



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Freedom From Attachment And The Secret To Joy

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.

October 11, 2009

Well, I've made another note in my "funeral" file. Now that's a cheerful way to begin a sermon, right? Well, actually, it is, because what I'm going to tell you is that working on my funeral file helps me view my dying with an important element of joy. Now my death is not something that is imminent as far as I know; I have nothing to announce like that. My genetic pool suggests I will be around for a very long time. One great grandmother lived until she was 97 and some of my great aunts and uncles lived well into their nineties. But during these past two weeks I have presided at two funerals that touched me in deep ways and forced me to think about my own funeral, especially what passages of scripture I want read at the celebration.

I don't have all the scripture identified at this point. But this one passage I have now settled upon is going to be important. Although I must quickly add that every time I mention to my wife that I have made plans for my funeral she quickly informs me that she is the one who will make the final choices. She adds, "After all, Bud, that service will not be for you, but for us." So, all of this might be an exercise in futility, vanity and ego. Nevertheless, I do want to share with you my choice because it relates directly to the sermon topic.

The passage I have chosen for my funeral comes from a rather obscure little epistle toward the end of the New Testament – 1st John, third chapter. The passage goes like this. "For this is the message you have heard from the beginning – that we should love one another. We know (and this is the important passage) that we have already passed from death to life when we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you do know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. How does God's love abide in anyone when you have the world's goods as your possessions and you see a brother or sister in need and yet you refuse to help them? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 John 3: 14-18)

The reason this passage has become important to me is that it describes one of the great truths about living. When you and I love another person – especially when we love someone who is not very attractive to us for all sorts of reasons - especially when we have to let go of something dear to us (like a resentment or a prejudice or our popularity or our job or even our money) to love a person, or a group of people – then we have already passed from death into eternity, from death to abundant life, from death to eternal life. That is how high the stakes are when you and I chose to love. We are already living in eternal life, eternity -- not seen in terms of heaven or hell but in terms of whether or not you are going to go ahead and start living heaven-on-earth now. That's what's at stake in the gospel lesson this morning.

I believe that love is another word for those things that are eternal. Love is another word for eternal life. And in order to love there is always required some act of non-attachment - no longer holding

on to old things or ways of thinking and being and doing. In fact in order to have a fuller and richer and more abundant and more joyful and more adventurous life, that path is always about letting go of yesterday's blessings so that you and I can receive today's blessings.

One of the most important things I ever heard was several years ago when Bill Moyers produced a video series and an accompanying book called *Healing and the Mind*. He interviewed a physician, Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen. In reflecting on the interplay of life, illness, healing, and death in her own life and in the lives of her patients, Dr. Remen said, "My sense is that the worst thing that happens in life is not death; the worst thing that happens in life would be to miss life."

She then told of a friend of hers who had told her that in the different religions (he was a student of all the world's religions), that in all the different religions, beneath all the differences in theology and doctrine, all spiritual paths have the same four steps. The first is "Show up." The second is "Pay attention or be aware." The third is "Tell the truth." And the fourth is "Don't be attached to the results." I have kept those four steps in my heart ever since and use them often as a mantra – show up, pay attention, tell the truth and don't be attached to the results.

I'm struck by so much writing that is being published today about healthy religion in the 21st century. The writing ranges from our friend Marcus Borg to Karen Armstrong (about whom I preached last week) to the Harvard professor, Harvey Cox's new book about *The Future of Faith*, which I picked up this past week. All of these writers are noting that throughout the world religions there is a contemporary growing realization of a similarity of teachings from the enlightened ones who are seen as the founders of the world's religions. And there is a remarkable move away from dividing us according to doctrinal or dogmatic lines to moving us to understand that at the heart of all of these writers was a notion of compassionate living. So it is not surprising that the Buddha and Jesus would both emphasize the importance of freeing ourselves or being free from attachments. Now "attachment" may not be a very familiar term to our Judaeo-Christian ears; our tradition speaks more frequently of having idols that get in the way of our worshipping God. We worship false gods that have no life in them and that keeps us from worshipping the living, loving, active God. But the cancer of the soul is the same. Grasping and hoarding yesterday's gifts get in the way of receiving today's graces – including the grace of exercising compassion to the least of these.

In fact, the second and third of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths have to do with the fact that attachment is the source of human suffering and that when we can get to a place of non-attachment that is the source of joy.

My new friend, Stephen Asma who teaches philosophy and Buddhism notes that The second Noble truth states that suffering is caused by craving or attachment. The Buddha argues that sensations (sense data) such as smells, sounds, tastes, bodily pleasures, and even the intellectual impressions (our ideas), inevitably give rise to craving. They are not pernicious intrinsically but it is the craving, wanting, desiring appetites, which become obsessed with repeating and sustaining those experiences that actually cause the suffering, in this case, of greed. (Stephen Asma, *Buddha for Beginners*, p. 84) It is no accident that the root of the word *miserable* is the word *miser*. Suffering flows from miserly, clinging attachment, which mistakes impermanent things and sensations for lasting and permanent realities like love, eternal life. Attachment is a confusion in the mind and the heart that tries to capture or solidify that which is forever in flux.

The Third Noble Truth states that the cure for the suffering both in yourself and in the world is nonattachment, or the cessation of craving. One still feels pain and pleasure, but one no longer clings to these fluctuating experiences. They continue flowing in the natural course without a clinging ego chasing after them. (Stephen Asma, *Buddha for Beginners*, p. 87)

My mother used to tell me when I was upset, “Son, this too will pass.” She was at heart a Buddhist, I guess. When we detach that leaves no fertile soil for craving to take root. Buddha explains that detachment stems from the philosophical realization of impermanence when we understand that this too will pass. When we understand the truth of impermanence, great joy can come to us. “ The logic is always the same: the source of fear is attachment to those things that are impermanent. Conversely, if you befriend the reality of impermanence instead of denying it, you won’t be afraid of anything. So attachments and letting go of them is central.” Lawrence, Shainberg, from *Ambivalent Zen, Searching for Your Soul*, p. 412

Now after I preached this sermon at the 9:00 a.m. service, someone passed me this note that said, “Ed, why don’t Buddhist monks vacuum under sofas or in corners?” The answer: “They don’t have any attachments. [laughter]

Jesus was all about non-attachment. He asked those who were in his first band of disciples to leave their boats and nets and family businesses and even families and follow him. All invitations from God to live fully today includes the invitation that every human being in this room is hearing in their heart this very moment – to let something go. Every invitation from God to live fully is an invitation to leave something behind from yesterday.

Freedom from attachments occur throughout the New Testament. No one ever can forgive without detaching from holding on to a certain ouch or pain or resentment or trespass. We will pray together in a few moments, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” That is about detachment, it is about freedom, it is about joy, it is about entering eternal life. And then one day Jesus took his best friends Peter, James and John up on the Mount of Transfiguration and they had then an ecstatic, mystical experience of Jesus glowing with brilliance. Peter said, “Jesus, let’s erect a shrine right here. This has been important – we need a transfiguration museum up here on this mountain.” And Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me Satan – there is an epileptic boy down in that valley and we are not spending anymore time in this mystical moment, we are going to get down in the grit of life and heal.”

When Jesus appeared in the garden after his resurrection the story says that Mary Magdalene went up to him and after she saw him as a gardener and then he called her by her name she realized who he was and said “*My rabbi*.” She went up to grasp him and he said, “Do not hold on to me. If you hold on to me that will keep you from moving into the future.”

Every individual Jesus calls in the New Testament stories, that person steps into abundant, eternal life by leaving something behind – except for one person and we just read about him in the gospel lesson this morning.

That one refusal is our gospel story this morning. It is the story of the rich young ruler, religious, pious, he knew all the commandments and kept them. He had his act together and Jesus detected that there was one thing keeping him from entering heaven on earth right now and it was his attachment to his wealth.

But rather than selling all he had and giving it to the poor which was an invitation from Jesus to let all the blessings of yesterday flow through him and out of him so he could move on with his life he went away grieving for he was attached to many possessions.

Jesus wants us to have life and love and relevance as priorities over our attachments.

One of the most pernicious forms of attachment is around our ideas. In my early priesthood I was shown a video about the concept of “paradigms” which has informed my life ever since. We all need paradigms, structures to organize all the data that come in. If we didn’t have some kind of categorization of all the data coming in we would just go crazy because we are bombarded all the time by sensory input. So we as a matter of course develop these paradigms – “this fits here; this fits there; this works; this doesn’t work.” The problem is we can have paradigm paralysis which means we are attached to the way we order life. And if something comes that can’t fit into our paradigms we simply don’t admit it into our awareness but yet it is real.

The most startling example in this film that taught me about paradigms was about a clock and watch show that was always held in Switzerland because the Swiss had all the best watch makers and clock makers. In the late 50’s/early 60’s there came this organization to the clock and watch exhibition called “The Texas Instruments Corporation.” They had these watches that were digital and LED and didn’t have two or three watch hands going around in circles and the Swiss went by and said, “That will never amount to anything.” And in ten years their market share had bottomed out because of their attachment to the fact that watches and clocks or reality had to be a certain way.

We see this phenomenon in our healthcare debate in this country. We don’t understand that healthcare for all is a basic civil right. We don’t have that paradigm. But maybe now that our President has been given the Nobel Peace Prize and he has a little “umph” behind him from the European community and everybody else, that we can move forward and break some of these old paradigms that don’t work for us anymore.

Mary Oliver, the poet writes,

*Every year
everything
I have ever learned
in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side
is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing*

*your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.*

Mary Oliver, "In Blackwater Woods,"

There's an old hymn that says "New occasions teach new duties. Time makes ancient good uncouth"

If our hands are fully occupied and holding onto something we can neither give nor receive. God is calling everyone in this room to live in a very big story that makes our concept of our story seem very small and petty. But God says, No, there is a big story – it is a story of compassion for all, justice for all, peace for all, inclusion for all. It's the story of having a very rich soul. It's the story of being a joyful person because we are free from worrying about protecting our attachments. All of life is a movement toward the soul and what gets in the way of moving toward a rich soul is our attachment to other things and other ideas. Too often we are rich in things and poor in soul and we love the gifts more than the Giver. That is what this Eucharistic table is about – about the Giver who gives us over and over and over again the love that leads us into eternal life, abundant life, the life of joy by letting the gifts of life flow through us.

At the rectory this past Friday night at one of the Stewardship parties these two wonderful guys gave a Stewardship witness. They included in their speech the top ten reasons to pledge to All Saints. I was touched by how deeply theological most of them were. Although one of them was, "It takes a lot of money to buy Anne Peterson's shoes." We had to have a little levity there. [laughter]

They recalled the doxology which we love to sing, "*Praise God from whom all blessings flow.*" The idea of life is to let the gifts of yesterday flow through us so that the gifts of today, the gifts of compassion and grace and love can flow through us today and lead us from death into life and to heaven on earth.

Amen.