“THE KISS OF JUDAS, OF THOMAS, AND OF LIFE?”

A sermon delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister of The Community Church of NY Unitarian Universalist, Sunday, April 17, 2011

Readings

(1) In thinking about the Christian Gospels, the creative stories of the early Church, I think of lines by Unitarian Henry David Thoreau, whose experiments with life and solitude have taught the world so much and whose witness to nonviolent civil disobedience influenced Gandhi and King. Thoreau wrote:

It is remarkable that, notwithstanding the universal favor with which the New Testament is outwardly received, there is no hospitality shown to it; there is no appreciation of the order of truth with which it deals. I know of no book that has so few readers. There is none so truly strange, and heretical, and unpopular… There are, indeed, several things in it which no one should read aloud more than once.

“Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven.”
“Lay not up for yourself treasures on earth.”
“If thou will be perfect, go and take all that thou hast, and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven.”
“For what does one profit, if one shall gain the whole world and lose one’s soul?” …

Let one of these sentences be rightly read from any pulpit in the land, and there would not be left one stone of that meeting house upon another.

(2) And having made quite a few hospital visits lately, I have been thinking about illness, pain, solitude, and loss and about strength, hope, and just carrying on. A helpful, contemporary, spirit-filled witness and pilgrim is Barbara Brown Taylor, a Christian minister and professor at a seminary in the South. In Altar in the World, she writes about living in our bodies, acknowledging them, in times good and bad as the foundation of faith, deeds not creeds, and daily living over dogmas. She offers an image that nags at me:

Once, when I was confined to bed for the better part of a week, I spent hours watching the sunlight that came through the slats of my wooden blinds move down the white wall of my bedroom. First thing in the morning it made honey-colored rectangles with soft edges. By 10:00 a.m. the wall was striped with bands of light as straight as rulers. By noon they looked more like the rungs of a ladder, dappled with leaves from the winged elm outside my window. By 2:00 they had lost most of their character,
as the sun moved over the roof of the house and left the front yard in deepening shadow.

This may sound boring to you, but it was not. It was beautiful. It was reassuring. It gave me a place outside myself to go. I did not have anything to do with making the light change. It had a routine it followed all by itself whether I was awake to watch it or not. If I did not like the way the light looked at a given moment, I knew it would change. If I loved the way the light looked at a given moment, I knew it would change. I could not speed it up and I could not slow it down.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the light was my life and I knew it. Paying attention to it, I lost my will to control it. Watching it, I became patient. Letting it be, I became well. (172-73)

“THE KISS OF JUDAS, OF THOMAS, AND OF LIFE?”

Again from our reading by Barbara Brown Taylor:

“Not to put too fine a point on it, the light – the ever shifting pattern of Light – was my life and I knew it. Paying attention to it, I lost my will to control it. Watching it, I became patient. Letting it be, I became well.”

Light and Life... Letting go and living in this world, letting it be, despite what it presents to us – those are some of her themes... and to be sure, themes that Jesus also returned to.

Having had an opportunity to visit Jerusalem on a couple of occasions, I was deeply moved to visit the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is said to have prayed in anguish about his life and his impending death... and ultimately acknowledged that he served a spirit greater than himself, letting go, and said, or is said to have said, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

A letting go... embracing a great love... a life of radical compassion, of faith whose mostly unknown details are grounded in a particular place... geography where spirit moved. It is the wisdom also of so many traditions... seeking the light, living boldly and letting go: spiritual wisdom as old as the 5000 year-old Mahabharata of India.

Barbara Brown Taylor also offers provocation when she asks, “What is saving your life now?”
What is saving your life now?

Or as the poet Mary Oliver asks, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

The light… Where is the light? The love? The connections with the More that heals and holds…. Letting it be?

On Palm Sunday, then, what of the light and life of Jesus? Sorting out the meaningful and the nonsense about the Jewish teacher Jesus is a challenge. We have no scholarly biographies by those who lived when he did, no first person accounts, no contemporary interviews.

Some here are familiar with Christianity’s Palm Sunday (which is mostly fiction), and some are not. The story recounts Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and speaks of the crowds that welcomed him. Then, according to the tradition, in the week that follows his joyful arrival, the crowds abandon him, the disciples reject him, and the ruling Roman Imperial powers condemn him to death and crucify him. He was just one more seditionist to be put to death, as had happened to hundreds if not thousands of others going back over the previous decades.

Tradition has it that those lining the roadside that Jesus traveled placed leaves in his path to create a carpet of honor, something common from ancient near eastern cultures. Only the book of John specifies that palm fronds were used, and the author of John wrote as many as 70 years after Jesus’ death.

Tradition… traditions…. They vary. Palm leaves…. However, the Russian Orthodox Church, Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and Ukrainian Catholic Church use pussy willows. Elsewhere, olive branches.

I confess to you I am intrigued by and attracted to this parade without a permit that legend offers about Jesus. And, in addition to Jesus today, I am pondering two other archetypal characters in the Christian narrative – two very different disciples of Jesus… Judas and Thomas who evoke different themes of betrayal and of doubt, and Thomas also speaks of light as well.

On a triumphal day like that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, gratitude easily flows.

Such gratitude is easier, no doubt about it, when things are going your way, and I suspect that even Judas, Judas who by a kiss was to signal Jesus’ betrayal to those who would kill him, even Judas was joyful on that first Palm Sunday. Judas, by legend, was a political revolutionary, and he probably thought that the overthrow of the Romans was at hand. The people would rise up under Jesus’ leadership, and the Kingdom of God would be established with Jesus as the new earthly ruler.
It was a good day, a sweet day, a beginning of the ending of tyranny, that day when the people cried out hallelujah and the parade of motley disciples entered the city.

And Jesus? He wept over the city, saying would that the people knew what would make for peace.

And who was this Jesus who stirred such devotion?

Today, the interpretations of who Jesus was and what he preached and taught – these interpretations vary quite greatly, and I find help and challenge in the view that he was a militant mystic... a militant mystic who (1) had a spiritual understanding of our unity with and our preciousness within creation, combined with (2) prophetic challenges to oppressors of the destitute, the poor, the supposed nobodies of the world.

The spiritual truth and the social ethic he preached say, “You are the light of the world.” And, “We own nothing and we must share everything.”

How annoying is that?

People are precious, every single one of us. And what an extraordinary thing if we could embrace that generosity, that vision, that sense of grace.

Many different images and messages: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world and do not hide your light under a basket.

Wherever your treasure is, there you shall find your heart.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself, and then comes the story of the Good Samaritan in response to the question "Who is my neighbor?"

Alone in the garden in Gethsemane in prayer, feeling betrayed even by God, and then, and then Jesus accepts that he in fact has given himself over to Life so deeply that he can give praise for life. Praises life!

Going back to the Palm Sunday story, the triumphal entry is not the whole story. What also captures my attention at this time of year is the story of betrayal, of the wounds we carry, and the wounds we can inflict, in spite of good intentions, sometimes in the name of good intentions. Sometimes we offer fear, cowardice, or cruelty, as well as bravery and love in our hearts. I think about the fragility and vulnerability of the disciples, and it makes me think about my fragility and vulnerability.
Many of us know that story. The same welcoming crowd did not rescue Jesus as he carried his cross to Skull Hill. Peter denied three times that he even knew this man Jesus. The disciples fell asleep rather than keep him company. For a moment, for a powerfully human moment that perhaps lasted hours, days, who knows, Jesus feared God had betrayed him, and of course one of his own, one whom he had chosen to teach and work with him, one of the twelve, handed him over to the Roman authorities, and he sealed it with a kiss.

For thirty pieces of silver – almost one half year's wages. Then, later we read that Judas hung himself. But we also read that Judas died in a fall. That's in the book of Acts, but is usually not the story everyone remembers. Like so much of the Bible, little is fact, much is contradictory, and these stories are often inconsistent, not history, but what theologians call “creative fictions.”

Lives were transformed.

And in the midst of this, we do know at some deep level that Judas lives. As one colleague has written, "The Judas kiss is an archetype – all have tasted it." (Clarke Wells)

Wounded, betrayed. The kiss of Judas lingers, and how then shall we live? How do you carry on?

Betrayal. Few are strangers to it altogether, and if so, be blessed.

And sometimes, Judas is so close at heart we succumb and lash out, and how hard it is to seek the forgiveness we may need from those whom we might have hurt.

There are so many other options in response to wounds we receive.

One way is to retreat from life. Build up those emotional defenses, those barriers, hide behind the meticulously constructed masks, never risk, never change, never feel, never touch and be touched. In opposition to that death, there is a shop-owner in Sausalito, California that I heard about who makes hand-blown glass figures and objects. In the store is a sign that says, "Please touch." The lives we almost lead....

The struggle to rebirth can be hard, and we need help from family, or friends, spouses, partners, a community like this, a 12-step group, a therapist, or a deeper spiritual journey and path... healing comes in different ways.

We know the danger, yet sometimes, isn’t it true that we have lost our center, if not our soul? Lost our balance, our vision, our faith in our connectedness, how deeply we are connected to each other – the beauty of our souls?
So, sometimes, we act out of soul-chilling self-absorption, instead of soul-freeding connection.

To be sure, we can bring some hurts upon ourselves. Jesus suggested we be wise as serpents and gentle as doves. Samson believed Delilah even though she betrayed him three times before the final downfall. So the fourth time, he wasn't betrayed; he was a fool. (Wells)

My colleague Clarke Wells also makes another observation that strikes me in its wisdom. "In our self-centeredness we often assume claims on others we have no right to. We think others owe us – duty, loyalty, even generosity, when in fact they don't." Some do, in some ways, but we do not own others, and we cannot command another's love, or loyalty or generosity.

I remember asking one of my children when the child was about three for a kiss and a hug. "Nope," was the answer. We cannot command love, loyalty or generosity. But that was not betrayal, only my neediness.

Sometimes we feel the knife: At work. Office politics.... Games, blaming, passive-aggressive folks. Watch your back! Is it ever more vicious than that?

Unless maybe it's at home. Families are sometimes especially good at it.

Or maybe with a lover, a spouse... We can fight dirty with those we love the most, perhaps especially those.

Society also includes its betrayals, and we have our affluenza, a new imperialism, and the old on-going oppressions of so many groups within this nation, with such extremes.

Politicians may knife us, even the good ones whom we voted for, when in the press of pragmatism they begin dealing, delaying, and compromising their promises – which is only to say that they are like you and me, we who live each day in the gap between our ideals and our actions.

So what do we do? With the politicians we just keep the pressure on!

Within ourselves, we stay faithful, try to stay faithful to our ideals and convictions, and our values that we are connected to one another... faithful to the Light within and around us. Paying attention. Watching it. With Patience. We keep trying to do the right thing.

Maybe, even unto death.

What are you doing to save your life?
How are you finding light, which abounds within us and around us?

Jesus’ spirit... Judas’ spirit... to those this morning just a word about the disciple Thomas. He is named as one of the twelve, and sometimes he is called Jesus’ twin brother, mostly in Syria. But that starts getting difficult if you have a dogma about the virgin birth, and then you have not one but two divine personages... that’s even dicier than one, so most of the early churches took a pass on that belief.

Thomas is said to have traveled to India to make converts, but he is best known as doubting Thomas. He would not believe his friends when they told him they had seen Jesus risen from the dead. He was the disciple from Missouri, who says “Show me.”

And in the Gospel of John, we can imagine the author’s challenge. Ordinary people felt the contagious spirit of love of the early church, but maybe they couldn’t and didn’t need to believe in bodily resurrection. Thus, perhaps we have this character Thomas, the skeptic, with words put in his mouth, followed by Jesus’ showing up... not only showing up but having Thomas touch his wounds... And then, even the skeptic had to believe, with the invitation to readers of the story to similarly believe a very strange story.

The more authentic witness of the disciple Thomas seems to be in the Gospel of Thomas, which I know some have heard about. It’s not a part of the Christian New Testament, but it is thought by many scholars to have predated the four accepted gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The Gospel of Thomas includes sayings of Jesus and parables, about half of which are contained in the other four, perhaps circulating within a few years after Jesus’ death. And it has some additional teachings, sometimes deemed to be Gnostic, though some scholars aren’t so sure.

What did Thomas say that Jesus said? Jesus says, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you." (Saying 70)

Also, Thomas reports that Jesus said, “...the Kingdom of God is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of … [God].” [Saying 3]

The light is within... share it... Bless and be blessed....

And the pain?
A final word of caution about these wounds that we carry and betrayal we may feel. One of the temptations of life is to feel betrayed by God. You, or a friend, a lover, a child, a parent lives and dies … cancer… or with AIDS… or with so many other possibilities. Illness strikes and debilitates – you, or a friend, a lover, a child, a parent. You get fired, laid off. Life’s not fair.

Sadness, yes, enormous sadness at loss, at pain, at cruelty. But to blame God for disease or illness or misfortune is to make God a petty, whimsical, or cruel despot. We are wounded healers, and we are not invincible. Nobody promised us that. We are survivors, who need each other and who need to catch the winds of grace – the breath of life – to feel the deep presence of our own powers that are what make us so precious. The light within…. The wider light….

The Creative Spirit of Life, of Love and Justice calls us to partnership in creativity. But little is guaranteed. The symbol of the cross honors that stark condition of experience.

Barbara Brown Taylor once again:

“There will always be people who run from every kind of pain and suffering, just as there will always be religions that promise to put them to sleep. For those willing to stay awake, pain remains a reliable altar in the world, a place to discover that a life can be as full of meaning as it is of hurt. The two have never canceled each other out and I doubt they ever will.”

As years pass, although I do not claim for myself the name Christian (and who in fact can live up to that claim?), I do have more appreciation for the cross, and some kind of Easter faith remains deeply a part of me. No bodily resurrection but spirit…. On the other side of pain is resurrection. On the other side of heartache is New Life for the making, the shaping. More on that next week….

We can give our lives over to so many things, not just silver.

We can give ourselves to something that is within us but greater than us.

What is it we plan to do with our one wild and precious life?

What are you doing now to save your life?

What are you giving yourself to?

Walt Whitman adds to the Light and to Life this way:

Still here I carry my old delicious burdens;
I carry them, men and women – I carry them with me wherever I go;  
I swear it is impossible for me to get rid of them;  
I am filled with them, and I will fill them in return

Burdens fill us, but what a choice! The kiss of Life... To fill them, to fill Life ... to keep on living with our burdens as we change and grow our souls.

Simply to be is a blessing... this Light, this Life. A gift that asks of us... to give back... to share the main thing... that Love is the main thing...

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Jesus once said, or at least is said to have said: “Straight is the way and narrow is the gate, and few there be that find it.”

“But all of us can.” (With thanks to Duncan Littlefair.)

Meditation

O Spirit of Life and Healing Love,

May we go about the ordinary business of our days, amid our joys and heartaches, rising “to our work, [and] serving one another with gladness and singleness of heart, so that the life we share goes on working, not for any of us alone but for all of us together.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, Christian Century, 3/23/10, 35)

In these our days – so brief, so blessed – may we be comfort and joy to each other, and despite any troubles of heart or mind or body, may we always seek to live with gratitude for this great gift of Life that we share.

Amen.