

Heresy In New Clothes

November 9, 2014

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening

We are here,
after a week of decisions many find unsettling,
to worship, to return to what is deeper
than what lies on the surface,
to continue to choose a way of living our lives
so as to make the world a better place for all.

And so, in this common house of life and love, may we lead lives of welcome, wisdom and kindness. Bestowing ourselves bountifully to the common good, let gratitude and question displace any easy assumption. Knowing that we are within this hurting, amazing world, not outside it, we approach our earth and social equity mindfully. Let each day express our amen.

Ingathering

So this is a true story. About me. Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, I lived for a time in Illinois, which is another state in that direction.

I joined all the children in the congregation I was then serving on a week-long trip to dig deep to find out what happened long ago. The big grownup word for this is archeology.

All the children in the Sunday School had been studying about people who lived long ago. They learned about people from the Bible, and they learned about King Tut from Egypt.

(Here is the mask of King Tut.) When some people were digging deep in Egypt one day, many years ago, they found something that was like a door, and they dug deeper, and they opened it, and they found this beautiful golden mask of the young king, whose full name was Tut Ankh Amun. The mask was made of gold and beautiful stones, and it was beautiful.

Everyone went to the Museum in Chicago to see the mask as it traveled around the world. Everyone loved it. They knew that they were going to go digging deep in May, and were excited. Maybe they too could dig deep and find a golden mask.

May came, and we all went to the place where we were going to dig. Near the Illinois River. To dig up a village of the old Mississippian people from 600 years ago. We went to the site, and there were great big holes, perfectly square, dug into the field. Just like this.

(shows picture)

Then we were given tools to dig. Not shovels, but something like this. "You take this," said Trygg, our teacher, "and scrape it gently across the soil at the bottom of the square holes." "That's not digging," we all protested. "It's how we dig here. It's how the guy who dug up King Tut's tomb did it too. You have to take the time to go carefully."

And so for a week we scraped the ground. It was hot. It was hard, being bent over on our knees all day. And there were no golden masks to be found. Not even a single arrowhead.

But one day, Trygg came over to the hole where I was scraping the soil, and he said, "We found something! We found something!" "Wow!" I said, as I came out of the hole and went over to his site.

"There it is!" he said, pointing proudly.

"I don't see anything. Just dirt," I said, confused. So he went down into the hole and pointed right at it. This is what I saw. (show picture)

"It's dirt, like I said." "Yeah," said Trygg, "but it's different colored dirt. These colors are the remains of a garbage dump. All turned into dirt by now after 600 years. But the colors tell us what they ate, and what they threw away. There are clam shells here from the river, and some frogs, and some nuts, and some greens and some corn. This is a great discovery!" he said.

"It is?" I asked, and the children asked. But we all learned that day something very important. It takes a long time to find out what happened long ago.

It takes a long time to find out what is happening in the world right now.

When you dig deep, there is no *fast*, only slow.

And you almost never dig up a golden mask. You need to be happy about finding simpler things. Like dirt. Like colors. Like the joy of learning new things.

Greeting

Announcement about BREAD

Affirming

**Moments in the past do not remain still;
they retain the motion which drew them
towards the future, and draw us in their train.**

Marcel Proust 1925

Singing #333 Alone She Cuts and Binds

Communing

"Alone she cuts and binds the grain," Wordsworth says, and she is singing as she works. And he doesn't know why the song sounds so melancholy, so sad. He just knows her voice floats over that deep valley, aglow in autumn with ripe wheat, and her sickle slices through the grain. He is just aware that she is singing. Let the poet be praised for his sacred humility. For not rushing to conclusions about what he does not know. Congratulate him for not hanging his own face over her own, for allowing himself to be impacted deeply in memory and moving by a single, momentary local event in this world full of events. Let us honor him for not making assumptions, or expecting unfolding meaning. In this world of often tough news and painful decisions, remind me, oh Love, of all that I don't know, and may not assume. But keep me aware. Keep me aware. Even if the law stands against them, I can still be aware of a man holding hands with another man because they love each other. I can still be aware of women making a life together with their children, even if their song today, because of the Cincinnati decision, is sad. Remind me that neither voting booths nor courts have the power to determine either love or eternity. Strengthen me, Love. Strengthen me. The poet was aware of the song, he says, and bore it in his heart long after it was heard no more. May we too, though the song be long gone, take its simple, comforting wisdom into the silence with us....

Silence

More than we notice those whom we will never know, we notice the lives of those intertwined with our own lives, those whom we love, who love us, those whose sorrows we share, whose hardships we witness, whose lives we mourn. Each of these lives is associated with a face and a name...let the faces that call to us this particular week rise before the eye of our heart, that we may name them as part of this moment...either aloud, or in the quiet shelter of our heart.

Naming

The song sung by the nameless woman which Wordsworth heard is long gone, but the present moment embraces music too. Let this music now rise up within you, and stay with us long after we ourselves hear it no more. **Music**

Reading

The First Reading comes from the Torah, from the Scroll of Shemoth, called Exodus in the English scriptures. This is a relatively well known story to many. This is the original telling of the legend.

A decree came out from the Palace, declaring that every single male child among the Hebrews must be thrown into the Nile, whereas the girl children were allowed to live.

But a certain man from the Clan of Levi married a certain woman from the same Clan, and the woman conceived and bore a son. The baby looked healthy indeed, and the mother was able to keep him hidden for three full months. When she could no longer stand the tension, she procured a basket woven of papyrus reeds. She made it waterproof with a coat of natural asphalt, and set it upon the river near the papyrus reeds along the shore, with her baby son inside it. The baby's older sister stationed herself within the reeds to see what would happen.

Wouldn't you know it, but the King's daughter came down to the river to bathe, while her young servant girls kept protective watch along the shore. The daughter spied the basket caught in the papyrus, and asked one of her servants to wade deeper into the river to fetch it. As soon as she opened it, she saw the baby boy, wailing. This prompted her compassion, and she figure out it must be one of the Hebrew children. The baby's older sister boldly thrust herself forward at this time, and asked "Would you like me to find a wet-nurse for this child from among the Hebrew women?" And the King's daughter said, "Yes, find one." And so she brought both her own and the baby's mother to present to the King's daughter. The King's daughter said, "Please nurse this child and raise the child until I can adopt him as my own. I will pay you handsomely to do it." And so this is how it happened. And when the baby had grown into a boy, the King's daughter adopted him as her own son.

The Second Reading *is an excerpt from Personal Poem by my favorite Berkeley CA poet, Julia Vinograd. This was written in 1996.*

People want me to write personal poetry,
about who I am.
Well, who are *you*?
Do you wash your underwear? Sign petitions?
Do you litter? Do you love?
What are your hands for?
Do you feel cheated at unexpected moments, as if your were stuck with the wrong life, maybe mine?
What does your face look like while you are hearing these words, or when you are asleep, or trying to decide what to order in a restaurant?
Do you cross at the crosswalk?
Do you floss your teeth?
Do you love?
Did you lose a blue and white marble
with a crack inside when you were 7?
I found it by the drain pipe,
but I don't have it any more.
What is it that you can't make unhappen?
How much time do you spend doing compulsive and complicated arithmetic with imaginary money?
Are you on good terms with your scars?
Are you listening?
Who are you?

Do you love?

Preaching

I was surprised this week to discover that a proverb I utter quite frequently was actually invented...by someone with a name. I had thought it was one of those "unwritten" proverbs, anonymous, like "A stitch in time saves nine." But I found out it was actually composed by a French wit, Jean Baptiste Alphonse Karr. He wrote in French, "plus ça change, plus la même chose." In English, "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

Does that sound to you like a bitter and cynical proverb? Perhaps, at times. I say it sometimes after certain elections, as a way of throwing up my hands, or after a legal court, supreme or otherwise, declares something that makes my eyes roll back into my head with great disbelief.

But I'm not always cynical. I also quote that proverb to remind myself that the simplest cursory study of history affirms that progress is almost always two steps forward, one step backward. I say it to remind myself that neither impatience, nor living with invincible expectations, ever does me much good.

And, I also utter the proverb to remind myself that we 21st century people have not, as I said strongly last week, outstripped our ancient or historical ancestors in wisdom and smarts. Having an Iphone does not make me wiser than Sokrates. Sending an email does not demolish the courage of Hypatia of Alexandria. My Ipad does not unravel the justice poetry of Isaiah.

And when I look particularly at the history of heresy, as I am doing this month, I've become aware that debates between heretics, five hundred, or a thousand years old, are still going on strong, even though in the secular world of our century, very few use the theological words God and Christ as weapons in the fight. Even if people deny religion, especially the Christian religious varieties, the essence of the heresy is still kicking.

The two heretical debates I want to lift up today, because they are still around, however secularized, are:

1. Sola Scriptura, a Latin theological term from the Protestant Reformation
2. Pelagius vs. Augustine, another heretical debate from the early 400s

First, Sola Scriptura. The literal translation of that Latin phrase is Scripture Alone, meaning that scripture alone is the source of all authority to decide what is true and what is false. The pope and the bishops do not have that authority, according to Luther. But I think Luther made a big mistake here.

Now don't get me wrong. Reformers like Dr. Luther were certainly correct in pushing against the unquestioned authority of the Roman hierarchy, which often associated itself with gaudy entitlements and aristocratic arrogance. Their critique was pointed and right on, in my opinion.

But for the Reformers, this really was a question of authority. Who has the authority to decide anything was true? A bishop? A bishop of a particular city, namely Rome?

Now the Roman church was entirely clear about their own authority. Traditions and opinions of the church as a whole, as taught by the bishops and Pope, were final. For the reformers, however, it had to be Sola Scriptura. The Bible alone. The scripture was literally God's word for them, and therefore infallible. The Reformers called the Roman leaders heretics and apostates, and the Roman leaders called the Reformers heretics and apostates. And the battle was joined for hundreds of years.

In this country, the Protestant tradition dominated. And thus, so did the idea of Sola Scriptura. And so to this day, the awful phrase "the Bible says" remains a common phrase here in the States, as though the book was a person with a mouth.

But you know and I know that many modern Americans have no use for the Scriptures. They see themselves as secular and non-religious. They ridicule the Bible, especially its television teachers.

And yet, despite all that secularity, the Protestant heresy of Sola Scriptura still prevails. How many times I've had people tell me that they read a book which "proved" that Jesus never existed, his story but a retelling of the Egyptian god Osiris. A single scripture...which only means *written text* after all... "proved" that to them. Sola scriptura. Others have proved, by a single book, that a planet named Nibiru will crash into the earth (oh that was last year, I guess the book was wrong!), or that a medical doctor's written down experience proves that people will go to heaven when they die because if it's written in a book, it must be literally true. Sola scriptura. Only one written document will do it. Don't waste your time going deeper, Sola Scriptura says. Instant and absolute answers are always better than taking the time to dig deeper. Stick in a shovel, and out will come a golden mask for the taking.

You may have heard the upset recently about the actor Christian Bale. Bale is the truly remarkable, and deservedly acclaimed, actor who is playing Moses in the new film ***Gods and Kings***, by the well-respected director Ridley Scott. In a recent interview the actor made a couple of comments about the character he was playing. Although he attended a Sunday School, he claims he must not have been paying attention. He said didn't know anything about Moses. But then, having read scripture to prepare for his role, he said this at a press conference about the film: "I think the man was likely schizophrenic and was one of the most barbaric individuals that I ever read about in my life. He was a very troubled man."

Now I suppose you might just call such a statement impolitic, if anything. You are there to promote a film with a biblical theme, and then you say tremendously controversial things, using loaded words that are bound to upset the various religious people you are trying to attract to the film. Maybe he wasn't thinking that day. We all misspeak at times, right?

But using the word *schizophrenic* seems rather impolitic too. What does he mean? Is he suddenly a psychiatrist, or is he using the word like many uneducated people do still to this day, meaning a kind of split personality?

But my main point is that Mr. Bale is talking about Moses from the *secular standpoint* of Sola

Scriptura. He is affirming there was a person named Moses who lived a human life which is accurately depicted in the Scripture. If the text says he killed, then he was a barbaric man. If he is depicted as changing his mind a lot, or being impulsive then he must have been a historical person fighting mental illness and the scriptures, according to the Sola Scriptura, depict cold hard facts. They are not stories asking you to think, as a human being.

For ages, Unitarian Universalist wisdom teachers have neither accepted the Catholic theory of authority, that the Church as a whole has the sole authority, nor the Protestant theory of authority, Sola Scriptura, meaning that the Bible alone has it. For hundreds of years our theologians and philosophers have inspired us to dig deeper, speak only provisionally, and to use the full range of shared scholarship available to approach *any* text, especially one deemed sacred. For example, any one who has taken the time to dig deeper (this is usually scholars, I admit) would recognize the ancient story about a baby floating in a basket as the ancient way of saying "Once upon a time." That's all. All stories of heroes set in Egypt begin with the exact same story. The greatest novel to come out of Egypt, about a guy named Sinuhe, is an exact duplicate of this story of the poor babe taken into the royal household.

Most biblical stories were never meant to be taken as strict history any more than Goldilocks and the Three Bears was meant to be a strict depiction of the domestic lives of brown bears and the eating habits of girls with curly hair.

If Bale had said, "I was surprised at how Moses in the biblical story is presented...not always in a very flattering light," there would have been little controversy. That would have been an accurate statement. But in taking the book as the depiction of a truly historical biography, which his present religious critics also do – still holding to the Sola Scriptura concept 500 years after Luther he blundered.

As I have said before, the Bible doesn't *say* anything. People say things. Books just sit there until a person with a brain and a mouth speaks for it. Interprets it for you. The Bible is a book made up of books written a long time ago.

Thus for me, the notion of Sola Scriptura is simply a kind of idolatry, the worship of a false god. It does no one any good, especially here in our own nation, where folks go around speaking lines from scripture as if they have ultimate authority for everyone alive.

When progressive people react negatively to the received scripture of the western world, it's almost always because of the abusive interpretations. A literal document about literal events it is not. I say any scripture, *anything written*, always needs to be interpreted slowly, over time, by people who study it with patience, care, historical, metaphorical, sociological and language awareness, and a sense of what the words may have meant in their very rich, literate, original context. If you don't want to do that, fine. No problem. Just leave it alone. But some of us do want to know.

No honest scholar of the scriptures can ever give a final answer about anything, either, because no such thing is even possible. Yet taking the time to dig deeper can lift up riches even in an ancient text. Riches as beautiful as Tutankhamen's golden mask in the story this morning, as

theologians like Paul Tillich, or Amy Jill Levine, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or James Cone, or Letty Russell, have truly demonstrated in their words.

Was there a historical Moses at all? Some say no. I think probably yes myself. But can we know much about him? No. Not very much. At this point anyway. But we have plenty of time to look if we are interested. To dig deeper. Even if we don't come up with anything as exciting as a golden mask. Just some colorful dirt. And that is Ok.

2. Back in the late Roman Imperial Era, two theologians regarded each other as heretics: Pelagius of Ireland and Augustine of Hippo in North Africa. They both accused each other of heresy. Augustine came up with the idea of "original sin." He said that every human baby was tainted at birth, bound for no good, and that only the grace or kindness of God could save us. Pelagius (and Unitarians and Universalists both were called Pelagians by their critics) taught that this idea was rubbish, and that we were individually responsible for our own misdeeds, and that our putative ancient parents, Adam and Eve, have nothing to do with us.

I was never taught to believe that Adam and Eve were real people, fortunately, and few, except fundamentalist creationists, believe that they existed as real human beings (always white by the way). In this secular world, most anyone who has taken the time to go deeper, knows they are just an ancient Mesopotamian legend. Yet despite the fact that such literal religious details are largely defunct, the argument still goes on.

And here I think *both* heretics had a point, even though historically Augustine, who kept on resisting being kind, won the battle back then.

Thus I don't think the battle was won. Nor can be won. And I think the conflict exists to this very day. For yes indeed, I agree I have to be responsible for my own life. Blaming others for my mistakes is foolish, a sign of immaturity and cowardice. Pelagius was right here. But Augustine was right to point out that no one's individuality is, or can be, cut off from the larger culture. In other words, many problems are not just personal, but social. As I have said many times, racial and other ethnic hatreds do not amount to just some white person spewing hatred under a white hood, but that we are all wound and bound together as part of larger historical systems here in the States, hundreds of years old. These systems, largely unconscious, drag us all along in their train, to quote Proust's affirmation words, save that we spend deliberate time resisting their power day after day after day.

Though both Pelagius, and Augustine are dead, and their specific theologies have little traction in our Unitarian Universalist communities, their 1500 year old debate continues, dressed in new secular clothing, nevertheless. It continues both inside us as individuals, and inside our communities. I wonder, where do you think you fall in the continuum of this debate?

In the end, what I am saying is that all theology, all anti-theology, all heresies and anti-heresies, all the isms, are not and were never really about vast theological concepts at all, but are the clumsy expressions of ordinary people trying to wrest some meaning out of their lives, some significance greater than their day-to-day grind, higher, and deeper, than their suffering. Julia Vinograd is perfectly correct I think. All of these vast ideas are puffed up versions depicting our

very personal, very human questions. You know: Well, who are *you*? Do you sign petitions? Do you litter? Do you love? What are your hands for? Do you feel cheated? What does your face look like while you are hearing these words? Do you cross at the crosswalk? Do you love? What is it that you can't make happen? Are you on good terms with your scars? Are you listening? Who are you? Do you love?

Those are the theological questions which make the most sense to me, and which seem deeper and more precious than any of the ancient heretical debates that shape our surface life.

And I am beginning to feel that until we dig deeper, and then deeper and then deeper still, spiritual archeologists if you will, to answer those very personal questions in the best, most honest way we can, the French wit will go right on saying to us: Plus ça change, plus la même chose. The more it changes, the more it stays the same.

Offering

From the generosity of human beings, one to the other, comes all the good we know. For when we support each other we are supporting ourselves. After all, we are part of the communities we support. May we share responsibility for this community right now, with gifts of generosity as beautiful as the music which now comes to us as a generous gift.

Returning

The Rev. Carol Brody, always supported with love and wit and care by her husband Paul, has been a powerful presence in this congregation for decades. Attending our local seminary, Methesco, Carol was ordained by this congregation to serve as Minister of Religious Education, or MRE, as they used to say in short form. She served and enlarged both the school and the congregation as a whole, offering her pastoral care and wisdom during times of loss and hardship in people's lives. She and Paul have raised a fine family during all of this, as she balanced the demands of congregational ministry with the very tender and loving needs of family and friends outside the congregation. Then Carol was asked to serve as our District Executive, the role which Joan Van Becelaere has now. Rooted here in Columbus, she visited the various congregations in the district from Cleveland over to Pittsburgh and down to West Virginia, and brought them into contact with each other so that they might be strong progressive and healthy presences here in that part of the Midwest anchored by Lake Eire.

When I arrived here, she was no longer serving in that way, but she was clearly revered, and so I brought up the idea of naming her the Emerita minister of this congregation. During all of my ministry of going on 17 years, Carol has been the best possible Emerita any lucky minister like me or a congregation like ours could have. She has both officiated and helped Wendy and me, and now Eric and me, with memorials and weddings for folks she watched grow up in these halls, and for companions during her own religious journey in this congregation. Carol and Paul have sold the house where they have lived for many decades, and now live at Wesley Glen. Her children are celebrating this present transition with a celebration that will follow the 11 o'clock service, but we wanted to lift her up at this service as well, for she served the whole congregation, and the association of which it is a part, for many decades. Let us rise and celebrate her now by singing #1010 in the teal books...but substituting the last line with the words printed in your orders. Please rise and sing

Singing 1010 Oh We Give Thanks

Blessing