

## **TORN BETWEEN LAW AND LOVE**

A sermon preached by Rev. John H. Nichols to the First Parish of Wayland on  
October 13, 2013

One Halloween night in a town far, far away children who were trick or treating each received from one house a religious comic book instead of candy. The comic depicts three ten-year-old boys, Tommy, Timmy and Bobby, who themselves went trick or treating. But, they are chased by what the book describes as "atheistic adults", and they run into the street where Timmy is hit by a car and killed. He finds himself in Hell. The Devil tells him that since he has unforgiven sins, he must pay for them which will mean eternal torture.

The next day, back among the living, Tommy and Bobby are talking about the accident with Tommy's mother. The boys are finding some consolation in believing that at least Timmy is now in Heaven, but Tommy's mother doesn't think that Tim is in Heaven.

"But that's impossible," the boys protest. "Good boys don't go to Hell." Tommy's mother explains that, yes she had been fond of Timothy once, but then he made a terrible mistake. He made fun of his Sunday school teacher. She knows he did this, because she was his Sunday school teacher. And, since Timmy didn't ask for her forgiveness, she is now sure he is paying for his sins.

With fear and trembling, Tommy and Bobby fall to the floor and beg for forgiveness, asking Jesus to come into their hearts and save them from the Devil. At length their faces have a glow of renewed confidence, for they are sure their prayers will be answered and they will go straight to heaven when they die, unlike their former friend, Timmy.

Why would anyone want to terrify children with visions of damnation over something as silly as that? Some would say "This is a perfect example of the harm that religion does. Here are true believers stomping through the minds of innocent kids and tormenting their dreams with thoughts of Hell." However, it is too easy to condemn a religious tradition that has inspired liberation movements throughout the world solely because of a rigid few.

So, what is going on here? How do some people attribute their idea of eternal punishment to the Jesus who exemplified love, tenderness, forgiveness and respect for all people, particularly children? How can they believe such a Jesus would condemn a ten-year-old boy to eternal torment? If Jesus actively preached that all God's children are loved without exception then how can a religious group which claims to love Jesus make distinctions between greater and lesser Christians, distinctions between the saved and the damned? Are there at least two versions of Christianity -- each with its own version of Jesus?

Yes. There are at least two versions of Christianity in the same Bible. There are also two different and contradictory versions of Judaism and Islam and two versions of nearly every other religion. These two conflicting versions of each religion reflect a tension that is also inherent in all of us. It is in the die hard racist. It is in the true blue political liberal. It is in you, and it is in me. The tension is between the genuine wish to love and accept the people in our lives and the sometimes equally strong wish to exclude and condemn those who committed the sin of disagreeing with us.

The hope, which is at the core of most Western religions, is that all people will recognize the bounty, goodness and the opportunities of life as their free gifts. And having recognized these gifts as fully sufficient for their happiness and security they will no longer build fortresses in order to protect their own and fence others out.

But there are other times when we don't trust that world. We believe we have to scratch and kick and fight for every moment of happiness and we want to be very careful with whom we share it. At such times, we prefer our religion with clear boundaries so that we can limit ourselves to safe friends. We want to belong to a religion of rules that will make it clear what beliefs are in and what beliefs are out, what believers are acceptable and what believers are not acceptable.

Let me give you a specific example of how the simple core of a religion evolves into something else. The core of the Christian tradition lies in Jesus' teachings that a loving God has made room for all of us at the common table of fellowship. Jesus used the experience of shared meals to demonstrate that God's love is healing and that it reaches out even to the last prodigal son or daughter so that everyone in the family can be reconciled. Jesus taught that this concern embraces all men and women equally, rich and poor equally, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Unitarian Universalists and secularists equally.

At first, Jesus' disciples were very much attracted to his unconditional respect for them and his acceptance of their unique strengths and faults. His was a religion of acceptance rather than a religion of law. But in the years following Jesus death, those who came to power were more strongly drawn to the path of exclusion. The radical openness of the early Christian communities began to embarrass them. They cherished acceptance for themselves but they thought it was somehow wrong really just to accept everyone, as Jesus seemed to have taught. If you accept everyone then who ARE you really? They were following an all too human tendency.

They thought, "Surely there must be true or false ideas. There must be some way to determine who is a real Christian or at least who is a better Christian than everyone else." These were the men who wrote the later accounts of Christianity, and so while the core of Christianity is the religion of joyful appreciation for all life that Jesus taught, in some of

the later writings of Christians we also find the demands for exclusion. And we will find the same core of acceptance and the same periphery of defensiveness in most world religions.

As a result, many years ago when then President Clinton visited South Africa, he attended church services at a Catholic Church in a black township near Soweto. At the end of the service he took communion, which pleased the people at mass with him but created a fuss that rippled all the way back to the Vatican. The issue for some was that the Protestant President should not partake of Catholic communion.

Jesus made no distinctions over who could participate in the fellowship of the meal, because the breaking of bread together was a sign of each person's willingness to accept the goodness of life and of one another. He welcomed everyone to the table: Jew and gentile, tax collector, prostitute, Pharisees and scribes.

For years after Jesus died, this ritual meal continued to be what symbolized his presence and it symbolized his message that in the fullness of our lives together we have already been given everything we could possibly want. In the early years, attendance at the meal was left radically open to all who wished to be there. However as the Church grew older – and less sure of the instincts which founded it – there were many who wanted to make distinctions and set rules. While honoring Jesus, they began to distrust his vision of a life without fear, and thus some branches of Christianity became a religion of law more than a religion of love.

Once, anyone could lead Christian worship? But as the early Christians became a major church, the people they appointed to lead them succumbed more to the human tendency to guard their privileges: to restrict, to limit and to exclude. So the privilege of leadership became restricted first to certain men and women, and finally only to certain men.

Once, anyone could attend the common meal of all Christians, which is what the Communion symbolizes. But gradually, it was established that the only people who were really welcome at the meal were people who understood this ritual in the "right" way. Attendance at that ritual sharing of Life's goodness became limited as well to those who were entitled by the new rules to join the religious club.

When then President Clinton was motivated to go down to the communion rail, he was expressing his desire to sit at the common table particularly with those who had undergone a lifetime of hardship under the repressive South African system of Apartheid. But some who reacted strongly to his having taken communion still prefer a religion of law – a system of status and exclusion – and were troubled because a Protestant didn't meet their standard for inclusion.

Shall we accept others openly and with the hope that they will bring something wonderful into our lives or, shall we, in an effort at self-protection, discriminate and exclude most people, because they fall short of our standards? This conflict exists for most of us. It permeates our thoughts. It colors our personal histories as much as our religious and cultural history. Religious liberals are not free of it, even though we preach most loudly against it.

Where is our religious tradition in all of this? The Unitarian and Universalist movements were founded by men and women who believed that the religions of their own time had leaned far too much toward legalism and far too little toward love and acceptance.

The Universalists believed the love of God extended to all people; that no child of God was to be given less respect, ignored or cast out. There was no Hell in eternity, they said, and we don't need to create one on earth. The early Unitarians had intended to create congregations that were very similar to what they imagined the early Christian communities must have been. These would be congregations where everyone was welcomed to the table of fellowship, where everyone's ideas counted and where each person learned from the others.

So we began as a religion of acceptance and a religion of love. But as I've already said, there are almost always two, opposing tendencies in our minds and in most religious traditions. There is a part of us that wants to welcome the world into our lives, but there is a part of us that wants to limit, to discriminate and to reject. If people are not with us, we believe they are surely against us, or at the very least standing in the way of necessary progress.

There have been times in our UU history when we have wanted to draw our own lines. Could non-Christians sit at our table of fellowship? Some said no, but in the end we decided yes. Could agnostics and atheists join at the common table? Some said no, but in the end we decided yes. And more recently, could those who prefer to use a language of reverence be comfortable at our table of fellowship. Some say no, but we shall in the end say yes. Can political moderates and conservatives sit at our table of fellowship? We struggle with this today, and my trust is that we shall answer yes.

What about people who still proudly maintain a part of their Jewish heritage? What about people who practice Buddhist meditation? What about Pagans and mystics? There is a strong human tendency to draw a circle that defines who is and who is not permitted at the common table.

But, it was a Universalist poet, Edwin Markham who spoke for all of us when he wrote, "He drew a circle that shut me out, a heretic, a rebel, a thing

to flout. But love and I had the wit to win. We drew a circle that brought him in.”

This radical acceptance sometimes makes it difficult for us to explain who we are to others. When people ask us to define ourselves they often ask exclusionary questions. Do you believe in this? Do you believe in that? They want to know where we stand on doctrines, which were originally designed to keep some people in and toss other people out. They want to know where we draw the line – just whom do we reject. Who cannot be a member of our club? After all, if you want to be an exclusive club, you have to exclude someone.

When we are asked questions about our beliefs there is even some small part of us that would like to give the kind of answer that would exclude someone – just so that we can hold up our heads in an exclusionary world. But the truth is that no one is excluded except by their own decisions not to commit themselves to the struggle for love and compassion in this world. We have worked hard to keep from being a religion of law and exclusion. It is never going to be easy work, but it is the work our movement has chosen.

We believe that Creation is a wonderful gift, and it is the entire gift we might ever want or need. We believe our world is a web of connections and vital relationships, and honoring those relationships is what brings us a joy in living. As much as possible, we seek to be that common table where political and cultural, racial and ethnic divisions will give way to the promise of a healing community.