

SERMON: "INTIMATE WITH INFINITY"

The four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - written by unknown authors several decades after Jesus died, are not histories of the life of Jesus. Rather, the Gospels are efforts of early followers of Jesus to tell the distilled truth of his life, his work, his death, and his lasting significance. Each has a different emphasis, but all of them are concerned with strengthening the faith of other early followers. They are not biography, but each is a witness of faith.

The fact that Jesus lived, taught, gained followers, made enemies, was crucified and died:- all of this is a piece of human history. Similarly, we can reasonably believe that he taught using parables and stories - stories like The Good Samaritan - and it is reasonably likely that the parables and stories he told were repeated orally many times by his followers before they were written down.

Jesus was a human, a historical person, and he changed history by his life and by his teachings. The point is the simple one that our understanding of history helps to anchor us to life. Human history is part of the way that we create the meaning of our lives.

For mainstream Christians, Jesus is the central event of history. He represents the culmination of God's activity. For most Unitarians, however, Jesus is only one exemplar, one teacher, one incarnation of a divine/human creativity.

Other men and women have so attuned themselves to life, to the Source of Life, that they too have ennobled it, have contributed to the development of human history, and can inspire us in our living.

Each of us has different heroes of faith. Think of Socrates, Moses, the Old Testament Prophets like Amos and Jeremiah; think of Gautama the Buddha, Lao-Tzu, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Junior, Albert Schweitzer, Norman Vincent Peale.

The creativity of other people has enhanced our world. Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, and the other great composers; Da Vinci, Rembrandt and the other great artists. And so on.

Each of us could compile a list of a hundred names of people whom we admire - whom we might seek to emulate in some way for their contribution to the rich and complex fabric of our world, our history, our society.

At the same time, it is of course true that human history has its share of villains - people who do not deserve our respect or admiration; whom we should not seek to emulate.

Think of Nero, Hitler, Idi Amin, Ferdinand Marcos, Pol Pot; think of the innumerable despots, tyrants, oppressors, persecutors, torturers, and so on.

For some people, certainly, life seems to deal out more brutality, injustice, hardship and inhumanity than love, justice, comfort and creativity. But, we cannot read human history as being exclusively the story of "nature red in tooth and claw". To do that is to read human history with only one eye - and a blinkered, cynical eye at that.

We need to read human history with both eyes, and with balanced vision. Then we will see creative genius emerge, even from all that is evil, wrong, unjust. We will see human nobility and self-sacrifice.

We will see, over and over again, that the human spirit is bold and strong, and that freedoms can be won. Not inevitably - it is often a delicate balance and a fragile freedom. But we can be witnesses of love, and of the triumph which results from the efforts of ordinary mortals to establish peace and justice.

Those ennobling threads of history can add both to our appreciation of our world and to our understanding of ourselves. The history of our free religious faith is part of the larger story of human history, and it can be a sustaining and inspiring force in building and developing our faith.

Ours is a tradition of free-thinking. It is a tradition which combines the tender heart with clear thought and with tough-mindedness. We are among the inheritors of a noble tradition of religious liberalism and social activism. It is part of our inheritance to help to uncover the light within every human soul and to let it shine; we are here to proclaim not hell but hope and courage, and we are here to help to bring our proclamation into effect.

The stories of our heroes of faith are part of the human story - part of our story, which is human history - and those stories bring light to the darkest night of oppression, ignorance, despair. They witness to the humanly possible. They witness to the fact that we are co-creators with the divine, and that it is human beings like us who shape history for both good and ill.

So, the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels is part of the historical record. Like him, we too share a divine spark in our souls - each one of us. Jesus was a human being, like you and me. Jesus was at the same time divine, like you and me.

NOTE: I said Jesus was divine like us - not that we are divine like him.

Jesus was divine like us because he was human like us -

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because he shared with us, though perhaps in greater measure than many of us combined, all the qualities which make us divine.

We can rejoice that Jesus was so full of God in his life - so "God-intoxicated" - that he left an impress upon history in such a way that at times we can see in him the god (the good) that is within ourselves.

The historical dimension of our lives might be seen as a subset of the larger cosmic story of the universe come to awareness.

The inter-personal dimension of our lives is of a slightly different order, because it is in meeting each other that we meet God.

Alice Walker in The Color Purple put it:

Tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God. ... God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself, even if you are not looking, or don't know what you are looking for.

The human dilemma is that we yearn for intimacy, for openness, for strength from another; we yearn to share our hurts, our fears, our loneliness. But, at the same time we may be too scared to risk; or to commit; or to take down the defences; or to remove the masks which we so carefully construct.

Certainly, some people are happy and comfortable being alone. The social distancing restrictions of the recent coronavirus lockdown were easy for people of an introvert nature, some of whom said they had been practising for years! For some, the company of the stars is sufficient unto itself; for some the companionship of heroes of past ages is sustaining enough. But most of us long for the human touch.

Rev Robert F Kaufmann wrote:

Touch me.
Don't just hold me.
Don't respond to my
 angry words
 or anguished cries.
Don't answer
 words of doubt
 or love
 with softly spoken
 assurances.
Hear instead
 my silence.
Let me know
 you know
 that I am.
Let me reach you.
Touch me.

And, sooner or later, most of us find courage to extend a trembling hand and are able to foster the emergence of friendships. If we are lucky enough, we may find one or two soul mates to accompany us through our days. But, the experience of loneliness is always open to us - whether single or married; in relationship or not; whether or not we are a member of a family or group.

In his book I And Thou, Martin Buber considered how it might be possible to speak about mutuality and about the sacred or the holy. He wrote:

I can only point indirectly to certain scarcely describable events in human life where spirit was encountered.

He wrote about mutuality - what he called the "I-Thou" relationship - the holy dimension when heart speaks to heart, soul to soul, mind to mind. It occurs when two people see and understand each other as subjects, as persons, as individuals, not simply as objects to be used.

This kind of mutuality - this holy dimension of the "I-Thou" relationship - happens sometimes, although not necessarily or exclusively, in marriage, and in similar relationships such as de facto or same sex partnerships.

It happens for some, but not all, in our relationships

Some people are not emotionally or psychologically well suited to parenthood; others know both hard work and much joy through their children.

The mutuality about which Martin Buber wrote - the "I-Thou" relationship - the holy dimension of inter-personal relationships - is not limited to spouses, lovers, partners, parents, children, friends, physical neighbours, or co-workers.

There is the wider social dimension which Jesus, in his story of the Good Samaritan, declared for everyone to see.

We are to serve one another
reach out to one another
love one another.

The ethic of compassion and charity/love is presented in the simplest possible terms, but it is a compelling force and a call which demands our attention.

A life of service is self-authenticating; it is a reward in itself, and requires no validation from outside sources. History tells us that, but more than that our hearts know it.

"Love your neighbor," wrote Martin Buber; "he or she is like you."

Yes, I admit that society often militates against such a social ethic of mutual concern and care. Yes, we may have struggles within ourselves sometimes, doubting the wisdom of the ethic because we can become preoccupied with our own petty concerns. Yes, we can be selfish and self-centred.

Yet, part of the truth and the genius of our lives is the same as the truth and the genius of the life of Jesus. As we give of ourselves, we receive. Isn't that what being a parent means? Isn't that what the experience of being in love (not "falling" in love, which has connotations of suddenness, drama, uncontrollability - but being/Being/living in love, ie loving actively, not passively) is - or should be about?

Isn't that the kind of relationship we hope we might have with our parents when we are grown into adulthood, and with our children when they are grown into adulthood and can become closer to us because they are no longer tied by the bonds of dependency?

Isn't it all about trying to achieve and experience a mutuality of giving and receiving? Not giving in order to receive, but receiving in and by the very act of giving.

In our hearts, don't we know that we are brothers and sisters on this planet, with obligations towards each other?

It is not always easy to hold onto that truth. It is not always easy to know how best to act upon that truth in our complicated world. But, as religious people, we must indeed affirm that are truly neighbours.

When I knew him the 1980s, Rev Bruce Southworth was Minister of the Community Church of New York, USA. In a sermon, "Meeting God" preached on 23 March 1986, Bruce said:

Judaism taught that God acted in history and Christianity concurred. Even liberal religionists might concur although we see the divine in many - not one - human events of freedom and liberation. Judaism, however, taught that God could not be seen and no graven image should be painted or sculpted. Christianity said otherwise. God was incarnate in Jesus. In that human being was the divine.

We, in our tradition, have gone a step further. We meet the sacred in one another, that is, we are able to do that awesome thing. We come to church to share God; we bring God with us into this place and wherever we go each day.

And Adrienne Rich affirms the power we have with one another, of so simple a thing as a touch, when she writes:

"a touch is enough to let us know we're not alone in the universe, even in sleep."

Bruce finished his sermon by telling this parable:

An old rabbi once asked his students how one could recognise the time when night ends, and day begins.

"Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?" one student asked. "No," said the rabbi.

"Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a date palm from a fig tree?" another student asked. "No," said the rabbi.

"Then, when is it?" the students asked.

"It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or your sister there. Until then, night is still with us."

We become intimate with infinity - we come to know God - as we establish the mutuality of Buber's "I-Thou"; as we build interpersonal relationships on sharing, compassion and concern rather than selfishness and greed; as we come to see each other human being as a sister or brother; as we develop our social ethic in a life of giving, sharing and service; as we become truly a neighbour to our neighbour.

I finish with words from a prayer entitled "Divine Kinship"
by Richard M Fewkes:

We do not know how or why, but Something beyond our selves has brought us into being, has fathered and mothered us all, and sustained us all our days. We are made aware of our kinship with the Divine, our fragile human spirit an image and reflection of the Infinite Spirit which dwells in all.

O Thou Who art the Depth of Life within us, make us One with Thee in mind and heart and body. Restore us to our rightful selves. Heal the brokenness of our fragmented lives. Enable us to channel the forces of destruction and evil within ourselves and the world to the upbuilding of life and the enhancing of beauty. Let the Oneness of the Infinite Life within all be made manifest in us and in the life of the world. May love become the law of our being, even the love of God made known by a Son of Man of long ago.

Amen.

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