

LESSONS IN LIVING

What We Owe One Another Part 2: Live From the Roots

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
October 31, 2010

Scripture Reading: John 15: 1-10; 11-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

When I was a kid in school, and they told us about the Holocaust, that really re-oriented my whole life, I think. Because the stories and the images were so devastating to me to think that would actually happen to people. I started having nightmares about it. At first, as you would expect from a child, the nightmares were a fear that that would happen to me. But as the nightmares continued, I realized there was a worse possibility – that I would find myself doing that to someone else. And so, the approach that I began to take in religion was...what are the ideas in my head, what are the practices I have learned that would predispose me in that direction? The Germans were not an evil nation. They considered themselves a Christian nation. They sang many of the hymns that we sing. They recited the creeds that we recite. But somehow, their religion didn't move from that personal understanding to recognize the sacred in the other.

I looked up at the front of my church and there was a big American flag by the pulpit and I asked myself a question that I didn't say aloud (I was at least that smart). How is it possible that I was born into the *one* good country in the whole world? What a stroke of luck! How come when we tell the stories of history we were always right and everybody else was always wrong? I'd get the little Weekly Reader and it would talk about how wonderful we were, and the stories we told, and every Thanksgiving we'd come together and tell this completely untrue story – completely untrue story about how loving our offers were to the indigenous people here.

So when I left for college I really wanted to explore that. I really wanted – not just for some philosophical reason – but the terror that I would hurt another person and not even know it...that I would embody the kind of violence that had been manifested by people who probably had no idea what they were a part of, because they had learned to shut down that discernment.

When I got to college I knew that what I had been taught was so small that I wanted something bigger. I knew that much. I started studying other religions, other practices. I meditated and I did the spiritual exercises of Ignatius. For some reason, I radiated toward painful things as though that was somehow going to do some redemptive work. But I think sometimes - particularly introverts - we have to start there with that kind of personal discernment. And then it

grows out of that. It's sort of like the larvae stage of a butterfly. If you don't go through that selfish stage and feed that need when you're young, it may haunt you the rest of your life.

There were three people that stood out [to me]. Actually, there were more than that, but every time I would go to these mystics I would feel a deeper part of myself, and stop reading to see a bigger world. I knew that must mean I was on the right path. If I'm reading something and I feel more of myself and then I see a bigger world, I've got to be going in the right direction. I certainly didn't feel that way in Sunday School, although the Bankstons that come here to church - she was one of my Sunday School teachers and she was one of two reasons I didn't give up on religion. Because when I asked them these questions, they said "We don't know." That's all I needed - a little honesty. The rest of the people bluffed it, faked it, and just kept repeating what they had been told, and I knew that wasn't true.

So I would read Schweitzer and it just touched me. I would read Helen Keller - loving, brave spirit, and Tolstoy. Now I didn't know anything about these people, really, and some of it was about the images that were there. For instance, I loved St. Francis, and my image was the little statue in the garden, the little bird on the shoulder. That was as deep as I was at that moment, but it was a first step in what I hope has been the right direction. But what I began to do was to come to my own roots in a new way - to understand who I was as a human being in a new way. It would be decades before I started adding things that had anything at all to do with politics. At first it was just discovering who I am as a person.

Last week we looked at a "covenant of kindness". For those who join this community, I really want to encourage us to pledge that to one another...to be kind in word and deed. The second thing is to live out of our roots - for this to be a safe place where people can live out of their roots, and we don't have to learn the parrot song of the nation or of the religion - because that's what they are. They are not the songs of the human heart. Can we learn those songs again? That's going to be our question today.

Now the one thing I didn't realize until years or decades later was that all these people I had chosen (because they were so nice) were all political radicals...every one of them on my list. Schweitzer's theology was very radical. He was the first person [I had read] that would question some of the things that were in the Bible. He would look at something and say "That can't happen, because it's supernatural. What do you think it means symbolically?" Whoops! I'd never heard that before - that the Bible is wrong about some things. I mean, you can't argue with it when you look at it and there are facts there that are wrong. The mustard seed is *not* the smallest seed. Yes, you find that in the Bible, but try it on a Biology test sometime and see how well it floats. What a gift! What a gift to say let that truth that I'm finding in this book take me to a deeper truth - to go down to the roots of it. And little Helen Keller (who I felt sorry for, I guess) was a firebrand. She was a socialist. She did some of the most radical critiques of capitalism that you'll ever see. And, of course, Tolstoy was an anarchist. He said the state is violence and it hides that by a false history, a false story. And you learn that story and you can't even talk about the evil because you have no words for it.

Now, you may choose not to use that word "radical," and I've had some people I respect very much say "don't do it, people won't know what you're talking about." And I think it's true that

if I use that word, many people will misunderstand what I'm trying to say because the word "radical", in this culture, means "extremist" and it's linked to violence. But how about turning to the dictionary and see that it means "coming from the roots of something"? Do you realize that part of the oppression of any culture, particularly an empire, is to get where you cannot say what's wrong with your culture? Those words are taken. They're not allowed, and so we learn to speak the parrot song, and we can't ever find our balance, much less say what's wrong with the whole that's there.

When I learned the story of the Puritans coming to this continent, I was told a false story. I was told they were loving and kind to the indigenous people. They lied, they murdered, they stole, but because they were Christian, they thought that was okay. They were better than the other person and so they could break their contracts because, since they represent God on earth, anything that works out for them is just fine. So they murdered people and didn't miss a prayer. You have to leave out [from the story] the fact that people, running away from problems they had someplace else, come over here, steal a continent of land (we've talked about this before) break treaties and steal the northern part of the continent and then build everything with slavery. We worked hard...we really did! What a success story that is. See, it's a false story, it's a false history and when we imbibe that false story and go out into the world, we see with false consciousness. We're not trying to do the evil any more than the Germans were, but we think we're better than other people, so we don't test ourselves by the same standards. And we believe that "might makes right." We believe the fact that because we're the strongest dog on the block means we must be right.

Jesus Christ was a radical. Jesus Christ came from the roots. *He was not defined by the factions that people had to choose from.* Now, I think it's wonderful to choose the lesser of evils in terms of electoral politics. I think that's an important duty that we have. When November comes, you vote between dumb and dumber, but don't call it smart. Do you understand what I'm saying? I believe we have a duty to vote and get involved, but don't take the choices we've been given by the rich, and say that's the world we want to live in.

Now listen to these words from Jesus and how they call you to the roots. You are not being called to the Presbyterian Church. You're not being called to the Christian church. You're being called to the roots of life itself.

"I am the vine. You are the branches. Cut off from me, you can do nothing."

That's the common life speaking. Jesus is speaking poetically because he has gone so deep into his own soul, he knows ours, too. He's not asking you to believe something hypothetically. You're not being asked to believe there's an invisible person somewhere and you're a part of that and you have to come to that. (You know that version of Jesus being the Son of God – God impregnated Mary and that's the only time that ever happened, so...no scandals. But that makes Jesus better than everybody else and then there's the resurrection or something else). Jesus is saying something that's true of all of us if we go deep enough, profound enough.

The rescuer God is not what Jesus came to talk about. The God for whom you surrender responsibility, shows up at the last second and bails us all out – that's not what Jesus was talking

about. Let me ask it this way: *if rescuer God didn't show up for the Holocaust, then what would be an entrance cue?* What would be miserable enough for this God to come and help us? How much begging would you have to do for this God to step from behind the scenes and come forward? That God doesn't exist. That's not what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is giving us a vocabulary to go deep in our own lives and recognize our connections with life, with the earth, with each other.

It doesn't have to be persons for it to be personal. Has anybody here ever been really depressed and have a dog come up and make everything better? A dog is not a person. When you talk about your day at work, the dog is not picturing what you're talking about. ("That must have been horrible. You're right, they're wrong.") It's much simpler than that. It's not a person, but it's personal and it's enough. That's the connectedness to life, to nature, that's being talked about. It doesn't take invisible critters to make it happen. You are a product of whatever creativity has given birth to everything. You are a child of that, and Jesus speaks of that: "I am the vine, you are the branches." When you feel that from the inside out, you will know the rest of it. You will grow into the rest of it.

If you remain with me, he says, how will you know you remain with me?...that you love. What does it mean to love? Here's the scary part, the part we don't want to hear. Are you ready? "Perfect love is this, that you give your life for others." You see, after you find your own roots, after you live out of your roots, you have to produce fruit...which is not just some abstract love. It's caring about the world, responding to the real hungers and thirsts and real loneliness of the world, responding from the very roots of your being and emptying yourself to that cause.

Most Christians read scripture the way an adolescent reads Playboy magazine...as a surrogate to relationship, as a surrogate to life, as a surrogate to true duty. And I don't choose that [illustration] casually or simply to be offensive. But when we use scripture in a non-loving way, we are producing the greatest pornography there is on the face of the planet. Unloving religion disorients, and comes between us, and fills our head with images that relate to nothing.

So Jesus says that God's role in all of this is to cut off whatever is not fruitful. Now this is a poem, and in the Trinity, each of [part of the Trinity] has to play the ugly role sometime. Sometimes Jesus has the role, sometimes it's the Holy Spirit, but it's the symbol of time. We don't have all time. Your existence in this world is a tremendous gift that took all kinds of things to happen in order for you to be here today. And someday - it will happen where you will be faced with the decision to pull back from this calling - from your gift, to sever from your roots, so you can feel safe or to give yourself to the common life, to the common happiness. The way Jesus says it is "I have come that you might have joy." He says "my joy." He doesn't mean Jesus' joy, he means the joy of the common life.

We need to learn a view of happiness that isn't selfish - that isn't isolated. Because that view of happiness has caved in on us our whole lives. This is a different view of happiness, and Jesus says, "I have come that your joy might be complete." We cannot be complete when we have to close the blinds to keep from seeing what the rest of the world is doing. We cannot be completely happy when we have to pretend that the religion that we're taught is healthy, or we have to pretend that the nation in which we live is righteous. *Jesus calls us to the roots that we*

might speak the truth to one another in love. When we look out on the world with a false history, and when we tell that story over and over again...about our nation, or about our denomination, or about our religion, or about our economic system...when we approach life with a false history, we also approach it with a false consciousness. We are disoriented from who we are as human beings in our roots.

So the second covenant I would invite you to make to one another is for this to be a safe place for people to be honest and to be able to live from the roots. Does it mean we're going to agree? We won't! But can we come from the common roots? That probably will start – for the introverts here -prayer, meditation, art, walking...until you're quiet enough to feel the roots within you. And then you begin to live out of those roots, and begin to learn that your happiness is tied to other people's happiness and in some ways, [to] the higher forms of happiness: you're happier when other people are happy, than when you [alone] get what you want.

And ultimately, the final step of this happiness is when it's complete. It's when you're living in the joy of the common life. For when that moment comes, to offer yourself for others, you do not see it as a sacrifice. You see it as your joy becoming complete. And if and when that day happens to you and you say "yes," I can promise you this: *it will be the best day of your life.*

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



St. Andrew's Church

Loving ♦ Progressive ♦ Presbyterian

14311 Wells Port Drive, Austin, Texas 78728 ·

(512) 251-0698 · Fax: (512) 251-2617 www.staopen.com