

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *From Indoctrination to Initiation*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
March 27, 2011

Scripture Reading: John 15:5-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Last week we talked about why religion needs to be universal. We talked about the damage that sectarian religion can do, and the importance of opening our horizons out to include the whole world. Today we're going to talk about something that's equally important - the necessity for religion to also be personal. When we try to live always in the universal, sometimes we are surprised to find out that the umbrella doesn't open all the way. You know you're supposed to love the whole world; you're supposed to care about social justice for everyone, but you don't feel it. Maybe it's in there somewhere, but it's not retrievable data. What a symbol like Jesus can do is keep you in touch with that.

So I want to ask the question as seriously as we can. A couple of weeks ago we asked "Does God exist?", and the answer wasn't clear, was it? Because a symbol doesn't exist; a symbol is deeper than that. In the same way, you don't really need a symbol. What you need is what the symbol is talking about. So do we need Jesus? I'll start off by asking it not in the sense, "Do we need Jesus as opposed to Buddha?" we've had a couple of conversations about that before. There are lots and lots of ways to understand the sacred in a personal way. All over the world there are wonderful symbols that are very much like the symbol of Jesus. But what I want to talk about is why we need that personal symbol; why sometimes it needs to have a face, or the texture of a hand for us to hold onto...this larger hope that we have for loving everyone and holding onto that.

In the ancient world at the time when this poem called "John" was being written, there was a very lively conversation - all over the world - about different ways to understand God, and how to symbolize that. The three primary ways that humankind was thinking of God have been remembered as the Trinity.

We'll talk about that next week. But one way to understand it would be like a flower growing out of soil. The symbol of the Parent is that mysterious source out of which we come. It is not human, it's not a big Mommy or Daddy, but the symbol of a big Mommy or Daddy may be a way for us to realize that we emerged naturally from that ground...that we are expressions of that. So if you think of the ground with a flower growing out of it, the flower is different from the ground; the ground isn't red, it doesn't smell sweet, so the flower isn't going to find itself in the ground, although it's there. Everything that's in the flower is someplace in the ground...and there's going to be other flowers. Is this strange enough for you? (*laughter*)

So within the Trinity you have the idea of the Universal, which is the Parent, this mystery out of which we all come. Then we have the Personal, which is what we're going to talk about today, the symbol of Jesus, or Christ, or Buddha, or lots and lots of other examples of it. And then we

have the third part of the Trinity which is the Transcendental, that part that is just too weird to think about. That would be like if the Source is like the soil, and the flower is like the Personal, then the Spiritual part would be like the bee. It's coming out of a context that the flower doesn't have. It's linking the flower to every other flower, but in a very strange and un-flower-like way. (*laughter*) It's important in your calculus to keep mystery in there because there are some very rude surprises when we forget to do that.

Jesus is going to speak in a way that was very common in the ancient world. Maybe not common, but there was a small group of people who did it, and it was all over the ancient world. These groups of people were involved in what was called the Mystery religions, and as part of their teachings, they would initiate their followers into *life*. Now this idea is critical, and has been lost in today's mainstream religions, but it's incredibly important. The purpose of religion is not to initiate you into the *religion*, it's to initiate you into *life itself*, so you can feel yourself intuitively coming from the ground of things, and feel intuitively connected to others, even though you don't know them. Then you know that your life has worth and meaning, even if it's not going where you had intended.

The way that these people would teach this...if you've ever been a counselor, you know this...sometimes in order to get in touch with your depths, you have to fall apart first. If you're trying to understand your grief, and you're not going to cry, then you're not going to understand your grief. But if you start crying, you're not going to be in the saddle, right? So what a counselor or a friend can do is to listen in a way that allows you to go into your cave. And that's what the mystery religions did, they allowed a person to go into their cave and go deeply into their own awareness until they discovered their own roots.

Remember a guy named Sigmund Freud? He kind of did some of this, too. What he discovered when he went inside a personality is that there's something sort of like 'me' in there, and that was called the ego, the 'I'. Then there was something that was sort of like 'you', the relationships with the people that I care about; my parents, the teachers, all those recordings that are already there, that was the 'you'. It has been translated very poorly as the super-ego, but in German it was just the 'you'. And then there was the 'it', translated 'id'. All that stuff that isn't really human, that doesn't really fit your purposes, but it's in there, it's *that* which you're growing out of.

Part of the mystery religions [teachings] was for you to realize that you were emerging from the earth, and to not be afraid of it. The way we've taught it is upside down. We're taught that the spirits make the world, and you're *in* the world, and there's no net to it...no sense of connection. So you spend your whole life in this material frame and hope that the spirits will come in a helicopter at the last second and "swoop" you up. This is a profound experience. It looks like the material world is actually producing this intelligence, this beauty that is coming up from the soil, from the bottom up.

When you go into your own personality, the deeper you go, the less it's you. Did you ever notice that? It scares the "bejeebers" out of people to realize that. The conscious part is at the very top, but beneath that, you're an animal! You're a mammal! We forget that, don't we? But when you're emotional, sometimes all you've got is the mammal. You can't hear the human part. So what they would do is go into that and stop being afraid of it. They'd go into the earth *itself*, into the ground itself, and say at the deepest level you're organic, right, you're elemental. So things like fire, things like water, things like earth were all ways of saying 'yes' to your own roots, and to not be afraid, to not be afraid of that.

So when Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” this was a very common way of talking about this. What the guide would do in a process was like this: you’d go to a cave; you’d go through these ordeals. Going into the cave, you’re going into your own depths, and what the guide would do would help you get through it, so you could unravel and find your way back again. And one of the ways that would be said was, “I am the vine, you are the branches.”

Since Darwin, the idea of the tree of life hasn’t been really popular, but that’s exactly what he was talking about. All those little charts that he made are the tree of life. It was never just one little bush in a garden someplace. The truth is that we are intimately connected with one another, and the more you know about biology, the more immediate that realization is for you. We are branches of one vine. So Jesus would say that, and when they heard that, they weren’t hearing an outsider talking to them. Right now you’re hearing me as an outsider; you can agree or disagree. This is almost like you feel something moving inside of you. This is somebody who *knows* you, maybe more than you know yourself. It’s almost like your DNA is speaking at this point. So in John, when you’re reading this stuff, “I am,” it’s not Jesus talking; it’s this source of life and being. It’s the mystic ground that’s speaking to you. “I am the vine, you are the branches; cut off from me, you can do nothing.” You see this all over the world.

Jesus represents the human face on your experience in the cosmos. That doesn’t mean that there’s a human being hiding somewhere...very well hidden. It’s not anthropomorphizing the universe. It’s just reminding you that you belong here. You are as much a part of nature as a tree is. And we forget that, don’t we? You are growing organically out of nature. You are not artificial, you’re not a freak, [even though] your life may be, if you’ve forgotten this. You may be trying to get things for yourself that do not feed your soul, but you yourself are an expression of this love.

Some years ago, I went looking for a word, “only-begotten.” Because in the early church a lot of times they would translate that as “first-begotten,” and I knew this had to be a philosophical concept. It was very obvious in the ancient world they were using it in a special way. For Jesus to be the only-begotten son did not mean something biological. They were not looking at it like the spiritual equivalent of a pap smear. This is a spiritual metaphor. It’s not a biological fact. Well, I could tell it was coming from Plato, and I was pretty sure it was coming from the *Timaeus*, so I go looking for this word. I have enough trouble with Biblical Greek, Classical Greek and stuff; it was pretty hopeless, but I was just looking for this one word. And wouldn’t you know it would be on the last page? I had choked through this whole book. Do you know what the “only-begotten” means there? It is talking about human consciousness. Plato talks about human consciousness as the only-begotten child of this source, because there’s nothing like it that we know, that can look and see the beauty of the universe, and be moved deeply by it.

So it was a celebration not just of one human being, but of all humanity. It was a human being that was speaking from a depth that would include us all. Mircea Eliade, the philosopher/historian, talks a lot about initiations in these mystery religions. What he said was the purpose of them was for you to wake up to a world that you realized was sacred. I have a modern equivalent of that.

Do you remember the song, “What a Wonderful World?” That’s the experience I think that the mystery religion initiates felt when they came out of the cave.

*“I see trees of green, red roses, too,  
I see them bloom for me and you,  
and I think to myself, what a wonderful world.”*

It’s not promising you that things will happen the way you want them to, and it’s not saying that it’s all going to be laid out on the table for you, it’s just that wonderful feeling that it’s OK. What a wonderful world.

So Jesus starts off saying, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” and “you do what I command you” - that sort of stuff. That’s the way the guide begins. But then at some point, he says something amazing. He says, “I’m not calling you students anymore.” Did you catch that? He tags out! What kind of a boss does that? Like a “Lord” wouldn’t do that. A guide would. He said, “I don’t call you pupils anymore, I call you friends when you do what I command you.” Now that sounds kind of contradictory, but what is he commanding us to do? - *to love each other*. It has nothing to do with Jesus directly, does it? Nothing about baptism, nothing about being Presbyterian, although he implied that, I think. (*laughter*)

Because the initiation that the world needs and is waiting for is not into the church, and not into religion, it’s into *life*. It produces a different kind of human being, and indoctrination doesn’t do that. To teach people how to be good Presbyterians or good Christians is not going to save our world. To help them be more like Jesus certainly would. And they wouldn’t even have to join! A Buddhist can do that, an atheist can do that...

“I no longer call you disciples, I call you friends.” Now why is it important to let go of that first small picture of Jesus? Why is it important to let Jesus die so Christ can be born? Sometimes people will say, “What’s so wrong if I just have this...I want to have this personal relationship with Jesus. I want to do it the whole way. I don’t like people very much, but I love Jesus.” (*laughter*) “What’s wrong with that?”

Now the question I want to ask is, “There’s nothing wrong with it, but what’s wrong with a pacifier?” When it’s time to get off mother’s breast, it helps make that transition, but you’re not going to get any milk out of it, right? You’re not getting any nutrition whatsoever from a pacifier. So even if it makes you feel better, it’s not feeding you, and you’re not growing. If it doesn’t help you make the transition to solid food, to real people, to real life, then in such an important way it has betrayed you. There’s something in you that’s strong enough to make it through life. There’s something within you that’s wise enough to guide you through life. There’s something within you that’s kind enough to respond the way you hope to in life, but it requires outgrowing the initial images that a child would be attracted to.

It’s almost like a flower trying to smell the soil when you think of trying to get God to be your friend. The reason that scripture has what sometimes seems like ugly ideas of God is to remind you that nature isn’t always friendly to human beings. We need to remember that...that the charity that we’re looking for, the truth we’re looking for resides in each other. When you turn to the person sitting next to you and you see the human face, you’re seeing the face of God. That’s what the initiation teaches you. You’re not alone. You’re not an accident. You’ve satisfied the calling when we love each other.

I’ve said this before, but this is something that we forget on a weekly basis; the word “to glorify” does not mean “to praise”, it means “to shine out of something” in Greek. It can mean the other, too, but in these mystery religions it’s saying, “You can stop looking for God, you are an

expression of God.” When you love, that’s God coming through you, through your vessel. The symbol, God, helps us remember that when we can’t feel it. The symbol, Jesus...that simple face. Sometimes I can’t remember what it’s like to love, but then to see a mother holding her child at Christmas...I remember. Or to feel myself being embraced by actual arms...that helps me remember that. But it needs to lead me to you. And it needs to lead you to me, and to your friends, and to the real people that you’re going to share time with this week.

In the song by Louie Armstrong,

*“...the colors of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky,  
are also in the faces of people going by.  
I see friends shaking hands, saying ‘How do you do?’  
They’re really saying, ‘I love you’.”*

That is the experience of having been initiated...to see all of life this way. When your heart is tuned to this image of Jesus...or I’ll say Buddha, any master of love, or mistress of love...when your own heart is tuned, you can hear the music in every other heart as well. Then people are no longer strangers, they’re your family, and the earth is no longer just material, it’s your home.

I want to close by giving Saint Louie Armstrong the last word. Life doesn’t always occur the way we want it to, and sometimes it doesn’t look like our story got finished, but this love is different. This love helps you know that even if you didn’t get to finish your story, the torch is passed.

*“I hear babies cry, I watch them grow,  
They’ll learn much more than I’ll ever know,  
And I’ll think to myself, What a wonderful world.”*

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



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