OPENING WORDS

Many years ago now, a wise old priest invited me to come and speak at his church…. “What do you want me to talk about?” I asked him.

“Come and tell us what is saving your life now,” he answered.

It was as if he had swept his arm across the dusty table and brushed all the formal china to the ground. I did not have to try to say correct things that were true for everyone. I did not have to use theological language that conformed to the historical teachings of the church. All I had to do was figure out what my life depended on. All I had to do was figure out how I stayed close to that reality as I could, and then find some way to talk about it…”

–Barbara Brown Taylor from “An Altar in the World”

HOMILY

Practical Spirituality

Whose are we? That is the question that has been circling around Unitarian Universalist minister’s circles for over a year. Whose are we? has engaged ministers and lay persons alike in deep conversations at General and District assemblies, retreats, and in some congregations. The conversation is usually framed around a set of very good questions asking things like “who or what are we responsible to” and “what are accountable for?”

In our reading this morning, the question presented was “What is saving your life now?” I believe the answers to these questions, “Whose are we?” and “What are we accountable for?” are closely related and are deeply relevant to “What is saving us now?” My answer to these soul-searching questions is an amalgamation of childhood Sunday school stories, seminary studies, religious exploration, interfaith work, and five decades of life experience.

“Whose are we?
I grew up believing I belonged to Jesus because Jesus loved me. He loved me so much that he forgave me when I picked on my brother, didn’t mind my mother, or didn’t do my best. Jesus was better than anyone I knew because everything would be all right.

But as I grew older, I realized Jesus must be busier than Santa at Christmas. There were so many wrongs in the world – hatred, poverty, racism, classism, injustice, brutality... Come Sunday morning, church pews were filled as people showed up asking for forgiveness. Maybe they got it. But something wasn’t working because the sins continued and people kept coming back for more forgiveness.

God was out there somewhere. In my early religious experience, God was a benevolent and somewhat passive blue-eyed, gray hair man who looked down over the world from a perch of fluffy clouds. The was a general notion that God wasn’t really a part of the world until we died, then he got out a record book of everything bad we had done in life. More than one person in town would lean over on a Sunday morning and say “God’s gonn a spend a lot of time with that one.” Of course, they had to get by St. Peter first; after all, he was heaven’s gatekeeper.

My early version of heavenly accountability was I could do anything as long as I asked for forgiveness. Jesus loved me so much that, of course, I would be forgiven. And as long as I asked for forgiveness, including a catch all phrase at the end “and everything bad that I have forgotten”, in the end, I could pass through the pearly gates, have my appointment with God and live forever in heaven.

But that didn’t fix all the wrongs. It only gave me a general framework for doing good and an easy out for responsibility. It was – and is – an endless cycle. Do wrong, ask for forgiveness, do wrong again, ask for forgiveness, go out and do it again...no significant change in behavior required because all would be forgiven. I believe this is where many people’s religious development stops.

Bible school flew past the most important question asked of Jesus: what are the most important commandments?

Matthew 22:37-40 (NIV)

37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' [a] 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.' [b] 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

These days, I interpret the “Love God” commandment like this. I know that God is not a physical, definable entity. God is a projection of all of human hopes and desires, and is
shaped differently culture by culture. God is credited with good in the world but is also often used as a “justifiable” excuse for war, crime, and atrocities. God is called by many names. God is personally present for some and a silent watchmaker who set the earth in motion for others.

I don’t have a direct belief in God as such, because none of the definitions work for me. But here is what I do believe. Knowing that we did not create ourselves and that we did not create nature, the earth, or the universe – even though we can explain the creation process to a large extent, we cannot and did not create life out of nothing – I can bow down in awe and be surrounded by great mystery. In a sincere but inadequate gesture, each day I offer up a prayer of gratitude for being given the gift of life. I breathe a prayer of thanksgiving each morning when I awake and each night before I go to sleep and often many times in between. I don’t need to debate the validity or name of God to be thankful.

The second commandment “Love your neighbor as yourself” is my life’s work. I acknowledge that I am fully human and have many faults. I often fall short. Yes, I can ask for forgiveness, but unlike sitting in the pew asking a heavenly redeemer for mercy, I now I ask forgiveness directly of the person or persons I offended. My faith has come down to earth and as Buddhists might say, I am present. I live in the moment. Unless I view that loving my neighbor is only a quaint theory, living in the here and now is the only way I can love my neighbor.

Whose are we? I cannot answer without a clear concept of a hierarchal being, because the minute I answer, I fall short. All I can do is offer up a prayer of gratitude for life itself, the world in which I live, and the universe in which science keeps expanding my awareness. I don’t have to name what I cannot name. My job is to be grateful which keeps me humble.

What is saving me now? Loving my neighbor. It is a full-time job and is never done. Too often I get distracted, succumb to judgment, or simply misunderstand what my neighbor really needs. But I keep trying.

Even though I have no longer describe myself as purely Christian, Jesus’ greatest commandments form the framework for my belief system. From these two, all else derives. Be thankful. And love. These two alone will fill my lifetime.

Blessed be and amen.