

LESSONS IN LIVING

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

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
April 25, 2010

First Reading: Philippians 2:5-11 (*The Inclusive Bible*)
Second Reading: Mark 10:42-45 (*The Inclusive Bible*)
Third Reading: From Tao Te Ching

The best of people are like water, which benefits all things and does not contend with them, which flows in places that others disdain, where it is in harmony with the Way. So the Sage lives within Nature, thinks within the deep, gives within impartiality, speaks within trust, governs within order, crafts within ability, acts within opportunity. Sages do not contend, and none contend against them.

I was in college when someone gave me the Tao Te Ching, and I recognized the words instantly. Did anybody here watch the show, "Kung Fu?" (laughter and raised hands) They spliced the sayings from the Tao Te Ching – the wonderful things that the Priest would say before they beat people up. The beating up part is the American part, the wisdom part is coming from the Taoist culture and what struck me right away is I'd never seen religion expressed impersonally, in terms of Nature, not in terms of invisible people. It would be like saying "the Nature within Nature is the Divine." It's sort of in the essence of things. It's like the grain in wood; it's like the DNA within a seed. It's the deep essence of things – the patterns that repeat all through Nature. And that was seen as the sacred.

Now, I don't know what that does for you, but for me, that felt – in studying the religions of the East -- like I was seeing grown up religion for the first time. Because when you construct the world and explain it with invisible people, the problem is it's hard to escape fear and supernaturalism. If I think of lightning as the sword of Zeus, (to use another religion so you won't get mad) poetically, that helps me grasp the grandeur of a bolt of lightning. Poetically, that's beautiful...but if I think it really is a sword, then when it hits my building, I've got some explaining to do. If it's the sword of Zeus that hits my building, then the village people are going to come with pitchforks, thinking that I've got a curse. You can't explain the world like that. And part of the crisis of modern theology is that instead of going and finding the deeper levels of these symbols which are embedded in our experience, we either move to reinforcing the invisible people and forcing people to say "yes" to creeds that make no sense to them, or jettison the whole thing and live only by the science and the physics – leave out the heart piece, leave out the poetry piece, leave

out the connection piece. Taoism reminds us that even within our own tradition, within Christianity, there is that potential for depth.

If we listen to the story the way that it was intended. Now, that's a very arrogant thing for me to say. I believe – and I don't think you can study the first centuries of the Church and wind up with a different conclusion, they purposefully chose symbols to talk about the invisible patterns behind our lives, and that's what they were talking about. I don't think they started going crazy until a couple of hundred years later. When we listen to the story of Jesus as a personal illustration of cosmic principles, which is how much of the early church heard it, a lot of the story is much more helpful. When I talk about the principles of the Universe, I'm not talking about rules and I'm not talking about abstractions. If you think of principles of religion as the sinews of love – as the architecture of loving and living - with which you are going deeper into the emotions, you're not jettisoning the emotions to choose some abstracted rules.

When we talk about Jesus being humbled, as in our story, that's not humiliation, it's not an individual being humiliated or punished. Instead, it's talking about the true worth of a human being which does not come from possessions, and sometimes, the only way you find that is when you don't have possessions. I have known many people who have lost their job, and lost what they had, and only then did they realize they did not want the life they were living anyway – that the derailment they had feared their whole lives was the first step into the life they had always wanted all along.

When the Bible talks about Jesus being crucified, this is also a richer image than the church has sometimes presented. I don't know if the theology works for you where God gets really mad at people and wants to hurt us really bad, and Jesus says, “no, Daddy, please don't hurt them, hurt me instead.” And the Cosmic Drunk Daddy says, “Well, I want to hurt them, but okay, if I can hurt you, then we'll call it even.” Am I being fair? (laughter) For many people, that idea of a vengeful, vindictive God has been what derailed them from theology in general. It's helpful to realize it was never intended that way at the start. Yes, it has been used that way, but it's talking at a deeper level and we'll get to that in a moment. And then, finally, when we're talking about salvation and atonement, to think about it personally, and the blood, redemption, and that kind of thing, it's kind of creepy. When we look at it in terms of a cosmic principle, I find it very exciting. (We'll see how you feel about that in a few moments.)

In our Taoist text, it talks about the best of people - or the Sage – it's hard to translate it, but the wise are like water it says...they take the lowest place, and therefore nurtures all beings. We can lose our life through success. In fact, part of what Jesus was trying to say on the Sermon on the Mount is that you can probably lose your life more easily through success than through failure. Because success can have you chasing after trophies that you don't even want. Have you ever gone to a carnival and found yourself wanting something that you would never buy in a store? You just keep trying and trying to get it. We're crazy animals and we can do that with our whole life if we're not careful...chasing after trophies! What do you do with a trophy? It's great for ten minutes...maybe a day or two, but after a while, it's just collecting dust and your heart is still empty. So when Jesus talks about humility, it's not about *robbing you*. It's about *freeing you* from something that doesn't feed your heart.

And furthermore – and this takes us to the second place, it keeps us from turning against one another for a trophy. In pursuit of the treasures of the culture, we can become vicious to one another. I love the story that when teachers go to other cultures, like the indigenous people here or sometimes in Asian populations, and they do a spelling bee...if the first kid misses a word, the rest of them will miss it, too, because they will not humiliate their friend. (Pagans! Right?) (laughter) I mean, you're a good Christian, but you will crush your competitor - even if they are your friend – in order to get the trophy. What the text says is that Jesus associated with oppressed humankind. It's not just that they are oppressed, but that they are human beings and the alternative is to become a part of the machine. And it starts so early in this

culture...to learn to turn against yourself, your friends, nature, everything to chase the Kewpie doll. Capitalism may or may not be a good economic system – we can disagree on that – but don't we all agree it's a bad religion...it's a bad cosmology...and it's killing the planet.

So, the cross is a symbol of the empire's threat against you finding your own heart. Remember, this was capital punishment. We've lost that it's become jewelry. "Have you seen my silver cross?" You know, comedians use this as comedic material. On electrocution in an electric chair, they say, "have you seen this beautiful cuff link I made with electric chairs?"...or they may talk about nooses. This represents a threat to you for standing up to being a human being, and not cooperating with the empire. I don't know if you've noticed or not, but you belong in an empire – you are in an empire. And, of course, we always have good reasons why we're going into other countries. So did Rome! Every empire has great reasons why they are in somebody else's country taking stuff...always! Do you think Hitler didn't have good reasons to go into Poland? It's always to get stolen land or to free somebody, and if anyone asked questions, they were attacking the troops. I mean, America has become like Cub Scouts. We're helping everybody, but we're helping the little old ladies across the street at gunpoint. (laughter) That's different. We're forcing them to cross the street, and then dipping into their purse for payback for our efforts. Rome did it, France did it, Spain did it...we're doing it.

What the cross symbolizes is your challenge to step out of whatever your country is, whatever your religion is, and to join universal humankind, and truth. So it says the cross doesn't just mean that God was just hurting Jesus. It means that Jesus would not be frightened away from love by being put in the same categories as the oppressed. If you stand with the oppressed, you will get the same punishment. You need to know that before you start advocating for anybody. What liberals typically do is advocate within our privilege and then bail if there's ever any heat. So you have one side that's just cannibalizing and another side that's hiding behind the bush. So the poor and the weak don't get a lot of help. The symbol of the cross is the world's threat against your heart. It's not an angry God, it's an angry empire, and a loving God, who was willing to hurt and suffer on behalf of the very weakest and the most voiceless and calls *you* to join that family. Now, that's frightening and you can't do it all at once. You may be able to turn and face your fear today, but can you run a little less fast?

Water goes to the lowest place. That's where the need is, and it nurtures all things. Have you ever been really depressed and have a dog come up to you and nuzzle you, and all of a sudden, everything was okay? In that kind of universal human experience when you have a dog that you love – and you're depressed – and the dog comes up and it makes everything okay. Now the dog doesn't make anything different. The dog doesn't say, "Let's go bite your boss. I'll make everything better." (laughter) It's the *Tao* of the dog, it's the *being* of the dog, and what the New Testament stories of the healings are about is your healing power as a human being...when you are human. I have that healing power for you...you have it for me. When we're human, we heal each other in ways we don't understand. I mean, it is a mystery. In Taoism, they think this is an irresistible force. Martin Luther King thought it was an irresistible force. The way they sometimes talk about it in the East is, when a fish wants to jump out of water, first it goes down and uses the buoyancy of the water to go back up again. When a bird wants to swoop down, first it goes higher and the buoyancy pushes it down. When you remember you are part of the whole, there is a power behind your life that goes beyond your efforts. When you live beyond the scope of your own little short life, and you live for the great principles, the fact that you don't win is almost irrelevant. You're going in the right direction. You're giving a torch to your brothers and sisters. And even if you fail a hundred times...in living well, you've done more to help the world than if you go the other direction. And if you live one day like that, your life is longer than if you do the living death of going the other direction.

I said it in the class: I'm stealing it from someone – Mel Gibson unfortunately, but you have no choice over whether you're going to die. You will die. The only choice you have is whether you will ever truly be alive, and the only way you can truly be alive is to live out of your greatest principles, imperfectly, of course. But you are only alive on that day that you have something that's worth dying for. That's when you know what your life is. Martin Luther King received a threat one morning. I'm going to read this. It's short, so I'm going to read it twice. It is so incredible. He's been told he's got a death threat. He's got kids, so you could understand if he said, "I need to put the family first." He was terrified. He was sometimes incapacitated with fear, but he realized he was selling his children out if he wasn't who he needed to be – that the best gift he could give them was to be fully human. He said this:

“If physical death is the price I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive.”

Will you hear this one more time and put the cross in this context:

“If physical death is the price I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive.”

Martin Luther King was [not] a different kind of person than you or me. Neither was Gandhi. They understood what human life is, and resolved to live out of their fullness regardless of cost. They believed that love is the most powerful, enduring force of the universe. Lao Tzu said “water, over time, conquers stone.” Who wouldn't choose the hard over the soft unless you think about it? Do you want to live the rest of your life for transient accomplishments that will be washed away as soon as you're gone, or do you want to give the permanent gift? If you want to give the permanent gift, you will choose softness over the hard, and your life will be very different. You will choose gentleness over violence, and you will give us a gift that will never go out.

When you hear the stories of Christ's humiliation, don't think of a person, think of all human beings in the universe, and how, when we become like water, we give life. When you read the stories of Jesus' miracle healings, don't think about magic tricks. Think of a gift that you have to heal me, and a gift I have to heal you when we come from our human heart. And finally, when you hear the stories about salvation and redemption, don't think of “Drunk Daddy,” think about the redemptive nature of human love...love that will not close its heart simply because it's afraid. Think of the gift the rest of your life will be if you realize that love is the most powerful and enduring force in the universe.

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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