

COULD THE GOSPEL BE MADE BETTER?

Rev. Jack Donovan - Unitarian Universalist Church St Petersburg - 7/16/17

READINGS (see end of sermon)

<u>Gathering</u>	<i>It Came Upon the Midnight Clear</i> , by Edmund Sears <i>The Second Coming</i> , by William Butler Yeats from <i>Gnomic Verses</i> , by William Blake
<u>Invocation</u>	<i>The Way</i> , drawn from the prophet Isaiah, ch. 58, 61
<u>Meditation</u>	<i>The Way</i> , drawn from Buddha's Deer Park Sermon & T.N. Hanh
<u>Reading</u>	<i>The Way</i> , drawn from the Gospel of Jesus, Luke ch. 4

CHILDREN'S TIME

Once long ago, a sister and brother lived on a farm – they were about 4 and 5 years old. They noticed the baby in the family was all messy after eating breakfast.

Mom was busy in the kitchen doing stuff, so they took the baby outside to the tub by the water pump and gave the baby a bath. The mom was watching through the kitchen window – and what did she see?

When the brother and sister finished washing the baby, the water was all dirty, so they were lifting up the tub to throw it in the creek, including the baby!

The mom opened the window and what did she yell? “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water!”

Ever throw the baby out with the bath water? Maybe you drop a cookie on the ground and it gets a little dirty and your house rule is you have to throw out the whole cookie? Or someone makes up a story, but you don’t listen because you know it’s not something that really happened?

For example, What did Wonder Woman believe in? Yes – she believed in love – the kind of love where you help people be safe and happy. Is Wonder Woman real? No, you’re right, she isn’t. But is what she believed still good?

What did Super Man believe in? Yes – he believed in justice – the kind of justice where you help people be safe and happy. Is Super Man real? Right, he is not. But is what he believed in still good?

By the way, the sister and brother didn't throw the baby out with the bath water. They rinsed off the baby and gently towed it dry and everything was okay on the farm.

SERMON

This morning I would like to share with you an audacious inquiry: Is it possible that the gospel could be made better? Let me tell you something of how I came to that question.

Sometime in the mid-1990s, a biblical scholar named John Dominic Crossan, who was a former Catholic priest of twelve years and then twenty-five years a famous academic and author, held a day-long seminar for a group of Florida Unitarian Universalist ministers. I was very pleased to be there as one of those ministers.

Dominic Crossan is important in the historical research about Jesus and his followers and their social, political, and economic times. In 1985 he co-founded the Jesus Seminar, a gathering of about 150 scholars engaged in the historical and literary critique of Biblical writings. They came together over a twenty year period to pool their research on the likely authenticity of the various gospel passages about the words and deeds of Jesus.

The main product of their work was an exactly non-doctrinal translation of the gospels. In publishing their translation, each verse was color-coded as to the degree of confidence they scholars had in the verse's authenticity. The color was based on the voting of the scholars – Red for Yes, this verse was probably what Jesus said or did; Pink for Yes, this was probably close to what he said or did; Gray for No, not likely his words or deed, but in keeping with his ideas; and Black for No, not in keeping with his words or deeds and probably added by the Christian community in the hundred years after his death for doctrinal or political purposes.

The criteria which the scholars applied as supporting authenticity were:

- The passages were found in multiple independent writings;
- They had the catchy concise quality of coming from an oral tradition;
- They demonstrated irony, deemed characteristic of Jesus' teaching;
- They evidenced a fundamental trust in the caring of God for life, also deemed characteristic of Jesus' teaching.

The criteria which the scholars applied as revealing non-authenticity were:

- They were self-referential (as in "I am the way, the truth, the life"), deemed uncharacteristic of Jesus' teaching;
- They reflected later church politics (eg, issues of leadership and in-out status).

Critical biblical scholarship has a history that goes back to the Renaissance and Reformation and perhaps in some ways to the earliest days of establishing the Christian canon (which is the scripture officially recognized as authentic and governing). But as far as I know, no denomination paid critical scholarship any heed and such scholarship did not dare enter into the

public discourse until Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing advocated for it brilliantly in his 1819 sermon, "Unitarian Christianity" – the most widely distributed pamphlet in America at the time next to Thomas Paine's "Common Sense". The thinking in that sermon precipitated the founding of the American Unitarian Association in 1825.

The next step in biblical criticism and authentication might be said to be the idea of identifying a research-based "real Jesus." That idea seems to have come fully into the public eye when another Unitarian, the world-famous Dr. Albert Schweitzer, published his 1906 study entitled, The Quest of the Historical Jesus.

So, some twenty years ago, Dr. John Dominic Crossan spoke for a full day to us UU ministers, most of whom had read at least two of his several books, The Historical Jesus (1991) and Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography (1994). The scholarship and integrity of his presentations that day were riveting, as were his personal struggles with their implications.

Toward the end of the afternoon session, one of the ministers asked a bombshell question: "Dominic, are you still a Christian?" Dr. Crossan paused, then answered, "No." He paused a bit more, then said, "It's too hard." We all sat in silence, including Dominic Crossan, all seemingly stunned by his willingness to reveal, though not by the revelation itself.

More silence. Then one of the ministers, perhaps uncomfortable with silence, asked an unrelated question and we moved on, leaving me to wonder ever since: "What do you mean by 'It's too hard'?"

What do you think he meant - this gentle, profoundly informed, rather monkish admirer of Jesus, sitting in front of a semi-circle of Unitarian Universalist ministers - saying with his soft Irish accent, "No. It's too hard"? Was it:

- an historian's objection to some church inquisitorial doctrines often at odds with the life and teachings of Jesus?
- an intellectual's objection to some core dogma requiring a leap of faith contrary to science, reason, or belief in a loving God?
- an economist's objection to the negative parts of church history, like the crusaders' anarchy loosed upon the world in service to empire?

Or quite to the contrary, was it:

- a deeply examined and humbled sense of being unable to live up to Jesus' way of unconditional self-sacrifice and caring?
- or, the rigorous discipline Jesus' way seemed to require – fasting, prayer, celibacy, poverty?

- or, was it too hard to believe there is a caring God when the scholar's life seems to testify differently – violence and economic depression in his Irish childhood, horrific war across Europe in his youth, the death by sudden heart attack of his brilliant beloved wife?

“It's too hard.” What did he mean? Was something essential missing from the Gospel?

In the centuries since Rome took over leadership of the Church, many voices have noted that something is wrong or something is missing. This October 31st on All Saints Eve, we will celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Reverend Father Martin Luther nailing the 95 Theses of his “Disputation on Indulgences” to the door of All Souls Church. Thus began the Reformation. But also, thus began the Reformation's consequent bloody wars. Was something missing in the Gospel?

At Christmas we will sing “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”, Unitarian minister Edmund Sears' Christmas lament in 1849 over the Mexican American War, conflict-ridden Europe, and brutal slavery in the United States. Despite the angels' song of love, wrote Sears, “have rolled two thousand years of wrong.” Is something missing in the Gospel?

And not infrequently we hear William Butler Yeats' poem “The Second Coming,” spoken from the despair and horror of Christian Europe engulfed in World War I – “Things fall apart – the center cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, a blood-red tide.... Surely the Second Coming is at hand.... Now I know that twenty centuries of stony sleep were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, and what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

Is this what we've done with the Prince of Peace? Will the holocausts ever end?. Is something missing in the Gospel?

Okay, what is the Gospel? Do we know? Well, the word “gospel” is the English translation of the Greek “euangelion” meaning “good news.” If we take Jesus' word for it, as in Luke 4, the good news is what the prophet Isaiah said after the exile: The power of God is with us and in us, constantly restored if we open ourselves to receive it (and, as I've heard said and do believe, the power of life is always knocking to get in). And this good news and the power to make life better expands if we use it to bless any who need blessing, any who suffer, be it ourself or any other.

That seems to be the good news that Jesus himself embraced and lived and taught. The good news is the light of God in you and you a light to the world, to help the world find comfort and joy, peace and good will. Only ask and you will receive the divine power to make life better, to make a world of caring and blessing, to make a heaven on earth.

Is that not Isaiah's and John's and Jesus' good news?

But it hasn't worked – not for the Hebrews and Abraham and Moses, not for Israel and Isaiah and Micah, not for Jesus and the people of the Way, not for Luther and the Reformation, not for the Pilgrims and their City on a Hill, not for Martin Luther King and his Dream.

Is it too hard to follow Jesus' Way to Heaven on Earth? What is missing? We must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Did we miss the way? Is something missing from the Way, the good news? Can the good news be made better? Let's backtrack to see if we can see.

What did Jesus do to find The Way? First of all, we must acknowledge, he was born a very lucky boy. He was born under a repressive empire, but he had nurturing helpful parents with very high expectations of human potential's greatness. If our sense of divinity and of self comes from our parents' ways of being, could Jesus have been any luckier than with Mary and Joseph as parents? Is that attitude in parenting part of The Way? Can we intend such familial luck for everybody?

Second, Jesus was lucky in being born into a people with a hopeful, yet inquiring, even cosmopolitan, tradition and spirit that affirmed his prophetic attitude of - "I want to know The Way." Is that societal attitude part of The Way? Can we intend such societal luck for everybody?

Third, he did some things for himself independently. As a youth, he sought out education from the wise in the Temple. As an adult, he publicly committed to The Way by undergoing the purifying rite of baptism. Then he went to the wilderness to confront in himself all the obstructions and diversions that Waylay the human spirit and human commitment – these being the insatiable and fatal cravings for ultimate and absolute power over the body, nature, and society.

When he left the wilderness he had been transformed, filled with the empowering spirit of life, ready and willing to follow the way to heaven on earth as it was now in him. He had found the way to The Way, the way to make use of the good. He came from his wilderness and went and taught The Way in word and deed.

But he did not live long enough to teach the way to The Way. He did not live long enough to teach how he transcended life's obstructions and diversions. How did he find that way? Is that's what's missing from the good news?

Perhaps what happened in the wilderness holds the clue. Perhaps what we need is for many of us to go to the wilderness long enough to learn the

lessons of the still small voice within. Perhaps it is necessary to go to the wilderness to appreciate the relationship between the source of power and the power in one's self and one's others. Perhaps it is necessary to make quiet peace with our inner voices and spirits and longings and fears, so as to hear the song of sacred power within – not vexing us to nightmare, but awakening us to see the heaven on earth that is so near we can touch it.

From Jesus' upbringing and his wilderness time, we know these things about what may be missing from the good news for many: the necessities of receiving nurturance, high expectations, hope, a sense of inquiry, and wise teachers – and giving to life a commitment and devotion to those high expectations and using all these factors cumulatively as a way to The Way

Mystic poet William Blake called humankind to "love without the help of anything on earth". Perhaps that is the greatest potential born in you from the beginning and what is missing is knowing how to fulfill it. So many just haven't awakened to how to do it.

I think the mystics, the wilderness people of all cultures, know what's missing from The Way of the gospel. It is what they do, and perhaps sometimes have to learn to do, during their time in the wilderness. It is a way of keeping persistent appreciative attention on the life-creating energy within. You can learn of it from the contemplatives like Father Thomas Keating or the meditatives like the Dali Lama. You could see it in the Buddhist monks who were here a few months ago, carrying on such a teaching of the way to The Way from very ancient times. The Buddha did live long enough to teach it. But it seems to be the way to The Way that Isaiah knew and Jesus walked to bring heaven on earth. Three simple steps – time-consuming, but blissful:

Step one, understand life. Ask what is truly real and truly good – then with long patient observation come to understand that you cannot retain ultimate control over anything – not your life, not nature, not society - for everything by its nature is changing except for the divine energy of nature itself which forms everything else. No ultimate control, except perhaps your attitude.

Step two, live well. Live for the good in thought and word and deed and livelihood – that is, in attitude. Live as the divine energy itself abides, so as never to hurt and always to help – because to hurt and not help takes you away from heaven in your heart and on earth.

Step three, watchfully tend this energy, this grace. Always keep watch over the flow of energy that supports your mind and consciousness – let nothing obstruct or divert your attention from taking care of the deep peaceful joyful self-energy in you and everyone. "Little creature, formed of joy and mirth, Go, love without the help of anything on earth" – that is the spirit of life that is already in you.

That, I believe, is the way to The Way that has been missing from the gospel. Go to the wilderness and learn to understand life. Return and live ever helpfully. Tend and keep clear the divine life power in you, always fully ready to give of that boundless power for the blessing of life.

John Dominick Crossan is 83 now. He continues to be in demand to lecture about the good news and what it meant historically for Isaiah and Jesus – to use our power to bring help to the poor in body or spirit. He identifies as Christian now. But his life of seeking, and teaching how to seek, seems to me to be his true answer to what he is and also to what is missing from the good news. Nothing is missing – except enough people knowing the way to live the good news Way truly. It seems the good news is actually a prophetic covenant. If we can catch the simplicity of it, it won't be too hard – maybe not hard at all. Then it may yet spread and be fulfilled. Our lives are the answer. As it is written, we shall see.

READINGS

Opening drawn from the prophet *Isaiah* chapter 58 and 61

From this day and from one another,
may the holy spirit of life send us to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the prisoners,
to comfort all who mourn.

May we build up the ruins, raise up the devastated generations,
be the hands of a holy spirit.

May this be the way we choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo and break every yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, to share our bread with the hungry,
to house the homeless, to cover the naked.

May our light break forth
and our healing spring up;
may we be like a fruitful garden,
a spring whose waters never fail.

Meditation *The Way*, adapted from Buddha's Deer Park Sermon & T.N. Hanh

May all beings have caring.

May all beings have happiness.

Our suffering comes from craving.

Our peace comes from not hurting.

Our love comes from helping.

Our happiness comes from appreciation of each moment.

Breathing in, I appreciate;

Breathing out, I appreciate.

Every moment, this is the way.

READING *The Way*, adapted from the Gospel of Luke (ch. 4)

Jesus, full of the holy spirit, was led by the spirit into the wilderness where for forty days he fasted and confronted the human temptations to seek power over Nature, Society, and God. When he finished, he was filled with the power of the spirit and he returned to Galilee.

He began to teach in the synagogues, as in Nazareth, where he read from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of God is upon me, sending me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim release for the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and liberty for the oppressed, to proclaim God's year of restoration of equal rights."

Then he said "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. So redirect your way, for the realm of heaven is within our reach."