take us to.

When John begins by saying, "In the beginning was the Word," it's saying there's an intelligence that weaves everything together. They didn't know about DNA back then, but they knew there was some word that each plant has within it. They looked at the fibers, and they recognized patterns repeating all across Nature, and they surmised there is *one word* that is speaking all of these beings into existence. They looked at matter and realized there are patterns that reoccur all through Nature – that if you talk about a circle, you have to at some point get to the symbol Pi if you're going to understand what creates the circle over and over again – to get past the physical circle to these symbols that are some primordial intelligence that shapes everything that we see or experience.

They also believed the intelligence in your head resonates with that intelligence in the universe – which is how a mathematician in Japan can get the same figures that a mathematician in Britain will have. Our brains are calibrated to this deep intelligence. Now, here's the thing: I believe that Darwin and Einstein and even Newton did a real destruction job on the traditional, external ideas of God. When Newton looked at the universe and realized that the same laws apply all over the universe, suddenly you didn't need that potter-making God. You could begin to explain things without this external intelligence, but it actually led us closer to that internal intelligence that dwells in every being, and percolates up through rocks and minerals and into plants and even into us.

What I want to suggest is if you'll go back to the teachings of scripture with that kind of attitude, you will see a radiance that, possibly, you were never taught. I want to begin with the Gospel of Thomas, because that was still in the "weirdo" phases of Christianity before they realized it's about power and possession. The "I am" sayings of Jesus are incredibly important and they are very carefully crafted symbols to talk about this deep intelligence. When you see Jesus say I am this, I am that, I'm the way, I'm the path, I'm the gate. He's not an egomaniac – which is what someone would be if they said "you have to go through me to get to anywhere that's important." Some theologian... I think it was C.S. Lewis said that when you hear the claims of Jesus, you're either listening to a madman or to the Son of God. But there's a third possibility: you're listening to a poet, a mystical poet who is so filled with love that that poet wants you to experience yourself as the child of God.

Listen to these words with that kind of attitude: Jesus said it is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I whom am the awl. From me did the awl come forth and unto me did the awl extend. Split a piece of wood and I am there. Lift up a stone and you will find me there. Then shift back to the Upanishad that we heard, where a seed is broken, and you see little-bitty seeds... you break those up and it's invisible. What a great symbol for the modern sciences, where the more we study matter, the more it breaks down into what looks like nothingness, other than patterns. So these symbols are still speaking to us today.

The prayer that Jesus taught that connects to this heaven – this intelligence – whatever it is, is probably also different than what you were taught. It's less about talking to invisible people and it's more about listening... deeply, to the ground of your own being. Jesus said "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." He's speaking as your own roots. "You believe in God, believe also in me, (the child of God), which is what you are. In God's house, in God's abode, there are many resting places, and I've gone to prepare a place for you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

Then he says, "You know the way," and Thomas, who sort of represents the rational mind that's unplugged from this depth, says, "How can we know the way?" It isn't really answered completely, because it's already been answered with the "I am" sayings. Thomas knows the way because that intelligence is what gives him his being. When you see that phrase, "the kin-dom of heaven," "the realm of heaven is within you," it's saying you don't have to look outside of yourself to look for the sacred. The sacred is every inch of the universe – wherever you look, it is there. There's a wonderful scene in the Gospel of Thomas where they are talking about the realm of heaven, and Jesus says,

"Those who lead you say to you, the realm of heaven is in the sky, then the birds of the sky will proceed you. If they say to you, it is in the sea, then the fish will proceed you. Rather the realm is inside you and it is outside you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known and you will realize it is you who are the children of the living parent. But if you do not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty. It is you who are that poverty."

Whenever you see, particularly in John, those sayings, "I am the way, I am the path," this is a person who loves so deeply that he wants to give you the ultimate gift, which is to realize that for yourself. Not where you live an empty life and praise *him*, but where you recognize those same

roots into your own depth, and your own being. Sometimes at funerals, you'll hear one of the most powerful expressions of the "I am" sayings as a kind of consolation.

Do not stand at my grave and weep.
I am not there, I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond-glints of snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
Do not stand at my grave and cry.
I am not there, I did not die.

That intelligence is not personal – just like the vine does not taste like grapes, but produces grapes. The symbol of the parent is that primordial depth...*that every person you meet is a child of God*. And that's where the personal relationship happens. That's where you find the personal religion – not by having invisible friends that you have conversations with, but to realize that every being, every animal, every plant, particularly every person comes from that source. And when we love each other, then the circle is complete. Then the parent is happy because the children love each other and embrace each other. Every face of every person you meet is the face of God. You see that written through scripture. Heaven, in a sense, is a dropping of the veil. What we want in our selfishness is to see the same people, the same little family, the same important relationships with the people that were with us in this go round. What this is saying is that what happens is the love grows, and we come to love each other as much as we loved those individuals. That we come to love every individual the same. Now, that's better than the consolation we were looking for, because what that means is we live in a symphony of living beings, each one singing a hymn, each one *being* a hymn. When you hear the "Ode to Joy" (Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee) that all the animals, all the trees, all the flowers are singing a song from this deep primordial ground.

You probably were taught that heaven was a remedy to your fear. What I invite you to do is to re-explore that symbol when you're not afraid...when the love in you feels like it is overflowing and spilling out, to go back and see if that depth doesn't take you to another place – that when you see a plant, can you see a pattern on the leaves of the plant, to let you take that down into a deeper intelligence. When you see the Periodic Chart, and you see patterns – $\text{Pi}=\text{MC}^2$, the constants of Physics, they're singing a song of a depth we cannot know, but we can recognize it in each other.

I want to close with the words of someone who knew this...although he hated religion. Robert Ingersoll hated religion because he had never heard from people who were coming from this depth. Many of you know people who hate religion, not for bad reasons, but for very good reasons. And I want us to be ambassadors for this: listen to this:

*Love is the only bow on life's dark cloud.
It is the morning and the evening star.
It shines upon the cradle of the babe
And sheds its radiance upon the quiet tomb.*

*It is the mother of art, inspirer of poet, patriot, philosopher
It is the air and light of every heart, builder of every home,
Kindler of every fire on every hearth.
It was the first to dream of immortality.
It fills the world with melody, for music is the voice of love.
Love is the magician, the enchanter, that changes worthless things into joy.
It makes right royal Kings and Queens of common clay.
It is the perfume of the wondrous flower, the heart,
And without that sacred passion, that divine swoon, we are less than beasts,
But with it, earth is heaven, and we are gods.*

Transcribed and edited by a member of The St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

The Disciples' Prayer Series

Part I: February 7, 2010, Matthew 6:7-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part II: February 14, 2010, John 14:1-4; 8-19 (*The New Oxford Bible*);

World Scripture: Chandogya Upanishad

Part III: Hallowed Be Thy Name. February 21, 2010, John 8:30-59; Exodus 3:13-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part IV: *Thy Kingdom Come.* February 28, 2010, Matthew 6:25-31 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part V: Our Daily Bread. March 7, 2010, Exodus 16:13-21 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VI: *Forgive Us Our Debts.* March 14, 2010, Matthew 18:21-35 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

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We are a More Light congregation. (www.mlp.org)

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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