

LESSONS IN LIVING

Around the World in 40 Days, a loving look at world religions from a Christian Perspective Part VIII Can Atheism be “Spiritual?”

A St. Andrew’s Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
May 30, 2010

First Reading: The Creed of Robert Ingersoll

To love justice, to long for the right, to love mercy, to pity the suffering, to assist the weak, to forget wrongs and remember benefits—to love the truth, to be sincere, to utter honest words, to love liberty, to wage relentless war against slavery in all its forms, to love (spouse) and child and friend, to make a happy home, to love the beautiful in art, in nature, to cultivate the mind, to be familiar with the mighty thoughts that genius has expressed, the noble deeds of all the world, to cultivate courage and cheerfulness, to make others happy, to fill life with the splendor of generous acts, the warmth of loving words, to discard error, to destroy prejudice, to receive new truths with gladness, to cultivate hope, to see the calm beyond the storm, the dawn beyond the night, to do the best that can be done and then to be resigned—this is the religion of reason, the creed of science. This satisfies the heart and brain.

Our second reading needs a little bit of explanation before I start...in fact, several words of explanation. When we hear the prophets, they often sound like very critical and judgmental people. This is because the church has acted like these sayings were addressed to individuals. They weren’t talking to individuals. The sin they were concerned about was in the nation and in the religion they were addressing. They weren’t coming to criticize individuals, they were calling Israel to its greatness, and Judaism to its greatness. In this country and in this religion today, we shouldn’t hear it as addressed particularly to us. When it talks about Sodom and Gomorrah, realize in the biblical times when those images were crafted, it had nothing to do with the social issue of an individual’s prostitution that the church has deceptively focused on. It was focused on the church of its day. That was the prostitution that the prophets were concerned about; the lack of justice, the mis-treating of individuals who were weak...that was what this symbol means. The passage will make lots more sense if you realize that. This is our reading from Isaiah; please do not hear it as a criticism of you as an individual, but of all of us as a nation and as a religion.

Second Reading: Isaiah 1:10-20 *(Adapted from The Inclusive Bible)*

Hear the word of God, you rulers of Sodom. Listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah. The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me? says God. I have more than enough of burnt offerings and rams and the fat of fattened animals. I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings. Your incense is detestable to me. New moons, Sabbaths, convocations...I will not bear your evil assemblies. Your new moon festivals and your appointed festivals my soul hates. They become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer I will hide my eyes from you. Even if

you offer many prayers I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right. Seek justice. Encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the orphan. Plead the case of the widow. Come now, let us reason together, says God. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient you will eat the best from the land, but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword, for God has spoken.

Well, we've been going around the world, stopping and learning from various religions of the world, and in some ways this is the most important stop. Because most Americans and most Christians do not realize that much of the world has non-theistic forms of religion. Buddha, for example, did not believe in a personal God. So people who have problems with personifying the sacred have been born into a very rich heritage. But in this culture, they are demeaned and criticized as though they were attacking us somehow. The word, "atheist" is actually a theological word, and it's very unfair to use that of another person, unless they choose that. But it's still problematic, because if you're outside theology, and somebody says, "You're an a – theist," it's very much like saying, "You're anti-unicorn." If you don't believe in unicorns, that doesn't mean that you're *against* unicorns. If you don't believe in bigfoot, you don't *hate* bigfoot... (laughter)... you just don't *believe* that. And of course because we're propagandized that all ethics and decency are tied into believing in God, we even use the word, 'Christian' as a synonym for 'good', or 'decent,' which is as offensive as it can be to the rest of the planet. One of the important reasons to stop at this place and learn from non-theistic peoples is that it gives us a humility and a depth that we desperately need.

Now when I got out of Dallas, Texas, and I was in college I started reading the hardest critics of religion that I could find... not to leave religion but to deepen religion. If you want to deepen your religion, the best way to do that is to read the noblest critics that you can find: Nietzsche, B. F. Skinner, etc. It will rock your boat at first, but it will take you deeper into reality. If you turn and hide from a critic, guess what, you've already lost faith. If you hold on to your faith by not listening to a truth, or looking at a truth, you've already lost it. So we're going to go on that little ride, is everybody ready?

A couple years back, I had a very strange experience. I loved quote books, and so I kept one by the bed, and if I woke in the middle of the night, I'd read some quotes. This book was called "The Quotable Atheist." I'd read portions of it for several months, and had a very strange experience when I got to the "R's". *I was in it! (laughter)* Very strange. And what's wonderful, the compiler lifted up religious figures to refute them, but was very, very kind in lifting up strong quotes from me, not trying to make me look stupid, which is sometimes pretty easy to do. I disagreed with the criticism. I felt like it was portraying all religious people as being superstitious. But that's the kind of dialogue we need to have. If we decide that atheists aren't worth having a conversation with, or if they decide that we are not worth having a conversation with, the world suffers. So what we're talking about is deepening.

Remember the second commandment? Does anybody remember that? *Do not form images of God.* Do you think that just means statues? No, because when you confuse your *symbol* of God *with* God, you're in trouble, and the world's in trouble, because you'll fight over it. We will fight viciously for symbols a lot harder than for anything else, even after they've lost their meaning. When a nation has lost its principles, it will lift up flags and standards like that, and follow anybody that waves the flag the hardest. In Christianity, after people have lost the principles of the Sermon on the Mount, they'll follow whoever lifts up a cross the highest.

We need to do better than that. To that end, we're going to listen respectfully today, I hope... at least I will, that's your option... to Robert Ingersoll, a devastating critic of religion, because he cared. He was

angry with religion because of what it did in his day, and unfortunately is still doing to this day. Listen to this. He wrote a book called "Some Mistakes of Moses." This is a very touching piece. He says, "I want to do what little I can"...this is why he says he's doing what he's doing..."I want to do what little I can to make my country truly free, to broaden the intellectual horizon of our people, to destroy the prejudices born of ignorance and fear, to do away with the blind worship of the ignoble past with the idea that all the great and good are dead, and that the living are totally depraved, and that all pleasures are sins, that sighs and groans are alone pleasing to God, that thought is dangerous, that intellectual courage is a crime, that cowardice is a virtue, and that a certain belief is necessary to secure salvation." Can't you say "Amen" to that? Yes! We can join shoulder to shoulder and learn so much.

What I'm going to do is examine pieces of what was read from Ingersoll's creed, and what's fascinating to me is in doing this creed, he lifted up the four cardinal virtues: justice, wisdom (or truth), temperance (or beauty), and courage. Here's how he says it: What he calls people to is "To love justice, to long for the right, to love mercy, to pity the suffering, to assist the weak, to forget wrongs, and remember benefits..." Now don't you know religion can forget to do that? Particularly *sectarian* religion that teaches you that your religion is better than other people's religion. If you look at the history of the church carefully enough, it will make you sick - how we have mistreated people because we believed that we were better. If you read the real history of the United States, it will break your heart - because we believe that we're better than other people. And so what we do to them isn't the same as what happens to us. Justice is an essential part of love.

If you wanted to put everything I've ever done into a thimble, you could say that I'm trying to re-frame Christianity around the pillar that Christ used, which is love. "Whoever has love has God," was the teaching. It says that God is love. It doesn't say that God is a loving person. This means that our theological differences don't have to be ultimate. In fact, it's blasphemy to make them ultimate. For me to use *my* symbol of love as a way of separating from *you*, and fighting with you, is to violate what that principle calls me to.

Those of you who have been with this church for a while realize that we got in trouble nationally for accepting an atheist into the church. He's the only one here, right? (*laughter*) The rest of us are blessed lambs of God. (*more laughter*) Never had an original thought our whole lives! But years ago I went to hear Robert Jensen speak, and what moved me deeply was that he was speaking almost verbatim from the prophets. His rage against the empire was based on a love and a broken heart that you feel when you read the prophets. The anger that you're hearing is not scolding, it's a broken heart, it's calling us back to our goodness and our greatness. When I heard that compassion, I knew that whatever else was there, that theology has to be under there, underneath it all. Whether or not you think it's God, that's really very small. Do you believe in love? Do you believe in justice?

In our passage today from Isaiah it's very jolting. The people in that day thought that because they came together in worship, they were making up for the injustices they did to other people. "God will never get mad at us, because we come together and say nice things about God...every week. How could God be so ungrateful as to count what we're doing to other people against us?" And just as we do now, religion then had been based on individual sins. That's not where the pain comes from. The pain is what we do together. Sin is how we collectively discriminate against other people...how we come together and hurt other people outside our boundaries in ways we would never do by ourselves. That is the sin that Isaiah is condemning. He says, "Don't come to me in the temple and raise your hands in my praise when your hands are covered with my children's blood."

Do you think Americans need to hear that? Me neither. (*laughter*) But the people in our scripture did hear. Do we have the courage to hear these words? Do you know the difference between heresy and

blasphemy? Blasphemy is when you say something against the sacred. Heresy is when you tick off the church. *(laughter)* That's Monty Python, Saint Monty Python. *(laughter)* Blasphemy is when we disrespect the sacred, heresy is when we knock the religious hat off somebody's head. I believe, (this is my heresy, but not blasphemy) a loving atheist is infinitely closer to the spirit of Christ than a cold theologian. *A theologian who can say every vow and recite every creed without passion, without compassion, is further from Christ than the most vitriolic critic of religion who has a wounded heart for humankind.*

Some of you may have heard of Sydney Carter. He wrote the popular hymn, "Lord of the Dance." Carter was not a deist, he was an atheist or an agnostic. Here are some of his words:

"Your holy hearsay is not evidence.

Give me the good news in the present tense.

What happened nineteen hundred years ago may not have happened.

How am I to know? So shut your Bibles up and show me

how the Christ you talk about is living now."

"Shut your Bibles up and show me how the Christ you talk about is living now." Do you think the church needs to hear that? Neither do I. *(laughter)* But those other people, they need to hear it. *(laughter)*

So the first thing that Robert Ingersoll calls us to is justice...and the church needs to hear that...that to praise God and then to mistreat God's children is blasphemy. It may not be heresy, but it is blasphemy.

The second thing is to love truth. To love truth, you have to be honest. And when the church tells you that to come into the club, you have to assert as truth things that you don't know about...in other words, when somebody says, "To get in our walls, you have to pretend that you believe that the Apostle's Creed happened...now it's one thing if you think it's a symbol, if you think it's a song, it's a beautiful thing...but if you're being asked to pretend to know something you don't know, then you're being asked to bear false witness. That's a sin...and you can't start from false witness and end up with honesty. When the church tells you that you have to pretend to believe something that you do not believe, you're not going to go from there to truth. So we learn from atheists; they had the courage to follow honesty. I may disagree with where it goes sometimes, but I take off my hat to honor that.

The church should be haunted by the memory of Galileo's telescope. He was looking through the window, and we wouldn't look. We didn't have the honesty. You see, when you won't look, you know you're wrong already. They *knew* they were wrong. But they lifted up their Bibles and said, "Don't you believe in the Bible? Don't you, don't you believe in the Bible? It says right here, 'The sun stopped in the sky' I don't need to look through your telescope." The church still bears that black eye, but I want to tell you that a thousand years from now, they're also going to grieve over the fact that we refused to be honest about human gender. When we say that humans are created male and female, and you start with the male and it becomes female, that's a lie. It's a lie. Human sexuality is a continuum. There's a spectrum there, and it starts with the female, and moves the other way. So the basic game plan is female. There's a lot of nodding here, at least half, I've got half the group. *(laughter)* That's pretty good...for me.

There's a beautiful line, "Come, let us reason together." Even when I was a kid, I loved that line. In places it says, "Let's think about this together. I'm not cramming something down your throat, let's think about this together." Sometimes people ask me, "Why do you stay Presbyterian?" (I hear some of you agreeing with that.) *(laughter)* About once a month, after church someone says, "Why do you call yourself Presbyterian?" Let me ask you another question. Why do you think Isaiah called himself Jewish? Why didn't he leave? Was he a traitor, was he a heretic? No. He loved his nation, and he loved his religion enough to call them to greatness. If we are to return to the heart of Christianity, which is love, it's going to take justice, and it's going to take honesty.

The third thing it's going to take is a love of beauty. That may seem like a surprise. In the classic virtues, temperance was the balance of the arts. The discipline that it takes to be an artist...and it takes a great discipline to be an artist...is needed if you're going after beauty. In our story today, we see that Isaiah was mourning and bemoaning the fact that beauty had left the building, and what was left was ritual, empty ritual. Burning cows was taken as a beautiful act of worship. Twenty years from now, when we come together...well, when you all come together...I don't know how long I'll...I want the stained glass windows to depict pictures taken with the Hubble telescope. I want galaxies, or I want pictures from an electron microscope that will move people by the beauty of reality itself and the intelligence imbedded in nature. It doesn't necessarily take a person for that to take place. But being moved deeply...did anybody here see Carl Sagan's "Cosmos?" Did anybody here think it was religious and beautiful? Now, he's an atheist. He's an atheist, but he was moved by the sacred nature of reality. Einstein sometimes called himself a mystic, not because he believed in God, but because he was moved that deeply by reverence.

The last thing that the church needs to learn from our non-theistic brothers and sisters is courage. When you've been told that there's a Hell beneath your feet, and you need to be good so that you don't bake down there, that's not going to produce a lot of love...it's not really going to produce any love. If I'm nice to you because I don't want to be basted...*(laughter)*...I'm not really being nice to you, I'm not really loving you. We need to turn the pole star to love in everything we do, and the touchstones are the great virtues. Ingersoll is absolutely right.

So we need to bring justice, temperance, courage, wisdom, back into the church, which means that we have to cast out the surrogates of dogma, of frightening people. We need to build the bridge between theism and non-theism, because that's where the hope of humankind lies. I believe that until we can say creeds in a way that a loving atheist can say yes...until we can do that...until we can say a creed in a way that a loving atheist says yes, we ourselves are not loving enough. We've not found the depths that the creeds are talking about. Until we can say it in a way that a scientist can say yes...we haven't gone deep enough, because we are talking about the poetry of life.

I want to close with a quote from Robert Ingersoll, coming through the years. It's a kind of hope for the church. It's him walking across the bridge in this direction. To do that, he doesn't have to stop being a non-theist. If you don't believe in God, you don't have to convert to be in a community of love. We all need to convert into love, not into theology.

“When every church becomes a school, every cathedral a university, every clergy a teacher, and all their hearers brave and honest thinkers, then, and not 'til then will the dream of the poet, patriot, philanthropist, and philosopher become a real and blessed truth.”

And to that, I think the honest Christian has to say, “Amen.”

Transcribed and revised by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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