

UP FROM THE ASHES

TEXT: Joel 2:12-17
Isaiah 58:1-12
2 Corinthians 5:20-b-6:10

This week is the first week of Lent in the Christian liturgical calendar. This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday. A day of atonement for Christians. A day to repent from wrong-doing or short-falling or sin and turn back to God. It's a sort of bastard New Year, as people make resolutions to give up something in exchange for being given yet another chance to get into right relationship with God. That's the traditional interpretation.

Lent stopped making sense to me about the time I started studying feminist theology back in the early 90s, and discovered Starhawk, the Covenant of the Goddess, and other pagan ideas. Then of course I learned about the early Catholic mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, and Meister Eckhart, who preached a God whose nature we can know by observing the world around us: the rocks, the rivers, the trees, the four winds, the seasons. When we pay attention to how the seasons change, and how they are not necessarily directly related to how the National Weather Service describes them, we may experience Spring as starting around February 2nd instead of March 21st. With all the world green and growing, with crocus poking up through the snow and cherry blossoms burgeoning into life, how can the Church be consumed with sin and death?

Somewhere in all that feminist writing I learned that Lent was invented by the Church to control the sex lives of the people. Probably because of St. Augustine, all of the festivals of the Church were declared to be times when sex was to be strictly abstained from. Sex on Sundays was taboo. So was sex on the Saints' days, and other feast days. Declaring 40 days of fasting in the Spring, when all the natural world is celebrating its fertility, was a real tour de force on the part of the Church. By the time the Church was finished with its project, there were three days in the year when sex was allowed.

My purpose is not to debunk Lent, although I have to say that my Mother, who was raised in a very conservative Christian tradition and is still very traditional in her Christian faith, used to say that for Lent she was going to give up cigars. So my skepticism about this so-called ôseasonö goes back to childhood.

Nevertheless, there is some metaphor here that we can work with. One of the myths of human consciousness is the myth of the Phoenix: a golden bird who dies in flames, and then rises again from the ashes. At the end of the most recent Harry Potter novel, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, the Phoenix, which has lived in Professor Dumbledore's office for years, gives voice to the grief felt at Dumbledore's death:

Somewhere out in the darkness, a phoenix was singing in a way Harry had never heard before: a stricken lament of terrible beauty. Harry felt ... that the music was inside him, not without; it was his own grief turned magically to song that echoed across the grounds and through the castle windows . . .

Bright white flames . . . erupted around DumbledoreÆs body and the table upon which it lay: Higher and higher they rose, obscuring the body. White smoke spiraled into the air and made strange shapes: Harry thought, for one heart-stopping moment, that he saw a phoenix flying joyfully into the blue . . .

The scene telegraphs hope, or a hint that the phoenix could well return to Harry in the next and last novel in the series. His wand has a phoenix feather embedded in the center, after all.

This is a powerful metaphor: life from death, the spirit rising from the ashes. In the old days, the season of Lent was a season of want. There was little left to eat except the root vegetables -- carrots, potatoes, rutabagas, turnips -- and there may or may not be milk yet from the cattle and goats, depending upon when the Lenten season began -- and certainly nothing is really growing yet. Even for us today, in the early years of the 21st Century, in these United States, we know about the people who have to choose between buying medications that will keep them alive and buying food. We know about the people working for WalMart who can't afford to shop there because their wages are so low. WalMart is now the biggest corporation on the Planet. General Motors has been left behind in the dust. So for us perhaps in this ashen time here at the beginning of the Christian season of Lent, the issue is not poverty, but justice. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." That is the hope of the spring season.

How do we get there without choking on the Christian dogma so many of us have rejected? And justifiably so?

I think it is crucial for Unitarian Universalists and other exiles from traditional faith to realize that there are many Christian scholars, theologians, professors, leaders, thinkers, and even a few Christian ministers who are working on the question of whether Jesus' message is relevant to the post-modern age in which we live, and are realizing that that message can only be relevant if Christian theology is allowed to evolve along with human consciousness.

I want to introduce two of those scholar/professors. The first is a Catholic philosopher who is now the Chair of the Religion and Philosophy Department at Stanford University in California. His name is Thomas Sheehan. The second is John Dominic Crossan, professor emeritus of DePaul University. Crossan is considered to be the most important, most influential scholar of the historical Jesus of our time. Both men are associated with the Jesus Seminar, a project of the Westar Institute in Santa Rosa, California. It is dedicated to the search for the historical Jesus and the origins of the Christian religion.

John Dominic Crossan's latest book is titled, "In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom." It is a fascinating book of Roman history, Christian history, and the implications for the post-modern relevance of Jesus' message to the social-political conditions we find ourselves in right now.

According to Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, his co-author, the purpose of Roman Imperialism was to bring peace and justice to the known world through conquest. Once a tribe or country was vanquished, colonies of Roman troops were established to insure the pacification and incorporation of the populace into the culture of Rome. That culture was based on a civil theology in which the Emperor was proclaimed and worshiped as a god, who then assured justice

for the citizens of Rome. For the Emperors the sequence was first victory, next peace, then divinity. For the people the sequence was first defeat, next assimilation, and finally peace, with justice assured in the end by the Emperor.

The Apostle Paul took his story about Jesus to the Pagan/Gentiles who were associated with Jewish communities in the Roman world: especially Corinth, Thessalonika, and Ephesus. Jewish communities were established throughout the Mediterranean region as a result of trade but the Jewish culture was in direct theological conflict with the Roman culture. The Jewish people were not about to replace their God with Ceasar. As a result, there was a kind of uneasy accommodation between the two, along with occasional pogroms and persecutions. Into that cauldron came Paul with his interpretation of the message of Jesus. And that message was that justice comes not as the end result of imperial Roman victory-peace-divinity, but is the on-going, in-process condition of life, a direct gift of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Crosson writes, “[T]he first and fundamental challenge . . . to the Christian faith [and I would say to anyone involved in a post-modern spiritual quest] is this: Do you believe the process of making the world a just place has begun and what are you doing about joining the program?” In other words, Paul taught that Faith means that what God will do has already begun. It is an evolutionary work-in-progress, and if we want to participate in that work, all we have to do is open our eyes and ears.

Thomas Sheehan, the philosopher from Stanford University, suggests that justice is OF God, not FROM God. In other words, Justice is who God is. But “justice” does not mean retribution, or payment, or revenge. Justice means fairness -- for all of life -- not because some interventionist God requires it, but because justice is what life deserves for its own sake. In fact, Sheehan suggests that the concept of God in our post-modern understanding means living in common for justice and mercy. God means justice-compassion, without external or transcendent motivation or reward.

So what does that mean in real terms? Usually we think that Justice is retributive -- i.e., if you do something wrong, you will pay -- either with your money or your life. We almost never think of justice as distributive -- as fairness, or access to the kind of power that gives us food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare. For example, suppose a woman traveling from Georgia to Virginia in August is stopped for speeding on I-95, and the cop discovers she has three children stuffed into the trunk of her car on a 90 degree day. You may remember this is an actual case. The first assumption is that she is at best stupid, and at worst an unfit mother and deserves to be charged with gross neglect, thrown into jail, and have the children taken away from her. That’s justice as retribution. Payment for wrong-doing. But suppose we find out that she is married to the CEO of some huge corporation? Ah, well, there must be some circumstance here. No rich, educated woman would possibly do such a thing without a very good reason. The rich woman is released on her own recognizance, while her story (perhaps of abuse) is investigated. She is innocent until proven guilty -- that is distributive justice. She is treated fairly because of who she is.

What about scruffy guys in turbans and long robes rounded up after a bombing run in Afghanistan?

Should national corporations with more than 8,000 employees in the State of Maryland be required to spend a certain percentage of their profits on health insurance coverage for those Maryland residents?

Does the fact that I don't want the National Security Agency listening to my phone calls or reading my emails mean I have something to hide?

Distributive justice is not the justice of empire.

Here is another quote from Thomas Sheehan:

And the Jesus of history, what would he have to do with any of this? Imagine that only half of what we know of him were true. Common table fellowship, overturning the dominant social hierarchy, consorting with outcasts, taking on the empire and the religious establishment, and then imagine that . . . Jesus somehow found out that he had no Abba in heaven who might gift us with our daily bread, forgive us our sins, bring about his heaven-sent kingdom on earth. Can you imagine Jesus throwing it all over? Eating only with the rich? Joining the conservative establishment and reaffirming the old hierarchies, kissing the wrist of Rome and the religious establishment, preaching that the eighth sacrament is capitalism?

Jesus probably actually said, "Blessed are those that thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." The meaning of the word "righteous," as many of us were taught in confirmation or catechism classes, is to be in right relationship with God. Usually that means doing what we think is God's will, or doing the work of justice-compassion because Jesus (or God) will bless us in return. But God's kingdom, God's realm is distributive justice-compassion. So the moment we find ourselves acting in retribution, expecting a reward from God, or demanding a payback from our neighbor — the death penalty, for example — we are out of God's realm and into the Empire of human society, where justice is retributive, not distributive. Justice in the Empire is the goal, not the condition in which we live.

The moment we decide to structure our payroll so that our employees fall just under the level that will trigger health insurance or pension coverage, we are allied with Empire, not with justice-compassion.

The ancient way to get into right relationship with God, after having failed to act from justice-compassion, was to offer a sacrifice — often the best of the animals we could have raised ourselves or bought in the market was ritually killed and roasted. The sacrifice was then eaten, in a feast celebrating our return to the balance of justice. The animal sacrificed was not considered to be somehow deserving of death, nor was the ritual considered to be a payment or exchange for some action committed by the one offering the sacrifice. Rather, it was a celebration and thanksgiving for making a change, for repenting, for turning away from wrong. The sacrifice made the transformation holy.

In the Roman civic theology, sacrifice became a way of commemorating the relationships between humans and divinity (that is to say, Ceasar and the other gods) and the relationships among people and between communities. It was a celebration of retributive justice: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Roman society was constructed on the basis of patronage. That means,

favors done between not only social equals, but between classes. A sacrificial banquet in the Empire was a way of paying back the patron above you (whether it was a god or Caesar, or a social better), as well as obligating a similar sacrificial banquet in your honor by the people who owed you, whether your equals or beneath you.

Interesting that recently there has been a great surge of charitable donations from people and organizations formerly associated with a certain Capitol Hill lobbyist. . .

Into that mix comes Paul with his message that there is neither Greek nor Jew, Slave nor free, but all are equal in the Christian community -- there is no patronage -- because of the willing sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus died because he challenged the civil religion and the power of the Roman Empire. He died in the struggle for justice-compassion, and Jesus' God (the Jewish God) approves of and participates in that sacrifice. Not in order to make some kind of blood payment for sin, but as the ultimate illustration that the realm of God is one not of presidential patronage, but of distributive justice. God's Kingdom is not an empire of earned perks and privilege, but a condition of equality, humility, and fairness. Jesus, and anyone who participates in the work of justice-compassion, willingly gives up the possibility of survival in the empire's terms.

So yes. If we pay our employees a living wage and provide them with health care and pension benefits, our profit margins will suffer.

So what?

Such sacrifice is not an act of obedience, but it is a revelation of the nature of God. Such a God, in Crosson's words, "[may be] a God whose gracious presence as free gift is the beating heart of the universe, and does not need to threaten, to intervene, to punish, or to control: a God whose presence is justice and life, but whose absence is injustice and death."

If our human consciousness has now evolved to the point where we are able to let go of the old interventionist God and accept the idea that God is the name for living from justice-compassion, then a Eucharist, or sacrificial meal, becomes a celebration of the Universe participating with us in our continuing struggle for justice-compassion -- what Matthew Fox calls "The Great Work." And the Eucharist, the Common Meal, is an invitation to others to join us in that struggle.

As I have done and will likely always do whenever I have a chance, I extend that invitation to you to join with me in our own sacrificial communal meal, dedicated to the sacred work we do in the struggle for justice-compassion in this community, and in the other communities we are part of. I extend that invitation to you to turn away from the Empire and realign ourselves to righteousness. To right relationship with justice-compassion.

Join me in the invitation and the response, printed in your bulletin.

- One: The Eucharist is about the universe loving us unconditionally still one more time and giving itself to us in the most intimate way (as food and drink). Interconnectivity is the heart of the Eucharistic experience: God and humanity coming together, God and flesh, the flesh of wheat [break bread]
wine, [pour wine]
sunshine, soil, water, human ingenuity, stars, supernovas, galaxies, storms, fireballs û every Eucharist has a 15-billion-year sacred story that renders it holy.
- All: The Eucharist is heart food from the cosmos û the ômystical body of Christö and the Cosmic Christ or Buddha nature found in all beings in the universe û to us. The Eucharist is also our hearts expanding and responding generously: “Yes, we will.” We will carry on the heart-work called compassion, the work of the cosmos itself.
(Matthew Fox, Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh)
- One: Come. All is made ready, and All are welcome. Tear off a piece of bread and dip it into the wine.