

What it Means to be a Liberal Christian

Jamaica Plain, August 12, 2007, Peter Connolly

Today's sermon is entitled "What It Means to Be a Liberal Christian," but really, of course, it is "What It Means to me to Be a Liberal Christian." I am vitally interested, though, in what it means to you to be a liberal Christian-- even if you are not one. What does the expression mean to you? Take a moment, if you don't mind, and, on the index card you were given when you entered and with the pencil I hope you also received, write a line or two as to what the expression "liberal Christian" means to you. At the sermon's end, we'll take some time to talk about your responses.

In preparation for today's service, I asked a few friends what their definitions were. I was particularly struck by the response of my friend Lee Jones, a former classmate from Andover Newton, and ordained as a minister last year into the American Baptist tradition. He declined to talk about "liberal" Christianity, but he said that Christianity, for him, was not a religion, but a relationship-- the relationship that God seeks with humanity. This idea is beautifully expressed in a number of places, but perhaps no more movingly than by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: His Philosophy of Judaism is called *God in Search of Man*. I start here in my examination of today's topic because it marks a crossroads in the philosophies of today's liberal Christians: Does our faith constitute our search for a relationship with God, as elusive as that reality is? Or does it constitute our response to God's search for a relationship with us? My guess is that, for most of us, the search starts with our questioning and our searching and our hope for a response.

I grew up in a Christian tradition-- the Christian tradition, we were taught, by which, of course, I mean the Roman Catholic tradition-- or more precisely, the Boston Irish style of Roman Catholicism. And I am grateful that I grew up in a religious tradition, that my hunger for a relationship with God was given a form and came with a tradition and that we were given an opportunity to explore that tradition through religious education.

At a certain age, though, the answers were no longer sufficient, my honest questions were met with impatience and a kind of self-indulgent petulance. At a certain stage, the institutional nature of the vehicle for inquiry became an obstruction rather than a light and my relationship with Jesus was obscured by my relationship with the institution. And anyway, by age 18, I was desperate to spread my wings and begin a larger search, more expansive and more invigorating, so I turned to books critical of the church in a way to gain a foothold for freer inquiry.

It was only after 20 years of being unchurched that I found the place where we sit today, a place which has allowed me free inquiry, fostered the impetus that fueled my search and given me a church community. In this Unitarian Universalist church with its liberal Christian grounding, I got to explore again what the Christian tradition might mean in my life. In this, I am perhaps, a reconstructed Christian. It is from that perspective that I come again into a sense of Christian identity-- in search for a relationship with God.

To be a Christian means to know the Christian story as told through the gospels, through the letters of Paul and others and through the Book of Revelation. It means, too, to have a working knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, the so-called "Old Testament" and a sense of how the New Testament is related to it. To be a liberal Christian means, as well, to be an educated Christian. A fundamentalist has an understanding of the Bible as a unified document that is literally true. A liberal Christian, generally, cannot hold to this--it strikes too deep a blow at the rational and, as inheritors of Enlightenment thought, the rational is where we feel grounded, is what reassures us of a place in the universe where we can participate as autonomous beings. A liberal Christian is an educated Christian--educated in the context through which Christianity came into the world.

We know and follow as a guide to life the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. At the same time, we know of course, that there was no "Jesus." There was a boy named Yeshua, a Jewish boy born to a young Jewish woman named Miriam into the culture of Palestine in the so-called "Middle East" two thousand years ago. We know and we remember that he spoke an ancient tongue called Aramaic and a version of Greek that was not that of the

educated class, but enough to do business within a culture complicated-- and largely formed by, an imperialist occupation, that of the Roman Empire. The Romans spoke no Aramaic, the Jews no Latin-- everyone made do with a rough street Greek. Jesus, in other words, was, in part, the product of a culture, and his pronouncements were within a cultural context. A liberal Christian seeks to find what is timeless in the teaching and to have the good sense to separate it from cultural mores.

To know Christ is to know this man Yeshua and the culture of these Jews. It means to think on these things: What is the heroic response to being subject to the will of a foreign power? What does it mean to live as a people with no settled sense of place, no sense of "nationhood?" What does it mean to feel "There is no place for me?" What does it mean to teach as a homeless man? (Matthew 8:20: "The Son of Man hath nowhere to lay his head"). What does it mean to know poverty, isolation, despair-- and to persevere with a teaching of tolerance and love?

Jesus taught in provocative ways-- the parable is provocative-- are we ready to be provoked? Jesus taught that a secular culture has values that need to be questioned and challenged-- do we dare question the secular culture in which we are immersed? Do we dare challenge its values? Jesus questioned the established authority-- because he had a passion for truth. At what point do we succumb to established authority? At what point does our passion for truth demand Christian action?

Jesus possessed sheer insight into the character of humanity, a fragmented character torn asunder internally by passions for power, for worldly goods and status, for comfort, for a smug conceit disguised as a "position in society." Jesus had a passion and it was a passion for justice. A liberal Christian-- any kind of Christian-- has a passion for justice. For one friend I spoke with in the past couple of weeks, this alone is the meaning of liberal Christianity-- to work for social justice. Well, that's part of it, but not all of it. As we do this work, is it with a passion? Or are we worn down by cynicism in a culture that makes us skeptical of incremental change? When Jesus got worn down, he went on retreat in the hills and fasted and prayed and found renewal. We seek and find renewal on

the Sabbath. We gather together. We find ourselves in spiritual community. And what do we do then? That's an active question for us to ponder together.

The world of the twenty-first century is not the world of the first century. The culture we live in is quite aware of itself as a culture-- obsessively so, we may say. We are in touch by telephone, mobile phone, pager, walkie-talkie-- in some ways we need never be apart. We e-mail and web-surf and blog; we comment, we critique, we comment on each other's critiques, we critique each other's comments. We are masters of irony. We talk about our mastery of irony. We are imbued in a culture of self-consciousness. We are acutely aware of our desires, our opportunities to fulfill our desires, our physical needs, our luxuries, our images, our self-definitions. If we identify as Christians, it is within a determinedly secular culture: we are counter-cultural. To be a liberal Christian means to swim against the tide.

Captive to this culture, how do we make sense of the language of Jesus and the priorities he taught? What do we understand by "God, the Father?" By the word "heaven?" Or "the eternal?" Or "discipleship?" Or "the end-time?" What do we understand is meant by the term "Messiah?" Does the story of Jesus make sense without "the passion?" What does "the passion" mean? What do we mean by "the Holy Spirit?" What do we make of the miracle stories? Do we really believe in the bodily Resurrection? Did Jesus really raise from the dead his friend Lazarus who lay rotting in the grave for three days? A liberal Christian must, I believe, come to terms with all of these questions and more. We cannot just believe those things which seem to us beautiful and true, sublime and transcendent. We need an answer to the question "Does Jesus save?" And we need to know for ourselves what salvation is.

One of the explanations for the miracle stories is that they descend from a mystical tradition where such things merely attest to the power of the mystery that lies behind the way the Divine makes Himself known in the world. The stories are the work of the imagination and the imagination is the repository of the transformational-- nothing extraordinary can exist without its birth in the imagination. It is a facet of a world-view

that does not worship the merely rational, the predictably scientific. It is poetic, in a word-- it refuses to be confined to the merely literal.

Some refer to the "Christian myth." This term infuriates not just the literalists, but many sincere and "liberal" Christians. Their reaction may be based on a prejudice against the word. The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory says a "Myth explains how something came to exist. Myth embodies feeling and concept." "Many myths... are primitive explanations of the natural order and cosmic forces." "A myth conveys a psychological truth." There are truths that run deeper than literal truths. The truth of myth is a truth in spirit, an anthropological truth, a human truth; it can be a religious truth.

When Jesus refers to "Heaven," I think of "the place where justice rules and where, therefore, there is peace." When Jesus speaks of joining the Father in Heaven, I think he means just this, traversing to the place where peace and justice reign. It is a matter of indifference to me whether such a place really exists as a locus in time. The words hold a powerful enough meaning for me that they are enough.

When Jesus refers to "Father" I hear him referring to Creator, a male deity, an idea that grew from living in a patriarchal culture. What other concept would Jesus have had for understanding Creation? The word he uses for father is "abba," a word of tenderness as well as respect, a word like "Dad," "Papa," or even "Daddy." Jesus has an intensely personal understanding of the Creator, the God of justice, the God of love. He feels a real and personal relationship that makes us examine our "concept" of God, that makes us seek for a relationship with not this concept, but this God, this Dad, this Papa.

Myself, I believe in the power of the holy spirit. I am aware of the times when stillness is a tangible presence; I am aware of a moment in the midst of a conversation where everything stops and a deep realization spreads and deepens in community; I am aware when the pace and rhythm and beauty of a hymn sung even in this church makes known the presence of the holy spirit. In the midst of the sublime there is nothing in my rational

mind that seeks a definition or wants data to substantiate the experience. And I am aware of the power of grace.

Well, I don't intend to unpack or "deconstruct" each of the terms I've mentioned here. And, in fact, I'm still looking for ways to understand some of them-- many of them. But that's the beauty of a liberal understanding of a "faith journey." I am not, we are not, moving to certainties. I am moving towards ever unfolding understandings. I proceed in the direction of the question. I explore, I ponder, I seek understanding. I want my faith to be meaningful and the gifts of imagination as well as intellect should guide me. The revelations I gain through the Christian tradition are the marks of a journey of faith.

It is a journey of faith and hope and love-- and the greatest of these is "love." This is a word that has been so much used that its depth, its breadth, its texture has been lost to us in these times. How do we rescue it? How do we grant it meaning?

I invite you to join me in a short exercise as we bring this investigation to its next phase, in response and discussion. Please place your hands together in the form of a cup. And sit in silence as you imagine this cup filled with water, cool and crisp and fresh. A pitcher fills this cup as you sit and the freshness fills and overflows your hands. You wait with reverence appropriate to this fundamental element of living. Wait till water seeps through the cracks between your hands. Wait while its coolness drips upon you and around you and refreshes your spirit. Smile in the spirit of love. And release... You love and are loved. How simple is the message of Jesus captured in the Gospel of Matthew 11:28-30:

"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly of heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."