

SERMON:
MY CONTEMPORARY UNITARIAN CHRISTIANITY
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I was raised in a Christian faith tradition, and of all the exotic blends, I was a Catholic Mississippian, thank you very much. As we can learn from some Native American Tribes, teachers often begin by stating who taught them, as a way of honoring their service. In this spirit, I share my background with you.

On the Coast of Mississippi, the Catholic Clergy happen to be imports from Ireland, the sort of individuals who are just as comfortable leading a Mass as they are drinking, swearing, and embodying the joy of life they seek to teach. I find myself in amazement how cold Baltimore Catholicism seems to me, for you see, the Catholics where I am from are profoundly liberal, social justice seeking, and determined to live their faith in actions, not words. I share this information because Mississippi Catholics were formative in my life, and in many ways, have come to shaped my own spiritual and emotional approach to the world and its betterment.

Particularly in the Sisters of Mercy, I found people who are altruistic, embody unconditional love, yet who are disciplined and expect that we all fulfill our highest possibilities. Having said this, I have listened with agony to some of the stories from people who have shared terrible things done to them by Catholics, purportedly in the name of their piety.

And you know what? It's easy to get bogged down in those stories. When I was sixteen, I began a journey into a place that would lead me away from my upbringing, and all because of my failing to see the forest for the trees.

I left home to venture north for a college early program, situated in the heart of the Bible Belt in North Mississippi. For a spunky, though snarky young gay blade, it was an opportunity to spread my wings, even more so, to explore myself, especially my sexuality that I had, until this point, suppressed.

In my senior year, I shared a bathroom with two juniors. The dormitory was broken into suites. Two rooms to a bathroom, with two to possibly four people sharing it. Just my gay luck, I was paired with Jeremy and Elliot, one openly gay, the other so far in the closet he was finding Christmas presents... though still singing *Dancing Queen* at the top of his lungs every evening.

As a senior, I had conveniently arranged that I had no classes before 10:00 a.m. Jeremy, being the perky and perpetually optimistic sort, would rise at 7:00 am. every morning, throw open the bathroom door, and greet the day by belting out Cher at the top of his lungs. Cher would ask if I believed in life after love; I would ask Jeremy if he believed in life after 8am, and if he did, to turn that darn music down! Such were my mornings; how I miss them.

Jeremy was a miracle in himself; he was born out of wedlock to a promiscuous mother. Jeremy was brilliant (he would go on to Dartmouth on a full scholarship), selflessly kind, loving, the most devoted of friends. When Jeremy confided in his mother about his sexuality, she was convinced that his sexual orientation was God's wrath for her lifestyle. Now only seeing this perceived blight, his mother lamented there were now two fruitcakes at Christmas Dinner. Jeremy was sent off to ex-gay camps, off to a myriad of psychiatrists and counselors

and pastors and exorcists and forceful relatives. All in the name of Jesus. Wouldn't it have been wonderful if his mother could see the very joy of God in his kind, loving disposition that I saw every morning?

It's stories like Jeremy's that can blind-side our rational minds. We start questioning everything – and for me, somewhere along those questioning paths in my life, Jesus stopped fitting. Even being the least juridical figure in the Bible, I lost his message in my anger at his messengers. I forgot my mentors while treating the wounds from the hatred of an entirely different type of people, fundamentalists who fixated on attaching recalcitrant conditions on any love or charity they might offer. People who could coldly watch boys die at the hands of their hatred, and indignantly respond with piety. These people bewildered every sense of decency inside of me.

How many of us have found ourselves here, in this place of hurt where the message dies, the messenger vilified, and the source damned? In bewilderment, we reasonably assign blame to the cruelty of the so-called pious. In error, however, we find ourselves assigning loathing to all these people may hold dear. Jesus, when wounded by such people, becomes the object of our scorn, the enabler of this hateful prejudice. Or does he?

I have often marveled at my encounters with reactionary atheists, people who do not believe in God because of the experiences they have with people who do, and who thus see God as enabling all the death and suffering in the world in his name. They make seemingly righteous denunciations of religion, theistic belief, and the division it creates amongst us. I've always countered that, even if there were a magic switch for turning off religious or theistic impulses in humanity, our world would be much the same. If you think that religion, or Jesus, or God, or the Bible are the root of the homophobia that the pious inflicted on Jeremy, think again. The species has found far more petty reasons and rationalizations to hate, suppress, or kill each other than God. The Third Reich, a glaring example of human cruelty in the extreme, was barely religious at all, as Hitler was not religious.

To quote Descartes, I am a thinking thing, and stewing in reactionary anger simply cannot hold my logical processes at bay forever. I am an artist, a musician, a lifestyle that calls me to love above all other things, that calls me to be love, and to rest it from the hands of anger and petulance at all costs. Like many people, in my heart of hearts, there came a time when I needed reconciliation with my upbringing. The Christian incarnation of Orthodox Judaism that our fundamentalist fellows on the Christian Right perpetrate against people like me made forgiveness a hard, painful act.

How do you forgive the seeming weapon used to beat you by those who meant you mortal harm? Those grudges are the hardest to loose, because you don't owe that weapon anything. You owe yourself something, folks, because that hurt is poison. Letting go is something you do for yourself, not for the weapon, and certainly not for the perpetrator. I quote Alanis Morissette from her song, This Grudge:

But who's it hurting now?
Who's the one that's stuck?
Who's it torturing now
With an antique knot in her stomach?

I want to be big and let go
 Of this grudge that's grown old
 All this time I've not known
 How to rest this bygone
 I wanna be soft and resolved
 Clean of slate and released
 I wanna forgive for the both of us

To see the man Jesus crucified for politically inconvenient rhetoric is the parallel of Jeremy's struggle. Even dying, Jesus stated, "Forgive them; they know not what they do." Jesus' message is not the malevolent cause of Jeremy's suffering; it's the victim. Whoever this man was, who came to teach unconditional love, truly, unapologetically, deeply unconditional love to be the rallying cry of those who would oppress, punish, and maim – is that not the ultimate insult? When I came to faith in Jesus' message – not faith in him, or his divinity, or his church, or his life, but solely in his message – I got it: when you are hurt, meet it with love; when you are wronged, respond with love; when you are scared, react with love; when you are dying, find strength in your love.

In spite of his elevated social standing as a Rabbi, Jesus used his position to denounce those that would try to maintain meaningless religious laws that did nothing more than continue to divide people.

I'll make no claim that what Jesus teaches is easy, simple, or convenient. Orthodoxy is literalness, and yes, that's pretty simple. Looking at Jesus' teachings, I've realized a few things about fundamentalism. Jesus' vast subtlety is, sadly, lost on the cruel and hardened with a fundamentalist mindset. How could the fundamentalist possibly understand that his message to the very Orthodox Peter in asking him to walk out to him on the water is exactly what they fail to grasp here presently in this contemporary issue: trust me, trust in my love, and trust that orthodox truths must not always be right. Trust in the revolutionary power of living a good life of kindness without need for reward, or justification based on fear, and without need for exacting specifics. I am compelled to ask: how Christian Fundamentalism can exist? How do you fundamentally follow a man who was utterly esoteric and non-literal in his teachings?

That is the irony. Jesus is the thinking man's muse; God knows it would have been easier for fundamentalists who are scared, thick, ignorant, or cruel for Jesus to abandon the parables, the subtlety, nuance, the cleverness and speak in easy declarative sentences. No one ever said the musings of Jesus were easy to understand, especially in their delightfully non-literal nature. I believe that his message has gone completely over the heads of the North Mississippians mentioned; or worse, that they are afraid, and cling to what is known, what is easy, or worst of all, what is convenient to continue believing.

If anything about Jesus' way of approaching people had been convenient, he would never have been put to death. Jesus wasn't put to death for calling people to leave their sinful ways; he was put to death for stating that the religious norms of his culture were sinful, as they had become so meaningless and arbitrary in their application, that all they were doing was hurting people at the hands of the pious engaging in sophistry. There's a profound lesson in Jesus'

death, a lesson much more fundamental than high concepts of eternal salvation: it's having the bravery to take what is known and demand that people evolve their hearts and understandings to the current needs of the age. So fierce was the religious opposition to this, that he was crucified. And so fierce were the beautiful convictions of this man, that he chose death rather than the status quo.

Is Jesus my God? Was his death necessary for some supposed debt to be paid to God for simply being mortal in nature? Is the virginity of his mother necessary at all? And so on... I'm not here to engage in those thoughts. They simply don't concern me.

I am concerned with other matters: Do I believe in his message? Absolutely. Is that message something I think was worth dying for? Absolutely. Unconditional love, even when all hope seems lost, even when hurt seems too deep, even when life seems unlivable. Non-violent, unconditional love. My integrity deserves nothing less.

We are called to be above reactionary anger, in spite of circumstances, or enemies, or grudges, or north Mississippians; we're called to be stewards of unconditional love. Amen.