

LESSONS IN LIVING

Around the World in Forty Days: A loving look at world religions from a Christian perspective Part II: What a Christian Can Learn From Buddhism

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
April 18, 2010

Scripture Reading: Matthew 14:22-36 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

In this series, I have mentioned before and I will have to remind you as we go through it that, one of the discoveries that I made in seminary in the back shelves of the library were stories that are in the New Testament that are found in earlier forms in other religions. There is a conspiracy of silence about that. Nobody is really denying, but the import of that fact that many of the stories that we teach as history preexist Christianity in earlier forms needs to be taken very seriously if we are going to be honest and reclaim what Christianity could be.

So I am going to read a story coming from the religion of Buddhism which may sound a little familiar at this point.

This noble disciple we are told possessed of faith and serenity of mind set out one day for Jetavana monastery. At evening tide he reached the bank of the river Aciravati, after the boatman had beached his boat and had gone to hear the preaching of the Doctrine. Not seeing a boat, he had recourse to the Practice of Meditation, concentrated his thoughts on the Buddha, attained the Ecstasy of Joy, and descended into the river. His feet did not sink in the water. He walked along as though he were walking on the surface of the land until he came to mid-stream. Then he saw waves. Then the Ecstasy of Joy, the result of the concentration of his thoughts on Buddha, became weak. Then his feet began to sink. But he concentrated his thoughts anew on the Buddha, strengthened the Ecstasy of Joy, walked on the surface of the water as before, entered Jetavana monastery, bowed to the teacher, and sat down on one side.

When I was a child being taught Christianity, I was told Christianity is about belief, believing in Jesus, but I wasn't really ever told what that meant. What does it mean to believe in Jesus? That Jesus existed? To trust what he said? That part really wasn't explained very clearly. And there wasn't a clear distinction between not questioning Jesus and not questioning my teachers. It was a whole lot more about not questioning my Sunday school teachers than it was whether I had personal doubts. I came to form the idea of heaven as a place that must be absolutely filled with Cocker Spaniels. Trusting, gullible souls who never let the spark of reason arise in their mind. I will never forget one day as a child I was watching *Peter Pan*, the musical, and there was a scene where it said, "Clap your hands if you believe in fairies" because Tinker Bell was very sick. Remember that? So I am feverishly clapping because I don't want Tinker Bell to die. I remember thinking, "what am I doing?" The next day in church I got that same sick feeling again. "Just clap your hands together; if you are not ashamed of Jesus then just keep on clapping."

What is this faith that they are talking about? Well I think it is what we bet our lives on. Whatever that is, is your religion, your faith--at some point you have to bet your life on something--I think that is what faith boils down to. And when that bet is based on a belief that you have never examined because you were told to be afraid of questions, there is a very good chance you will be sorry when the bets are laid out.

I think one of the problems with Americans, that makes it so hard for us to question the lies that our leaders keep telling us, is we are told early that faithfulness means not questioning; not just Jesus, but our Sunday school teacher, our governor, senator, our president. Now there came a time with our last administration where at some point the lies just got too compacted together. Almost everybody in the country realized at some point that the Iraq war was founded on lies and not much else. But many of the people that were in the streets protesting that war are buying hook, line and sinker the idea that we are in Afghanistan because we are concerned about the women. That the mean Taliban are hurting the women and that is why we are there. You know what? If we want to really do something for the women of the world the first thing we could do is pass the ERA here. Pass the Equal Rights Amendment here. We could stop trading off women's reproductive rights every time there is any kind of discussion. Then maybe we could bomb other countries in the name of feminism and it wouldn't be such a joke. I suspect it would still be a joke.

There is an incredible difference between a religion of belief and a religion of awareness. When I was exposed to Buddhism I not only realized the value of awareness but I realized that is what Jesus was talking about. Not getting a bunch of cockatiels together to say the same words at the same time and call that unity but something much more profound was meant by faith. Do you remember the country western song, "Don't Close Your Eyes?" It says, "Don't close your eyes. Let it be me. Don't pretend it's him in some fantasy." It is that idea that somebody doesn't even know who you are. The people all over the world are singing that song to you. "Please stop closing your eyes when somebody calls us Communists or Socialists. Please don't bomb our village because somebody has called us a name. Please don't bomb us because somebody has called us Taliban when you don't even know what a Taliban is, when you could not even spend three seconds saying what a Taliban is. You have just been propagandized to justify and react to. Look in our faces. Look in our children's faces." That is the difference between a religion of belief and a religion of love. Jesus taught a religion of love, I believe that with every inch of my being. But if we are going to get back to that religion of love we have got to do something really uncomfortable, which is dismantle the apparatus of trance that we are calling Christianity right now. Where if somebody holds certain creeds and beliefs we think they have somehow mastered the love of Christ, in the abstract with no relationship to real human beings. What Jesus is teaching us is how to see the divine in each other. That religion which calls itself Christianity that loves Jesus and hates everybody else--we have got to speak against it. It is not enough to be nice; we have to dismantle what is killing the world and that is a very costly enterprise.

We are looking at a story today that you were probably taught within the apparatus of a religion of belief. They are going along, Jesus gets out and walks on the water, no big deal, a magic guy who can do all kinds of magic things, walks on the water and if you have enough faith you can do that too. How many of you were taught that? That is the lesson of that story--if you have enough faith you can walk on water. How many of you can walk on water? How many of your teachers, the people who said that, can walk on water? How many people have you ever known anywhere at all that can walk on water? Nobody? Zero? Zip? Then that must be wrong, particularly when you have another version of the story. It can't be just about Jesus or a magic trick that was done. It has to be something deeper that is true not only in Israel but also in India and maybe here too. That is what a universal truth is; not something that happens once in history that freaks all the laws of nature, but something that undergirds your life and my life and the common life together. In the Buddhist story the disciple also gets out and goes on the water. What do they have in common and how are they different?

See, what we have to realize is that when people first heard this story as Christians, they probably already knew the earlier version of it, if not this story other stories. Nobody can accurately say how old this story is, and where it started it, and who borrowed it from whom. But there are plenty of places in the New Testament where that is not in question. What I am encouraging every Christian to do is to say "How is that story different if you already heard another version of it?" You wouldn't think faith meant believing that it happened. There is a wonderful line in the book of James that I just love. It says "You believe in God, that's great; the demons believe in that." What a great one liner. If there were demons they would believe that Jesus exists, and has power, and can walk on water or whatever, but they wouldn't believe in what? Love. They wouldn't believe in compassion and they wouldn't bet their lives on it. Because sometimes we believe in love but we don't have the courage to bet ourselves on it. And in a way that is what this story is about; getting out of the boat where it is safe, going into the storm where it isn't safe, but feeling peace at that because we are not going to lose what is most essential.

One of the things that always come to mind for me when I read this story is that the moon walks on water. There are lots of lunar symbols in the New Testament and I don't know, this could be completely a crazy preacher talking here, but the moon walks on water and there are lots of spiritual lessons about the fact that when we look at the storm of life that we are in we elevate ourselves above it. Our consciousness is not in the storm. The consciousness within you that is looking at your problems is not in the problems. That moment of transcendence is very important even though it does not feel any different. You are still in the storm but you feel a part of yourself outside of it. I will never forget one time the work load was getting incredible, I had deadline after deadline, and I felt like I was kind of going under. In the middle of the night I had this image of being a submarine, and everything was okay. When my image was of being a capsizing vessel I was going to suffocate, but a submarine is just fine in the middle of the storm. In the East they say that the moon is not wet when it is in the bottom of a well; that the moon is reflected in that; that it is not your consciousness. Who you most basically are is not defined by what is happening to you. So that is one thing, to realize that the storms you see are in your mind much more than they are in the world and there is a peace in that. The ugliness you see in other people is much more in your mind than in their hearts. The failures and ugliness you see in yourself is much more in your mind than it is who you are.

The next step is to realize that when you look in the bottom of a well and you see the moon down there that the moon is not limited to that one well. What religions do is think that the reflection they have of the one truth has been copyrighted. There is nothing more blasphemous or common in Christian theology in my opinion than thinking we have copyrighted Jesus or we have copyrighted God. What blasphemy to not recognize when God speaks to somebody else, to say "Well then it can't be real. How can God be real if God spoke to *those* people?" That doesn't make God any bigger; it makes us think we are bigger, but is pathetic and it is tearing the world apart. That is the point to which I want to return. As an American you have been taught to believe in a fragmented view of human kind that allows you to murder your brothers and sisters if they are different, to disregard your brothers and sisters if they fall outside your group, to disregard their claims for human rights. Jesus calls on behalf of them to become aware, to become awake. To think you are better because you are American is to disown the common parent of every other human being on the face of the planet. To think you are better because you are Christian and you don't have to examine yourself, but even worse than that, to trust your leaders. Don't you wish the followers of Saddam Hussein had asked questions? Don't you wish the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini had asked questions? Well they are wishing the same thing from you and you have got a whole lot more power than any of them have ever had. We are the most powerful people that have ever walked the face of the Earth. If we think in selfish, self-enclosed terms, we will do more damage than any other human group that has ever been. We don't have to be worse than other people. We have got so much power that mediocrity kills.

Christianity is that calling we hear, not to *leave* our group but to *transcend* our group. You are still in the boat, you are still in the storm, but you see one common light.

This is where the flower image comes in. It is from what is called *The Flower Sermon*. Buddha picked up a flower, now he is about to depart to die and he wants to choose the person who understands his teachings the best.

He picks up a flower and shows it to the assembled people and they did not understand. Only Mahakasyapa smiled. Buddha said I have in my hands the Doctrine of Right Action (keep in mind he is holding a flower). I have in my hand the Doctrine of Right Action, birth less, deathless, formless, inscrutable. It is beyond sacred texts, it does not need words to explain it. I give it to Mahakasyapa.

What that is saying is, if your religion allows you to see the worth of a flower, then you must have everything scripture talks about, everything meditation talks about, but if you would kick a dog it disqualifies. That means you haven't finished the work yet. The Buddha lifted up a flower and everybody else was having a head trip or looking for magical things or saying can I be it, but whoever saw the flower understood the rest of the teachings. Jesus did it with a child. Remember that when he lifts up the child? They are arguing who is going to take the place of Jesus. Who is the best Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic? Jesus, which is the right one? Jesus lifts up a kid and says look in this face and then we will know who is the real Christian, who is the real leader, who understands this calling on behalf of particularly the weak and the vulnerable.

If you have been given a religion of belief, I implore you to examine it because a religion of belief alone will come in conflict with everything you learn scientifically, it will come in conflict with every person who sees the world differently, and ultimately it will predispose you to do deeds that you cannot look in the mirror afterwards. When you look at the bottom of the well and you see the moon, when you look at your religion and you see your savior, whether it is Jesus or Buddha, you have to realize is that what you are really being called to see is the human face of every being you will ever meet. When you look at your problems, realize that you have transcended them in a way. You are not in the storm as you meditate or you pray about your problems--there is a part of you outside of the storm. When you see the one common reality that we all share you have also transcended the storm. But when you have no idea what to do when all you think you have is propaganda and you don't know where to turn remember four words and you will understand this story "Don't close your eyes."

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

Around the World in 40 Days Series

Part I: April 11, Hinduism; Luke 9:28-36, passages taken from the Bhagavad-Gita

Part II: April 18, Buddhism; Matthew 14:22-36, Jataka Tales, The Flower Sermon

Part III: April 25, Taoism; Philippians 2:5-11, Mark 10:42-45, Tao Te Ching

Part IV: May 2, Confucianism

Part V: May 9, Native American

Part VI: May 16, Judaism

Part VII: May 23, Islam

Part VIII: May 30, Can Atheism be "Spiritual?"



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