

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *From Ritual to Sacred Art*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
January 30, 2011

Scripture Readings: Deuteronomy 6: 4-9; Matthew 6: 26-30 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Well, we are in a series, and the first five sermons are based on three questions that I used to ask my Sunday school teachers. They couldn't answer them, and then I went to Philosophy school at UT and they couldn't answer them, [then] Seminary, and I was not claiming to have the answers but I thought by understanding the questions better I'd be getting guidance in life.

The first question that I used to ask my teachers was this: how do you know that a religion isn't all made up? The stories you hear from scripture - those wonderful stories that make us feel good, but how do you know that somebody didn't just make them up and put them in a book? That was the question [we discussed] last week.

The question this week is even harder. In the first service, I saw the eyebrows go up. (*laughter*) The question is this: even if religion is true, why do we need it? A kind of important question. We've all known people who used religion as a crutch. We've all known people that used religion as an escape from intimacy, from life. What is it about religion that we need?

I want to start the conversation by quoting Karl Marx, and I think probably most Presbyterians today are doing that. (*laughter*) I'm not quoting Karl Marx because I agree with Karl Marx; I'm quoting Karl Marx because if your mind does not go through Marx, Darwin, Relativity, Materialism - if your religion skirts around the major discoveries of the last 150 years, you're going to lose contact. You will not be doing the best you can do to stay tuned to life and to nature. Karl Marx believed there was no religion that was not an escape. I disagree, but we have to hear the truth of what he's saying. This is a very famous quote:

*Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of a soulless condition. It is the opium of the people.*

You probably have heard that before. Now by opium, he didn't mean delusional, that was how you blunted pain. Novocain would probably be a better translation of that. That is what we turn to when we are so bruised that we can't go out into life. Now there is some truth in that, isn't there? Here's where I beg to differ.

*The abolition, getting rid of religion, as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for the real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up conditions that require illusions. (Pretty good point) The criticism*

*of religion is therefore an embryo, the criticism of that veil of tears  
of which religion is the halo.*

I love that phrase... "The veil of tears of which religion is the halo." It's saying when you look at the world with eyes full of tears, you see the rainbow there, the halo. He's saying it's an illusion. And we have to sober up and face the world as it is. Now obviously that would require leaving beauty as much as it would be leaving religion. Those arguments against religion are absolutely equally applied to beauty; beauty isn't objective; beauty isn't something you can put into words. So while beauty fails the test of philosophy, it's philosophy that suffers, right? (*Got real quiet in here...laughter*) I think you understand how important this question is, to not skirt around it, but to go into it.

When I was a kid, my memories of church were suffocating boredom. (*laughter*) Whenever I see kids out there- there is a place in my heart [that is touched] when I see a kid misbehaving in church, because I've been there. So boring, and I can't remember if it is Incubus or Succubus that sucks your breath out, the ghost, that's what I felt like in church, like somebody was sucking my soul out. And that I wasn't going to be myself if I didn't shut down what was happening there - someone undercover, also in philosophy, also in Seminary. There were people in the church who were very moved by what was happening; singing the hymns over and over again...just crying. Doing the same prayers they'd done everyday...just crying.

And when I got to college and studied Pavlov. (Remember the story of the guy who fed the dogs and rang the bell and when he rang the bell the dogs salivated?) The truth is we can get conditioned to a feeling of meaning that doesn't connect to anything. Now, please know that's not where the sermon's going to end (*laughter*), because I wouldn't have a job, (*laughter*) and, also, because it is not true. You are related to the Universe. I went looking for a definition of beauty, but I went looking because this critique not only says we shouldn't be religious, it shuts down the heart at someplace, which is part of why Marxism turned cruel, right? When you shut down to beauty, you shut down the empathy; you shut down the empathy and your enemies are going to look really bad to you.

So, what I encountered in college was the exact opposite; you've just got to be tough. You know, one of the first classes I took was called the mechanical brain; the brain's just a machine, get used to it; the world's just stuff, get used to it. And I encountered what I called the Spartan's sneer, and that's that argument, you can't get around it that poetry's stupid. If somebody says poetry's stupid, how do you argue with that? But it's the coarseness of the person that makes the argument work. If somebody believes that violence is the ultimate test of goodness, how do you argue with that? How do you argue with somebody that has a bat to hit you with? The Spartan wins the argument in his or her own mind, but that's the only place. Because what it requires to live in that brutal world is to lose what is most essential in a human being. Remember playing in the background in the mist, and you saw the rainbow in the mist? Is the rainbow false? Is it just an illusion, or is it the revelation of the beauty that's embedded in nature? When you look at beauty and something deep resonates in you, is that false, or is a deeper attunement?

As I say, I went looking for beauty, and I would read people like Hegel, and definitions of beauty, and then at the end of the day and I would go out and there was a rose outside my apartment complex. And I would go and look at the rose and say, "does that cover it"? Does that theory of beauty do justice to the rose? And what I discovered was that artists knew what beauty was, but they couldn't say it. Philosophers could say what beauty was, but they had no sense of, you know, it didn't make any sense - there was no sense of beauty. And it was therapists, art therapists that talked about a deeper pulse that we're tuning to that helped me cross that river. Then in a sense what beauty is, is the heart resonating with the beauty of the universe - of nature. In a human form, there is a translation that takes place. I think

that's why when Buddha was looking for the person to take on being the teacher after Buddha was gone; the test that he used is very interesting. He got all of the smart people together and he lifted up a flower and the person who could just relate to the flower - not theories, not practicalities, but could just look at the flower and be moved deeply - he knew [that] was the one to carry the message forward.

When Jesus wanted to teach a new way of living that is based on love, yes, it's religion, but that's not the heart of it. The heart of it is to be a loving person. And if you have love, you have the rest. What he did when he wanted to find a group of people who might be able to follow along, he took them out of the city; he took them to a place called the Sea of Galilee. You may have seen pictures; it looks like the middle of Texas, the Hill Country, wild flowers, that kind of thing. Now think about that, when you're trying to teach the core of your religion, why would you want to put people in a beautiful surrounding? *Because it's not just about the words.* It's about restoring that connection to life and to Nature. Because we used to be animals - in one sense we still are - but our intelligence has made us fall out of the web of life. Once you turn and look at the web and see yourself as something separate, there's a missing core to your life and part of what religion is doing is reconnecting that sense. Animals don't need it, they're already there. But your human consciousness needs to be reminded that you're a child of the Universe. And every time you see beauty, something resonates in you, like home. You can't touch it; you can't get there. It's like a rainbow, you can't have it - not as long as you have a body - you can't touch it, but it's the source of your being, the source of everything that you care about. One of the ways of understanding it is the Universe is like a kaleidoscope. We can't see the kaleidoscope. All we see are the beautiful patterns and colors.

When the scriptures say love God with all of your heart, what that's trying to say is love the whole, love that which causes the patterns, not the patterns themselves. We fall in love with the patterns and get our heart broken time and time again, and think life doesn't matter, life is random, life is cruel, and all those things can be true; but when we see the beauty, we remember there is something very important at the core of it, at the ground of it.

When I was a kid, we were taken on a tour of Christian art. Holy Jeepers, it was horrible. *(laughter)* Those flat, lifeless people, flat, lifeless colors; I mean, you'd walk through the surrealist's stuff and all/everything is jumping out at you, and then you go into these hideous, hideous pictures. And as I was wont to do, I wandered off a little bit. They had a display from Egypt and they had the hieroglyphs. And when I saw those little pictographs, the hair on my arm rose up. I could feel them speaking to me about something deeper; I didn't know what. And I realized that's what art is; putting invisible form - that invisible something underneath everything, so that we can trust it; so that we can care about it, and when our heart is tuned, everything else becomes more beautiful. So one definition of beauty is the heart tuned to the song of life, to the song of the Universe.

Marx said that religion is like putting flowers on our chains. Marx believed that all our problems come from society, but there are chains that have nothing to do with society; little things like death, little things like time. So we need to go deeper than what Marx is talking about, but it is a two-edged sword; beauty can either lead you away from life and from your pain and your feelings, or deeper into it. There were people who played Wagner when they were resting as they worked in the Holocaust... would listen to beauty and surround themselves with paintings. Hitler was a great collector of art. Art can be something that masks your cruelty, or it can take you deeper into life in a way that you give yourself fully, not only to life but to other people, and to see that is what your life is. So this idea of this beauty, this rainbow, this halo that we see can either be an illusion where we are escaping from life or can be that sensible way in which we understand that we are all connected, and that there is nothing inconsequential in this universe.

Maybe that is what is meant when you see the figure of Christ on the cross - not that God was angry in punishment, but that it hurts to keep your heart open. It hurts to stay in touch with beauty and that part of the strength and the courage that the Spartan knows nothing about. The Spartan is just brave enough to be cruel, but not brave enough to risk feeling intimacy. Maybe that's what that means of a love that is so strong that it will not be broken or reduced. It will not give up on beauty, no matter what life does to it. I think maybe that's what Buddha was trying to say when he handled the flower. I think possibly that's what Jesus meant when he said I have a new religion that's very crazy, that may not make sense at first. So I am going to take you outside the city, put you on a hill by a sea and say, "Look at the flowers."

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

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