

"The Way of Jesus: The Love of God"

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

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### Traditional Word

21 Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money[c] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. --Matthew 19:21-22

### Contemporary Word

"At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us." --Albert Schweitzer

### The Way of Jesus: The Love of God

Last week I made some pretty big claims about our Christian faith. I claimed that Jesus sets up the foundation for our faith with his "Greatest Commandment," and I argued that much of the modern church perhaps doesn't "do" that Great Commandment very well: Love God and Love Neighbor. Or at least, their interpretations of the commandment fall short of what I believe to be a more accurate reading of those words.

Today we are moving forward in our exploration of how the modern practice of Christianity came to be and UCC's place within it. Today we're exploring devotion, or "love of God," and how this primary aspect of our faith drives much of the teaching that has come down through the ages. Devotion to the Holy One takes many forms, including what we are doing right now. Singing hymns, prayer, our banners, we do many things that show devotion and love of God. Some take their devotion even further—too far, in some cases. The term zealot is spot on in describing someone with a "more than normal" amount of affection for the deity. In the early years of the church, some were driven by their immense love of the Creator to go so far as to not only renounce all of their worldly possessions but also to separate themselves from the rest of the secular world. In the first century world, this was easily accomplished by moving out into the desert. These hermits eschewed

everything that living in a larger community had to offer. They thought that they could better show their devotion to God and their commitment to the Way of Jesus by saying goodbye to their old way of life and setting up a life in the middle of a barren desert.

For generations, these hermits actually attracted acolytes, others who wished to learn the way of asceticism. Large communities of hermits developed out in the desert sands. This reminds me of a comment a friend of mine made about our River Festival—she always used to say that more people would come to the River Festival if it were less crowded. Once again, the religious leaders were faced with the extant need to provide rules and regulations concerning the daily life of all of these people. In the larger urban areas, local governments had arisen (or were loaned to them from the Romans) to maintain order, and now these hermits were faced with the one thing they were trying to escape—people—and there was no one to organize and enforce order but the very hermits who were fleeing the masses.

This period of time in the early history of Christ-following Jews is called the Patristic Era. I call it both the Church Mothers and Church Fathers period because of new scholarship. It was in these monastic communities that elaborate rules and rituals were developed to maintain a particular type of order in the community. Monastic order. An order that had at its hierarchical acme, The Holy One, who then shared its desires and wishes and commandments to the head of the monastic order. Significant theological and philosophical work was taking place in these religious centers. We know that they then would grow to play an essential role in protecting wisdom and knowledge when the Roman empire begins its long slog into its ruin. We can't forget that the reason almost any of the knowledge of history survived the Dark Ages was that the monasteries became repositories for that knowledge and fiercely protected it during the social collapse of the time.

OK—so the Church Mothers and Fathers love God and the Way of Jesus so much that they felt they had to sell everything they owned, leave the city, and move to the desert to contemplate their souls. They felt that abolishing the distractions of modern life would allow them the clarity and focus they lacked to understand their lives. They left behind the baggage of their lives to meet the demands of God, even if that demand was interpreted as giving up your life in the service of the Christ. Don't forget that Rome had not so much declared Christianity illegal during this period as it made it extremely difficult to practice the new religion. The Roman leaders maneuvered so that if you failed to participate in the Roman Civic Religion--failed to belong to one of the temples of Demeter or Dionisius—you were at risk of imprisonment and execution in the arena—unless you then recanted your new faith, as a follower of Christ, and paid tribute and homage to one of the Civic gods. New followers of the faith, though, were very enthusiastic about their religion—so much so that martyrdom was seen as a worthy practice. We couldn't go through a sermon series on Church history without spending some time with the martyrs as well.

Our faith has a long history of creating and sustaining martyrs—people who love God so much and are so devoted to the Way of Jesus that they would sacrifice their lives in what they believe to be the service of the Christ. Perpetua and Felicity are two such martyrs. Here is their story, a story we have because Perpetua kept a detailed diary of her trials at the hands of the Romans: Perpetua began her diary with an account of her imprisonment and continued it with descriptions of her trial and her father's impassioned but fruitless plea for her to renounce her Christian identity. Most of Perpetua's text concerns her prison dreams (which she believed were prophetic), offering visions of her entry into heaven, her deceased younger brother Dinocrates, and her ordeal in the arena. On the evening before her scheduled death, Perpetua gave her diary to another Christian, who then continued the story of the martyrdom of Perpetua and her fellow Christians. He described how one of Perpetua's companions—the pregnant slave Felicity—gave birth while in prison; he also wrote of the young Christians' bravery in the arena when they were attacked by wild beasts and, finally, of Perpetua's voluntary acceptance of death by the sword.

On April 20, 1999, a shooting occurred at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Among the 15 fatalities, which included the death by suicide of both gunmen, was a young girl named Cassie Bernall. You may recall her name because of a famous story that has grown up around her death. While the killers were stalking their victims, they asked them if they believed in God—if the students said no, the killers left them alone. When one of the killers discovered Cassie hiding under a desk, he mockingly asked her if she "believed in God." And Cassie reportedly said yes, and the boy then shot and killed her. Cassie's story, which became condensed as the slogan "She Said Yes," caused an enormous response from the public. Cassie was almost immediately declared a martyr in the press, and it is reported that her death sparked a new wave of evangelism among teenagers. No one would have judged her if, in saving her life, she denied her faith. I honestly think God would have understood. But, that ending would not serve the needs of the martyrdom narrative.

These passionate and dramatic stories attract many young people to the faith—stories like that of Perpetua and Felicity and, yes, even Cassie Bernall. The doctrine goes like this: If Jesus could give his life to save humanity, then what is it for you to give up your life for your devotion to God? I am always puzzled at how the crucifixion became the focus of the faith instead of the teachings of mercy, compassion, and love. I read the Gospel as a life-affirming thing, and these early zealots read the same documents and determined that death was actually the preferred way of showing devotion. And this was an accepted practice for centuries—an accepted interpretation. And it was accepted because it is the logical progression of one of Jesus' more perplexing teachings: what we honestly must do to eradicate poverty. Follow me here...

In Matthew 19, we get the story of Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler, who has just asked him what he must do to get into the Kingdom of Heaven: "Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money[c] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions." Yes, who among us would NOT grieve such a commandment? What if we held all of Christendom up to THAT standard for determining your worth as a Christian? For some reason, I don't think that would fly. But the logical progression of "giving up" possessions would end with one realizing that, after selling everything and liquidating their Bitcoin, all they had left to offer was their flesh, their very life. You can begin to see how a zealot or fanatic might conclude that their death was just part of the sacrifice. I think it speaks to the degradation of individual lives in the Roman Empire and the early church's teaching.

This idea of following Jesus—come, follow me-- was new and radical. It did take root, and many early Christians DID indeed sell everything, gave it away, and joined these new communities that were developing around the various documents that would become our Gospels. Imagine, you have this ancient practice of Judaism, passed down through the generations, a solid faith that has served your community well for centuries, a faith anchored by its covenants with Yahweh, and here come these new "Followers of Jesus" who are putting flies in the ointment and who are making changes to the very basis of their faith. You can imagine the anger and frustration the temple authorities felt. The anger the average Jewish person on the street felt-- Families were torn apart, brother against brother—the first few centuries of this new faith were chaotic and disorganized. And you can understand and sympathize with the "old guard." The new "Followers of Jesus" were liberal and countercultural. By the way, Christianity has ALWAYS been liberal and countercultural—and it should always be liberal and countercultural. The very heart of the Gospel is to do things God's way, not Rome's way. The new followers of Jesus were revolutionary and progressive. They were the progressives of First Century Palestine.

Diana Butler Bass writes this: "...Progressive Faith is not about winning. When progressivism becomes hubris, it always fails. Instead, ancient tradition, deeply formed in the ideal of spiritual progress, insisted that the progressive faith was about humility—our lives and the world transformed through God's beauty. This, of course, does not fit on a bumper sticker or work very well in a party platform. But it should give progressive Christians pause, always remembering progress is a journey, not a destination." (page 57).

And while we are on our journey, we sometimes find pleasant company to travel with us—like-minded people working to love God and love neighbor. The benefits of us traveling together are many, but Albert Schweitzer hits on a very nice benefit when he writes: "At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark

from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us." How many times have you had your own "spark of life" reignited by someone whose generosity or act of kindness actually made you feel the warmth of something...something was triggered by this person. Or perhaps you will be the ember that can coax someone else's fire back to life.

Last week I also spoke of how Albert Schweitzer's book *The Search for the Historical Jesus* sparked a new wave in religious studies and profound biblical scholarship and research. This type of biblical scholarship is relatively new to the world. And since the church kept tabs on how biblical scholarship occurred for most of the preceding two thousand years, it's been tough getting at objective "truth" about the bible. What we have uncovered is this: The bible was arranged in such a way as to ensure the power of the church to maintain spiritual dominion on earth. The only way to God or to Christ was through the church and its compliant priests and monks and nuns and deacons. The Protestant "way of Jesus" is devoted to God through a direct connection with the Holy One, not the intervention of a priest or a saint. Protestants believe the anyone can connect with God at any time and anywhere. That was one big plank in the theses.

When I taught, I used a metaphor of hiking and sightseeing for my underlying teaching philosophy. I knew the way through the forest of our subject, whatever lesson I was teaching, and I could accompany my learners on a journey of discovery through our subject. I might know a shortcut here, or maybe this aspect of our subject is really cool and we should spend a little extra time sightseeing here. Sometimes my students would wander off of the trail, and as long as they weren't heading into the wrong part of the woods, sometimes I would let them. The best kind of learning is that which happens spontaneously, even in the midst of a well-planned lesson.

The theological work that Robin and I do is similar. We know much about these things, and we see a path through the woods, and we've been down this trail before, but sometimes you all have a really neat insight, and you show us all a new vista that we might have missed if we simply went our traditional way. A modern practice of Christianity might have all of us as priests and all of us upholding the sacredness of the Holy One. Christianity must be more than a rule book—the faith must be more than a weapon to use against others—and it must be more than just a useful map for assisting us through this forest of life. Christianity points us in the right direction with love of God and love of neighbor as our target. Whether or not we hit the mark and achieve our goal—well, that's up to us. How will you love God and neighbor this week? How will you honor Perpetua and Felicity and, yes, even Cassie Bernall? How will you keep the memory of the Church Mothers and Fathers who went on ahead and make up that vast "cloud of witnesses"? How will you be a "Christian" in the world today? Whose light will you help rekindle?

Amen

RESOURCES USED:

Holy Bible, NRSV

Diana Butler Bass. *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2009.

Elizabeth A. Castelli. *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*. Columbia University Press, New York, New York, 2004.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Perpetua-Christian-martyr>