

“No Scripture is Sacred”

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, May 16, 2010

“There are only four questions of value in life,” said Don Juan Demarco through the voice of Johnny Depp:

*What is sacred?
Of what is the spirit made?
What is worth living for?
And what is worth dying for?*

These are the very same questions to which the scriptures of the world’s religions offer an often detailed response. It is in these very details that we are often divided, even lost. All of the world’s religions originate in different contexts of culture and history. They all offer different paths to answer these same questions.

There are those – maybe some of you – who struggle with the question, “There are so many... How could I possibly choose between them?” There are those who find the scriptures of the world’s religions to be contradictory in their details, and who use those contradictions between texts to claim that the scripture they support must be the only correct one. And there are those who use those same contradictions to claim that none of the texts have any value at all. And there are others who refuse to engage with anything outside of the scripture that was given to them in their family, or that is most present in their culture, and choose to turn a blind eye to the diversity of the global experience of the Holy. They choose to turn a blind eye to what is sacred in this world.

Two stories from my own history come specifically to mind. First, I have a friend who was talking to her father about her father’s experience of parenting her. Maybe you have had the opportunity to be in a conversation like this – adult to adult with your own parent – it can offer opportunities to both connect and heal. It can also be a complete disaster. At one point, their conversation took a turn to the vulnerable, and my friend spoke of some of the choices that her father had made in his parenting, and how those choices had had a negative impact on her life. Obviously this was difficult for her father to hear. He quite flippantly responded, “Well it’s too bad there’s no manual on how to raise a child.”

My friend has a child of her own now, and that was actually one of the motivations for even having this conversation with her father in the first place: to learn from his mistakes, see what he would do differently, find out the reasoning behind some of the choices he had made. His response was frustrating to her on multiple levels, and he was not willing to, or could not yet recognize her

struggle. He did not seem to take any ownership in their difficulties. My friend's response to her father's comment was, "Actually, there are probably over 5,000 books on parenting and child rearing." And she thought, but did not say, "Could you not have at least read one?"

The other story I want to share with you this morning is this: I used to have a terrible habit of picking apart other people's certainty about their religion – even to the detriment of our relationship. It was awhile ago, and I have learned that is not how I choose to live. But I was working with a man, who I genuinely liked, and yet I could not understand how this very intelligent person could be so literal, so fundamentalist, in his Christian beliefs. It just didn't add up. For awhile, I think he found the dialogue between us interesting, and a challenge, until my questions started to get to him. I must admit, at the time I found this amusing. I would say things like, "Did you ever notice that they call Jesus *Jesus of Nazareth* when he was born in Bethlehem?"

I remember very clearly the last time we talked about religion. Our final conversation, before it became an off-limits topic in order for us to maintain our working relationship. One day, he told me that the reason he was a Christian was because he used to work in a neonatal intensive care unit, and he would see all of these newborn babies in various stages of health and disease. He said, "I could see in all of their eyes, *the light of God*." I remember having several thoughts at the time about why this didn't necessarily make him a Christian per se. (Maybe it made him a theist, but it was only his context that made him a Christian. If we had been in India it might have made him a Hindu.) Anyway, evidently I was feeling particularly feisty. Instead of finding the place where we agreed – the common ground of revering the miracle of life, the awe of a new life – I said, "but in your understanding of Christianity don't you believe that all children are born into sin? So those children couldn't have had the light of God in their eyes yet... right?"

My jaw dropped open when, instead of arguing with me, he gave all his power to the text – *one interpretation* of the text. Instead of allowing his direct experience of wonder and awe to hold significance against this contradiction, he said to his own defeat, "No... you're right. I must have been mistaken." It was a terribly sad moment – for both of us. Essentially, because of what was written (and so narrowly interpreted) he not only denied his own experience, but he was claiming to believe in a God who was actually less compassionate than he was! That God is way too small, for me to believe in.

What is held sacred in our culture is sometimes placed high on a shelf, protected from discernment, secured against violation and infringement, and immune from scrutiny. When scripture is held sacred in this way we lose the psychological truths embedded at its core. We lose the spirit of the text as a whole when it gets buried in the particulars. When scripture is held

sacred in this manner, we lose that which speaks to the human experience, and that which holds up to individual scrutiny and reflection. When scripture is held sacred in this way, it is often used as a weapon, with sections selectively chosen, to support arguments that divide rather than connect us. And then it does not hold up to diverse experiences – the diverse experiences that I believe are inherent in God’s creation. In order to lift up the reverence and veneration that is owed to the wise words of the world’s religions, we must take them off the shelf, take them out of the protective and fragile casing we created for them, and hold them up to the light of reason and experience, revealing their true divinity. A divinity that extends beyond the words between the cover; a divinity that lies between the reader and the text, and is not bound solely to the lines on the page.

Poet Laureate, Billy Collins asks us to

*take a poem and hold it up to the light
like a color slide or press an ear against its hive.
[to] drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,
or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.*

Why would we not also want to do the same with scripture? It only increases its value – its *sacredness* – when we seek the points where our lives and the text meet.

Collins continues:

*But all [some] want to do
is tie [it, bind it] to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.*

This is unfortunate, limiting God in this way, restricting the Holy.

One text that kept ringing in my ears as I have pondered this sermon this week has been John 1:1. You probably know it:

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

Based on the Greek, in the tense and case in which this verse appears, grammatically, this last phrase could read either, "the Word was God" or "the Word was a god." Some translations even preserve that sense of ambiguity with "the Word was divine." Or, one I really like:

what God was, the Word also was.

With this sermon I am left screaming YES YES! There was a time when the word *was* a God; when

the word was worshipped as God; when God was equal to the word, or at least that is how religion was lived out. But now?

The Christian scriptures go on to suggest that Jesus came and changed everything. He was the life – the *living* word. His visit to Earth broke those bonds that made the law infallible. He was the life – the one with whom we could be in relationship – a living being that was not bound to any text. Jesus who dined with tax collectors and prostitutes; the one who healed on the Sabbath. A carpenter who likely built crosses upon which others were hanged. Jesus, who struggled with his own path – with his own choices in life. Jesus, who was angry at times, and full of contradictions, and love, and forgiveness. Jesus, who led by example of holding his own life up to the law and made choices based on those involved – on the circumstance. Jesus, who did not deny his own experience, even when it contradicted his own Jewish teachings, and who struggled with those choices and his feelings of being forsaken by God.

It is in these stories; in these contradictions; in the struggle, that I find the Christian scriptures to be *the most* accessible – the most relevant to my own life, the most sacred, the most holy. It is in Jesus' struggle, not only with his divinity, but also with his humanity; in the struggle between his life and the law, that he has expanded my understanding of God.

So then why? Why do some choose to worship the Bible instead of the God toward whom it directs us? Even when it explicitly says not to place any idols before God. Why? Because it is old? Because their parents did? Because so many others claim its literal truth with such conviction? Because of the threat of what might happen to them if they do not? It is true, that there can be real consequences to moving away from the literal, including losing one's community and friendships, straining relationships with family. Not to mention, the difficulty of a path of uncertainty when the foundation of our lives crumbles beneath us and we must constantly rebuild our understanding of ourselves and our world – when we must reconstruct new meanings, and reconnect and re-learn how to trust our own experience of the world. Why is it, that in so many other areas of knowledge, we so easily see that we must filter our meaning making and pass it through the fire of our own experience?

It is so clear in other contexts that there is no single source when it comes to the describing the human experience. For example, when it comes to birth, you may not be surprised to know I have read at least 30 books on birth and the birth experience. And at the same time, I know in the depths of my being, and mothers are not shy about telling me, that it doesn't matter how many books I read. I have *no idea* what I am in for. I have no real concept of what my own birth experience is going to be like. And it seems so obvious... doesn't it? So why would we also not

hold up any text concerning our relationship to the sacred in this way as well? Why would we not be interested in the wisdom of those who have come before us and still give authority to our own discernment, our own intuition, our own experiences?

Are the scriptures important? Yes. Valuable? Yes. Enlightening, inspiring, strengthening, empowering? Yes, yes, yes, yes. Sacred? YES. Literally true for everyone? No. So where does *our* scripture, as religious liberals, come from, and what can we deem sacred?

I want to make sure that you walk away from this sermon clear that I do, in fact, hold scripture sacred. Not sacred as in untouchable, but sacred as in *holy*. Scripture is sacred when it points to the transcendent. When it directs us to truths that we could not have discovered on our own, and that enhance our connection to God. Therefore we might read our own lives, and relationships, and some conversations, and nature, as scripture as well. So if we can receive inspiration from *any* source does that mean we can believe *anything*? No. Our beliefs are held up to the accountability of a community and a consistency that encompasses the world's diversity. So when we look at our sources of scripture, first and foremost it is important that we *recognize* our cultural heritage. And this free religious tradition is grounded in, and has been built upon, the Bible. For many of us it is part of the air we breathe.

We may also gain inspiration from the world's religions, our own lives, our experience, poets, contemporary authors, the experience of those who have come before us, that mighty cloud of witnesses, art, film, even fiction. With this breadth of awareness, without a wall between the sacred and the secular, the possibility of how we might access the Holy opens up to a variety of influences and opportunity. As we search our values and look for the ways in which we are moved ever closer to the transcendent, or to ways in which we are opened up to feel as though we are part of something larger than ourselves, the sacred becomes *more* present, not less, and our concept of God grows to encompass a living word.

When we open up our idea of *sacred*, God becomes a dialogue, a relationship, a process that cannot be fixed in time. With this kind of freedom, God becomes what happens *between* the lines of scripture. And religion becomes the act of bringing our whole selves – warts and all – to the table. We expand, and our concept of God is no longer bound to the pages of a single text. This act of making meaning of our lives and our world is reflected in the Christian scriptures: in Genesis God spoke, naming the world into existence. Adam was delegated the power to name what was in that world – to make sense of it. This naming in its creation and its meaning-making is an active process. When it is no longer an event, a relationship, or a conversation; when it becomes fixed, a creed, and is no longer contextual or relevant, it is *no longer sacred*. When

scripture goes against a core value that we hold of inclusion, or love, or connection; when that meaning-making is exclusive; when scripture is the word without the process – the word without relationship, or context – it is no longer sacred, and therefore no longer valuable.

The scriptures of our free religious tradition have many things in common. They attempt to answer in some way one of the four questions of Don Juan de Marco:

*What is sacred?
Of what is the spirit made?
What is worth living for?
And what is worth dying for?*

The scriptures that we hold sacred answer these questions with lots of space – with room for us to bring our lives and our experience to the table – and for Don Juan the answer to all four questions that makes room enough for all of us is the same. This message can be found in *all* the world's religious texts. It is a process *and* a product of the living word. And I happen to agree with Don Juan. What is sacred? Of what is the spirit made? What is worth living for? And what is worth dying for?

Only love.

Amen.