

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
The Trouble with Paul
September 25, 2011

Prelude

Chalice Lighting

We light this candle

For the light of truth and reason

For the warmth of love and friendship

For the flame of strength and action

And for the vision of tolerance and justice.

Opening Hymn

John Pepper

Please join me standing as you are able singing our opening hymn No. 157 “Step by Step the Longest March”

Announcements

John Pepper

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here.

(Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, we have an application form also on the table you can fill out and turn in when you are ready.

Next week I'll be back with a service honoring the events of 9/11.

Our special collection this morning is for the Walker County Habitat for Humanity. Please make your checks out directly to them.

If you can, please stay for our potluck lunch.

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

Opening Words

John Pepper

Please join with me now in a spirit of worship.

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We come together to celebrate who we are, to share the insights that give meaning and hope to our lives, to learn from the wisdom of others, that their truths may contribute to our understanding.

We gather, we share, we learn; we celebrate our coming together.

Rejoice Together, Ann Peart, p.11

Hymn

Please join me singing Hymn No. 86 “Blessed Spirit of My Life.”

Joys and Concerns

John Pepper

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

Offertory Statement

Offertory Music

Story for All Ages – *Roly Poly Pangolin* by Anna Dewdney

Reading

My first reading this morning comes from the book *The First Paul* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.

For Paul, love in this text is radical shorthand for what life “in Christ” is like – life in the “new creation,” life “in the Spirit,” life animated by a Spirit transplant. As the primary fruit of a Spirit-filled life, love is about more than our relationships with individuals.

For Paul, it had a social meaning as well. The social form of love for Paul was distributive justice and nonviolence, bread and peace. Paul’s vision of life “in Christ,” life in the “new creation,” did not mean, “Accept the imperial way of life with its oppression and violence, but practice love in your personal relationships.”

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To make the same point differently, people like Jesus and Paul were not executed for saying, “Love one another.” They were killed because their understanding of love meant more than being compassionate toward individuals, although it did include that.

It also meant standing against the domination systems that ruled their world, and collaborating with the Spirit in the creation of a new way of life that stood in contrast to the normalcy of the wisdom of the world.

Love and justice go together. Justice without love can be brutal, and love without justice can be banal. Love is the heart of justice, and justice is the social form of love.¹

Responsive Reading

No. 638 “Love” from 1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. Prophecies will come to an end. Tongues will cease. Knowledge will come to an end. We know in part, we prophesy in part. But when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.

When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. Now, we see in a mirror, in a riddle.

Then we will see face to face. Now I know in part. Then I will know fully.

Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

¹ The First Paul, 204-5.

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Prayer

John Pepper

Please close your eyes, look out the window, simply relax in whatever way you center yourself for a time of prayer and meditation. (Pause)

Spirit of Life, so much of my time is spent trying to discover my true identity. Who am I? What am I to do with my one wonderful and marvelous life? Probing for answers to these questions, I touch the startling truth that the “I” that I seek can only be found in relationship to the pulsing force of life and the people who surround me.

The psalmist cried to God saying, “Where can I go from Your spirit, where can I flee from Your presence?” Yet he knew there was no escaping this relationship. And so it is with us. Our true identity is to be found in the relationships we create and is fashioned in the spaces that separate us.

Today I pray for the wisdom to live my life, not in isolation, but in the sacred space of togetherness.

(Pause) Amen!

Be the Change, Stephen Shick, p.20

Sermon – *The Trouble with Paul*

Who exactly is the real Paul of the Bible? The Paul I am most familiar with is the most prolific author in the New Testament. His writings are both beautiful and infuriating. On the one hand, he’s given us beautiful prose and sentiments like those we shared together in our Responsive Reading.

And on the other hand, over the centuries his words have been used by many in the Christian community to condone the subjugation of women and the owning of slaves. Quite frankly, the tremendous disparity in his writings has mostly turned me off to Paul and in effect, I’ve thrown the good Paul out with the bad Paul. Mentally, I often just can’t separate the two. It’s just not worth the effort.

But when I step back for just a minute and when I’m scrupulously honest, it isn’t really fair to the real historical person who lived and breathed and who was first known as Saul and later as Paul of Tarsus. We UUs pride ourselves on facts and getting to the truth of every issue and lumping together the real Paul with the much larger Paul of the New Testament is simply not fair or right. The real Paul truly deserves much, much more.

What I’m about to share isn’t in any way new and in fact it is generally accepted throughout much of the educated evangelical world and almost universally throughout the much broader religious academic world.

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You see there wasn't simply one Paul in the New Testament; there were probably at least 3 or many more Paul's. First there was the living breathing Paul and then there were the Pauls who came after him, who attempted to write in a similar but ultimately different style and who attributed their writings to the original Paul.

When I'm honest, it is mostly this second grouping of Pauls, the ones who wrote in his name, which I have major problems with. I'll call them the imposter Pauls. In my very evangelical seminary, they admitted and taught about the different Paul's, they just weren't as troubled by the imposters as I was and am.

A recent book written by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan reminded me that there was a Paul, the original and real Paul, who is worth remembering and even revering. That Paul died for his beliefs because he dared to take on the status quo and as Borg and Crossan label it, the domination system, also known as the Roman Empire.

He didn't die for telling slaves to obey their masters, that saying came much later. He died for claiming slaves were the equals of their masters and for claiming and promoting other similar heretical ideas. Yes, he was a heretic and that is what killed him.

There is a rather large consensus among many reputable scholars that there are in fact only seven (7) genuine books of the New Testament written by Paul and they are Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon. Borg and Crossan call the author of these books the Radical Paul. Books probably not written by Paul are 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus and Borg and Crossan call the authors of these books Reactionary Paul.

There is no consensus of authorship on the final grouping of books but they have a very different flavor than the books written by the Radical Paul and Borg and Crossan call their author or authors Conservative Paul. Those books include Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians.

An easy illustration of the differences can be found when you compare the writings of the Radical Paul in 1 Corinthians and Galatians with the writings of the Conservative Paul in Colossians.

In both 1 Corinthians and Galatians Paul claims Jews and Greeks along with slaves and free, are all equal in Christ Jesus. Conservative Paul says the same thing but then he provides caveats by saying wives obey your husbands and slaves obey your masters.

This conservative Paul may have been the creator of the "fine print" we all so despise in contracts today, such as yes you can get 0% financing, but the fine print says only for six months and then it converts to 50% interest for life. Conservative Paul would also have been perfectly comfortable with "Separate but

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Equal” and “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” – two equally despicable notions which are no longer officially with us, and the last, was formally abolished only just this last week.

The styles of the books are simply so different a close analysis of the content along with many other grammatical aspects have resulted in the very common belief in multiple authors.

But another possibly even bigger problem with the various Pauline letters is that related to them we really don’t know much about the intended recipients of the letters. We don’t know the character or the circumstances of the communities. We simply don’t know the specific circumstances which led Paul to write the letters for any of the communities.

Paul was a travelling minister and I have some first-hand experience in that area. Were I to write letters involving specific issues to each of the churches I regularly visit, I assure you they would be vastly different letters addressing very different issues. The Huntsville, Houston, and Galveston congregations I visit are all very different and each is unique and what might be appropriate for one congregation would likely not be appropriate for either of the others.

But regardless of who wrote the letters or what their specific purposes were, these Pauline letters which are now scriptures for the Christian community, were very instrumental in the conversion of the entire Roman Empire into the Holy Roman and Catholic Empire. Over a period of about 275 years, these letters circulated throughout the Roman Empire and around 323 they formally came together in the form we are familiar with today – the New Testament.

I would imagine the Conservative Pauline letters were selected to offset and provide a counter balance to the Radical Pauline letters, after all, the time in question was very patriarchal.

And it wouldn’t have gone over too well to actually follow all of the Radical Paul ideas, and so Conservative Paul stepped in and saved the day preserving the status quo for both men and slave owners.

But truly, I envision the Pauline letters as little symbolic fires set all over the empire. They eventually erupted into the full blown flames of Christianity, which ultimately consumed the entire Roman Empire.

And it was many of the concepts presented by both the Radical and the Conservative Paul that helped fan the flames and radically change the empire and the world forever. Borg and Crossan elaborated in depth on them, but I’ll briefly focus on just a few concepts. And the few I touch on remain as relevant today as they did almost 2000 years ago.

But first, what was so different about Paul and what he actually did among all the various communities. Borg and Crossan say, “Paul did not simply convert individuals. Paul created communities. He converted

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people to a new life in community, to life together “in Christ.” The phrase is shorthand for a way of life in community radically different from that in the normal societies of that world.

But life “in Christ” for Paul was not primarily about a new personal identity for individuals. Paul’s understanding was very different from a widespread understanding of the role of “religion” and the purpose of “spirituality” in modern Western culture, where they are often thought of as primarily private, individual matters, even though many Christians would say that being Christian also means being part of a church. For Paul, life “in Christ” was *always* a communal matter. This was so not simply because “it’s important to be part of a church,” but because his purpose, his passion, was to create communities whose life together embodied an alternative to the normalcy of the “wisdom of this world.”²

One of the radical changes Paul helped to institute is something Borg and Crossan call “Share Communities.” The participants of these communities did not sell all of their possessions and give the proceeds to the community, as some might imagine. Instead those who were better off financially did help and assist those who were less fortunate. This was very important at the time because the Roman Empire had caused the displacement of huge numbers of people. In many cases the typical support structures previously provided by family had dissolved.

Ordinary people in the urban environment where Paul preached were in precarious economic positions. When there was work to perform they were okay, but when there was no work, they were extraordinarily vulnerable. These new “Share Communities” helped to take care of one another. In many cases they replaced the family structure which had been destroyed.

This same ethos of care for each other is alive and well today in many of our charitable organizations and may be some of the appeal people have today for the big mega churches, which often step in and help their members in times of crisis.

I’ve already touched briefly on the second radical change Paul helped to institute, but only in a jaded way clouded by the intervening 2000 years. Both the Radical and Conservative Pauls did speak on equality; everyone was equal “in Christ.” Conservative Paul may have toned down the equality but nonetheless, it was a radical new concept for the day.

Everyone was equal. Others within the Christian community may have tried to hold on to some of the early Jewish traditions and expectations, such as with a need for circumcision, but Paul would have none of it.

² The First Paul, Borg and Crossan, 185-6.

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In Galatians he was abundantly clear where he said, “Believing – faith – is what makes a person a descendent of Abraham, not circumcision. We hasten to add that believing and faith are not about a set of beliefs, but a relationship of commitment and trust.”³

Borg and Crossan go on to ask, “So, is Paul’s message about being “one in Christ” about unity rather than division? Or about equality rather than superiority and hierarchy?”

We are persuaded that Paul’s response to the conflict in Galatia is about equality and not simply unity. We don’t think he was saying, “Can’t we all just get along, despite our differences?” That might be a good thing, and would be better than much of what we have had since. But Paul’s vision was about more than this. It was about equality instead of acceptance of hierarchy and superiority within Christian community. ... His vision of life “in Christ” meant that a Christian master could not have a Christian slave. We also argue that men and women were to be equals in the community. The issue is equality between Christian Jew and Christian Gentile, even though uncircumcised. Equality, not simply unity, is the hallmark of the new creation.”⁴

And finally, Paul’s letters established something special for the individual, giving worth to each and every person. And this is something today we call the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

At that time in history (and frankly things haven’t changed much at all) people were little more than pawns used by the Empire to further the Empire’s strength and wealth. As I mentioned before, countless people were relocated from their homes to distant lands in order to service the Empire. But for Paul, each and every person had a gift and all gifts were equally valuable. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”⁵

Yes, each of us has gifts and although we may or may not recognize our specific gifts, being a part of a community, one that cares for each other, provides us with opportunities to explore our gifts and may even help us recognize them.

The wisdom and life experiences of others often helps us clarify and put into practice what makes each of us special. Paul pushed people to explore and use their gifts. He gave women and slaves value and a reason to live and use their gifts for the benefit of others. This was surely appealing to the oppressed and other people drawn to his teachings.

³ The First Paul, Borg and Crossan, 194.

⁴ Ibid., 196-7.

⁵ The First Paul, Borg and Crossan, 201.

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In fact, Paul's teachings, his messages of caring and love promoted by the "Share Communities," his willingness to challenge the status quo and his claims that all are equal, and his amazing ability to see the inherent worth in every person and his encouragement to grow that individual worth, made him possibly a unique individual in his time. Paul's passions, his commitment and his love helped solidify Christianity's hold on the Roman Empire.

Today we can choose to focus on the parts of the Pauline scriptures that have been abused down through the centuries by much of Christianity seeking to maintain the patriarchal status quo, or we can honor and revere the Real Paul and his genuine messages of caring, love, equality, and individual self worth, messages that rocked an Empire to its very core. The Real Paul stood up and wasn't afraid to share his beliefs or the potential consequences and he took on the Roman Empire and ultimately he won. Namaste!

Ingathering Prayer

Please join me in prayer, an Ingathering Prayer.

Guided by Love, secured by Hope, and made courageous by Faith,

We gather together at a moment of beginning: Both Learning and Teaching, Welcoming the Injured and the Healing, Ever Justice-Seeking, We bless this church with our Love.

With Pilgrims and Seekers, Growing Children and Cherished Seniors, Guided by Pillars and by Leaders, We bless this church with our Hope.

Praying and Resolving, Trusting and Involving, Some Settled, some Evolving, We bless this church with our Faith.

Let us receive our Ingathering as a gift. May it inspire renewed commitment to our great covenant of Love, Hope, and Faith.

May our eyes be opened to opportunities for broad ministry within, throughout, and beyond.

And may the blessings we come to know through that vision be a blessing to the world.

(Pause) Amen!

Introductory Remarks for Water Communion Ritual

We gather in community to worship at a corner of our year as a church. This morning we carry love and hope and courageous faith, and seek to renew our covenantal commitments. We remind ourselves of the

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home we share, a home that we come back to, whether after a long or short absence, a home we welcome all to make their own: a home of love and hope and faith – come, let us gather together within.

And, we gather ritually this morning – carrying gifts of our summer – symbols of the water that we have been present with, and which has been present to us. It is also a symbol of that which we have missed during the drought.

These symbols may call to mind light summer showers, thunderstorms, dewy mornings, and misty evenings. Or in its absence, the awareness of how much we depend on water for our very lives. Perhaps we found ourselves in the presence of water during a moment of grief or birth or rebirth. Or, perhaps in a mundane place whose sacredness is palpable nonetheless.

We reflect upon what we brought with us to these moments and places, in backpacks and coolers, surely – but more so, what spiritual, emotional or other baggage we carried. And what we did with it while we were in these watery places and moments.

Did the water’s resiliency inspire you? Or its serenity? Maybe its waxing and waning tides? The music of its motion, or the silence of its sleep? Or did it’s absence cause us to stop and pray and reflect.

Did you feel the interdependent web of all existence coming alive in those moments? Some of you may have had the gift of a momentary spiritual epiphany. Others of you a growing awareness of how this very water is like strands of the web, and how the web is us... and everything.

Perhaps the ties to spiritual companions throughout the world come clearer and clearer. Bring to mind the monsoon rains that our UU partners in the Philippines and India know; or the churning ocean that the UUs in Tierra del Fuego know; the rivers and valleys of Transylvania; or Lake Victoria and Lake Tanganyika present to UUs in Kenya, Uganda and Burundi. What brings these companions, like us, to the water? What does the water bring to them, like us?

How glorious. How sacred. How peaceful. Let us rest and rely on that truth in a moment of silence.

(Pause)

Blending Waters

And now, come forward to add the water you have carried with you.

If you feel comfortable and would like to, please describe the origin of the water you are sharing with us today. Please form a line to my left.

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(Pause)

Conclusion

May our gathering together this morning be a blessing for one and all. May it inspire us to a year of hope and love and courageous faith. And may we walk that year in the full awareness - as often as possible - of the blessed ties that bind each to all.

Amen!

Closing Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 20 “Be Thou My Vision” and remain standing for the Benediction.

Benediction

John Pepper

Let us go forth from this place ready to extend a hand to others, open our hearts in sharing, and find kind words of praise for all we meet.

Amen, Namaste, and Go in Peace!

Rejoice Together, Alexander Meek, Jr., p128.

Extinguish the Chalice

Postlude