



FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY of WESTCHESTER

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Buffeted by the Christmas/Hanukkah hurly-burly frazzle-dazzle, a computer that expired in an untimely manner, and a new computer whose keyboard varies significantly from the old computer, I confessed to Sarita that I didn't know what I would speak on tonight, and she suggested that I just needed some inspiration. I replied, "I'm closer to EXpiration than INspiration." But I decided I could look to the classics for inspiration, roughly meaning "to breathe into," and found Theodore Parker. You have heard Parker's most famous saying: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward Justice." Abraham Lincoln read and treasured Parker and the saying, and the saying then found its way into Martin Luther King's repertoire and a speech in 1968, and from there it was frequently cited by Barak Obama and woven into his presidential Oval Office rug. Parker preached at a time when a good sermon was at least two hours long, and I consulted his 1841, seventeen-page sermon, "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity." Although I could not spare time to read all of his ornate, florid writing I found what I needed for tonight—the comparison between the Word of Jesus which Parker thought has been permanently (and universally) useful to humankind and those of other people, institutions, and nations which briefly flowered and then faded into obscurity.

Here's a snippet of Parker's thought:

Looking at the Word of Jesus, at real Christianity, the pure religion he taught, nothing appears more fixed and certain. Its influence widens as light extends; it deepens as the nations grow more wise. But, looking at the history of what men call Christianity, nothing seems more uncertain and perishable. While true religion is always the same thing, in each century

and every land, in each man that feels it, the Christianity of the Pulpit, which is the religion taught; the Christianity of the People, which is the religion that is accepted and lived out; has never been the same in any two centuries or lands, except only in name. (page 3)

“The religion that is lived out” is why we are here, celebrating Christmas. We are neither holograms nor concepts; we physically inhabit the physical universe and so we revere the presence of a person who clearly spoke of high principles because that embodiment enables us to grasp what the abstractions could mean to us. Jesus spoke of peace and love, he spoke of honoring the life force, or God, giving to others what you would like given to you, and holding fast to what you most value. But he not only spoke of those, he was living in a world where he faced the same fears and hopes as any one of us. That he was born in a stable makes his message accessible to the poor, which could be any one of us. That he was subject to the oppression of an occupying power, just as we are subject to the oppression of powers that would have us fear to speak our minds and would take our resources to conduct wars without our real consent (as Joe Gilmore said at the beginning). His example lives for us as an example of fortitude in the service of Love.

The ethereal overlay of angels speaking of his birth and wise men following a star to him was simply the metaphorical way the Scriptures needed to assert a connection of the divine to Jesus, but by extension the divine is connected to every one of us. The physical universe as we know it interrupted by the unexpected, the miraculous, in order to impress upon us that Jesus is both one of us and very special. That is why I asked that people of the congregation read Bible passages and respond to the lessons they taught. I have read and responded at Christmas Eve services to all these passages, but I wish to emphasize that we are all equally examples of the priesthood of all believers, examples of the wisdom that comes from each of us sharing with each other, together. I wish to emphasize how Christmas touches us more personally than the transient hierarchies, rituals, and theories of Christianity. Parker’s either/or, black/white view of Jesus’ wisdom vs. Christian institutions is more extreme

than what I see today. The Pleasantville Lutheran Church advertises, and I quote:

We welcome people of all races, ethnicities, and cultures, people of all sexual orientations gender identities and expressions, and people of all ages, abilities, marital status, and social/economic status, and dedicate ourselves to racial and gender equity . . .

But they are a lonely if lovely, exception. The Methodists have torn themselves apart by fighting with each other about dignity and equality for everyone's sexuality. It was a big deal (in the news) when Pope Francis declared that Roman Catholic priests could bless same-sex unions, but nothing in the blessing could be construed as a wedding, no wedding clothing, or clerical vestments; blessings could be by a priest anywhere but in a church. I want to emphasize that Christmas for us means we are all called to Love one another, we are called to be inspired by Jesus to Love without holding back. We are called to bless love wherever we find it. You want a blessing? You can have it here. Early in my ministry when I was an assistant minister in Manhattan, I was asked to do a funeral for a young boy's pet turtle. I buried him in the dirt of a two foot by three-foot urban church yard and spoke of the delight his turtle had given the boy. Five years later, the boy's mother, also then chair of their ministerial search committee, called me to ask if I would apply to be their senior minister and thanked me again for that memorial service. We are all:

called to speak of love wherever it is found,

called to speak of love as much as is humanly possible,

called to speak the truth to powers that would have us fail the powerless, called to contradict those who harshly demean the outsider or despise the poor, or deprive the immigrant.

We are all called to honor and protect the miracle of birth, the sweetness of new life in the midst of fear and anguish wherever in the world births occur. Every baby born is a miracle. Every baby born in Syria, Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, or the other 50 world-wide fields of war is a miracle.

How they grow into curiosity and learning is what breathes life into our spirits.

At this point, let us listen to Theodore Parker once more, as he concludes his sermon, an ordination sermon for a young minister but a sermon that could just as well apply to all of us as ordained to the service of each other. Parker said:

You may encourage your brother to tell you the truth. Your affection will then be precious to him; your prayers of great price. Every evidence of your sympathy will go to baptize him anew to Holiness and Truth. You will then have his best words, his brightest thoughts, and his most hearty prayers. He may grow old in your service, blessing and blest. He will have

....”The sweetest, best of consolation,

....The thought, that he has given,

....To serve the cause of Heaven,

....The freshness of his early inspiration.” (page 17)

And there I found my inspiration only incidentally in Theodore Parker as an early example of how Jesus pointing to Love’s spiritual core that helps us love one another. Inspiration means the breath of heaven or Love or whatever name you give the goodness of the Universe, so energizes our consciousness that we—as Jesus instructed us-- do unto others as we would have them do unto us. So be it.