

***FAITH AND HUMAN NATURE***  
**© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine**  
**University Congregational Church**  
**March 15, 2009**

**Reading: Psalm 19: 7 – 10 (NRSV)**

**The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;  
the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.  
more to be desired are they than gold;  
sweeter also than honey,  
and drippings of the honeycomb.**

The other day I was reading a sermon by the Rev. Dr. William Ellery Channing. Dr. Channing was speaking before the congregational ministers in Boston, Massachusetts in 1816. The sermon was entitled, “War,” and his text was Isaiah 2:4. “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Channing began his argument with some of the more obvious reasons why war is fundamentally evil, such as the destruction of cropland, the deaths of soldiers, the creation of widows and orphans, and the total havoc leveled against urban settings. But the knowledge of such destruction is not sufficient to avert us from war and its consequences. Dr. Channing believed that there is something about the human being that is ripe for warfare. He did not mean anger, or greed, or fear. Rather, argued

Channing, the human mind engages in warfare and conflict because the human mind is too often bored and not sufficiently challenged. Pacific times do not engage the passions nor invigorate the affections. There is little that we honor off the battlefield and other forms of self-sacrifice pale before military ribbons. There is something about the human being that will create a conflict for the purpose of exercising his mind and emotions and for the possibility of tribute.

I have been thinking about those ideas in relationship to faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I specifically wonder about the faith of my children and grandchildren. They are all made of human nature whose minds demand exercise, their souls inspiration, and their commitments galvanization. I think this is especially challenging for them because of the vast availability of technology. For example, when I was a child we did not have a television in our home until I was nine years old. There were the three major television networks and eventually public television. Our music came from a Motorola hi-fi system and I had a crystal radio that I could attach to the screen on my bedroom window. My father had an Argus 35mm SLR film camera and my mother had a Browning box camera. We had one telephone that was on a party line for all of my childhood.

In our house today there are four televisions hooked up to the dish satellite system that gives us hundreds of channels to choose from. The average child will be exposed to over 900,000 commercials on television by the time that he or she reaches the age of majority. This does not include what they are exposed to on the Internet. We have a landline and four cell phones. On my Blackberry I can make phone calls, text message, get directions, and many other things I don't even know about. The World Wide Web allows me to download articles, movies, photographs, and be in communication with people around the world in seconds. When my son was stationed in Afghanistan he and I could talk through the Internet on Skype. Emily, who is now ten, was playing games on the computer when she was 18 months old.

All of these advances in technology and information sharing also are capturing the myths of our culture. They are replacing the family table board as a place where mothers, fathers, elders, and children break bread together, share even the slightest spiritual discipline, relate the events of the day, and tell the family story. Some people are more familiar with the last episode of "Desperate Housewives" than what their children did in school that day. The values and the images of values that

we want to pass on to our children no longer pass from the lips of wise ones, our grandfathers and grandmothers, but over cables and airwaves.

We are confronted with a huge technological culture over which we have very little control. And if you pay any attention at all to the media and its many expressions you know that they understand a lot about human nature. The entertainment industry pushes those qualities against every conceivable boundary. They understand the role of conflict in every good story. They appreciate the place of human passion and the hunger for the heroic. And let's face it, no one enjoys a story, or play, or music that does not engage these realities. We complain that the program is boring if there is not enough dramatic tension. This simply is not about entertainment values, but the hunger of the human mind to engage a challenge.

I love murder mysteries. I started reading Sherlock Holmes in high school. I watch mysteries on television; everything from "Foyle's War" to "CSI" to "Eleventh Hour" and "Numbers." I read murder mysteries, and I especially prefer the English authors. And the best ones, of course, have limited scenes of gore and mayhem. I like them because they make me think. For the same reason I love the Hornblower series by C. S. Forester because of the challenge to create a mental picture of the ships in

storms or in battle. I read them with books about the ships of the line. I spread out maps on the bed that have been created for the series so that I can follow the action.

For the same reasons children and adults flock to the Narnia books by C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien's "Trilogy of the Ring," and J. K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" books. The new books in the "Twilight" series by Stephanie Meyer are rapidly growing in readership with teens and adults. Why are these so popular? Because they are compelling and they confront the imagination. And here is the amazing thing. In every one of these examples the authors are read before their works are made into movies. It is human nature to think, and feel, and aspire. And when you read you get to use your own mental images, not what someone else has contrived with machinery or computer graphics.

And so, what happens next? We go to church. After six days of television viewing, text messaging, computing, and interactive communicating we sit in long pews and hope that the choir and the preacher will be somewhat engaging. We say that we want our children to learn the Bible stories, except for the ones that are violent, conflict riddled, and morally compromising. That, of course leaves out most of the interesting stuff in the Bible. We want people to learn about the love

of God, but spare us those uncomfortable stories where Jesus refuses to see his mother and brothers and sisters and tells folks to let the dead bury the dead. And we would rather not have to explain to our children about prostitutes and lepers. Need I mention the sufferings of Jesus at Golgotha?

The question that I am trying to raise here is how in the world will Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century be convincing if we do not take into consideration the intellect, the passion, and character.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm instructs us that if we would but learn the wisdom of God and educate ourselves in the ordinances, laws, and precepts of God our lives would be filled with existential sweetness. Such ideas have been reinforced in the history of worship and Christian Education. Our preaching and teaching are content focused on Bible stories, memorizing the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Layer on top of that creeds and platforms of various denominations. We imagine that if our children will learn these things they will grow up to be good Christian men and women. Or, I will hear parents say that they have come back to church because their children are older now and they want them to learn about the moral teachings of the Christianity or the religions of the world.

Now please do not misunderstand me. I think that we all should know what moral lessons the Bible has to offer. My question is how do we learn? I learn, and I think most people learn, from experience. We learn from the problems that we need to solve, the challenges we need to meet, and the obstacles we need to overcome. Those are the times in our lives when our minds, our passions, and our wills are alert. I submit to you that Christianity is fading in our culture, in part, because we have blinded the intellect out of faith, we have sugar coated the gospel of Jesus to mere emotionalism, and we have diminished the expectations of personal commitment and leadership.

The truth is that religious thought has not kept up with the rapid advances of science and technology. We are not prepared as a religious people to think about the ethical dilemmas of genetic engineering, science versus creationism, robotics, or end of life issues. Let me offer you a very specific example.

Do you know what sexting is? That is spelled s-e-x-t-i-n-g. Don't be too alarmed if you don't. I had to add it to my computer's spell checker. Sexting is the taking and sending of cell phone photographs of nudes or sexual acts. It is a phenomenon among young cell phone users, often teenagers. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned

Pregnancy recently completed a survey that reveals that 39% of teens are sending or posting sexual images. 49% of teens report receiving sexual images via cell phone.<sup>1</sup> It has become such a huge problem that law enforcement is now charging teens with the dissemination of child pornography.

This phenomenon took a tragic turn in the life of 18-year-old Jesse Logan of Ohio. Jesse thought that her boyfriend would like to have nude photos of her. She took the photos with her cell phone and sent them to him. Some time later they broke up. The boy then sent the photos out to other people in their high school. Jesse was ridiculed, tormented, and shamed. The humiliation was so great that in July of 2008 Jesse hung herself in her closet.

This brief description of Jessica's story is chocked full of life issues for teens and ought to be the subject of their Sunday school class. It is a social issue, a family issue, an ethical issue, and a religious issue. Here is a story that is ripe with issues that we can encourage our children to grapple with. It is obviously filled with passion. It begs for heroic moral leadership on multiple levels. I submit to you that in the course of such a

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<sup>1</sup> As reported by Mile Celizic, "Her Teen Committed Suicide Over 'Sexting,'" MSNC.com, March 6, 2009 at <http://www.msnbe.msn.com/id/29546030>, downloaded March 14, 2009.



conversation we can bring Christian values that touch the daily lives of teenagers in this congregation and city. I think that this is the doorway we offer them to our values of human worth and dignity, what it means to be made in the image of God, the beauty and care of the human body, the responsibility to guard each person's image. What does it mean to value another human being as Jesus taught us to love one another?

Faith is vacuous if it lacks intellectual rigor. Faith is impotent if it has no depth beyond momentary feelings. Faith is absurd without heroic choices. Faith is convincing when it engages and enlarges our reason. Faith is fertile when it plumbs the depths of human grace and nobility, calling us into full fellowship with life. Faith is the salvation of human beings when it served by women and men of unflinching moral integrity. Faith only has a future with the embrace of human nature.

### *Finis*

When I deliver a sermon like this one I always worry that someone will be certain that this is a complaint or a criticism about our church or staff members. This sermon is not about our Christian Education program or our excellent Christian Educator, Karen Robu. She is leading the way in Christian Education with drama and music and interactive/experiential programming. Rather, how we learn about faith is a deep existential challenge for all churches in the Christian fold. Don't you just love institutional paranoia?