

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Twentieth Sunday of Pentecost/Ordinary Time – October 2, 2016 - Communion
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 17:5-10

For Reflection

“We all know that any emotional bias -- irrespective of truth or falsity -- can be implanted by suggestion in the emotions of the young, hence the inherited traditions of an orthodox community are absolutely without evidential value.... If religion were true, its followers would not try to bludgeon their young into an artificial conformity; but would merely insist on their unbending quest for truth, irrespective of artificial backgrounds or practical consequences. With such an honest and inflexible openness to evidence, they could not fail to receive any real truth which might be manifesting itself around them. The fact that religionists do not follow this honourable course, but cheat at their game by invoking juvenile quasi-hypnosis, is enough to destroy their pretensions in my eyes even if their absurdity were not manifest in every other direction.”

~ H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) American Author, [Against Religion: The Atheist Writings of H.P. Lovecraft](#)

Brain Washing

Dictionary.com defines the word “Sermon” as follows:

SERMON - noun

- 1. a discourse for the purpose of religious instruction or exhortation, especially one based on a text of Scripture and delivered by a member of the clergy as part of a religious service.**
- 2. any serious speech, discourse, or exhortation, especially on a moral issue.**
- 3. a long, tedious speech.**

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/sermon>

These definitions are exactly the reason why we now call what we do on Sunday mornings a “Reflection.” Here is their definition of “Reflection”:

REFLECTION - noun

- 1. the act of reflecting, as in casting back a light or heat, mirroring, or giving back or showing an image; the state of being reflected in this way.**
 - 2. an image; representation; counterpart.**
- 3. a fixing of the thoughts on something; careful consideration.**
- 4. a thought occurring in consideration or meditation.**

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/reflection?s=t>

This is what we attempt to do during our time together. I do some advanced reflection – write down some of my thoughts – share them with you – sometimes ask questions or converse with you – and you reflect, sharing your thoughts with the rest of us. That

way your minister does not harass you into believing preconceived sets of ideas. That way you have agency in your own thinking and responsibility for your own value system. You find value in the thoughts and values of others here – otherwise you wouldn't come back week after week.

Now the author of Luke/Acts was doing something slightly different from “reflecting” when he wrote his Gospel for a particular audience or readership. Here's a definition of “Gospel” – same online source:

GOSPEL - noun

1. **the teachings of Jesus and the apostles**; the Christian revelation.
2. **the story of Christ's life and teachings**, especially as contained in the first four books of the New Testament, namely Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
3. (usually initial capital letter) any of these four books.
4. **something regarded as true and implicitly believed:**
to take his report for gospel.
5. **a doctrine regarded as of prime importance:**
political gospel.
6. glad tidings, especially concerning salvation and the kingdom of God as announced to the world by Christ.

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/gospel?s=t>

Luke was not just writing a story or recording facts as he understood them (although that was part of it). He was combining and rewriting a number of written sources – Q (a document as yet unfound), the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mark. By rewriting he was also teaching a belief structure and exhorting people to act in accordance with this set of beliefs. I also use the word “he” cautiously. This gospel was written late in the first century – and continued to be revised further into the second century. So there were editorial contributors to this document as well.

Gospel as “something regarded as true and implicitly believed” is, I believe, where Christianity lost its way. In Judaism there was an understanding that every text had 70 meanings. “The Torah has 70 faces.” It was the work of rabbinical scholars to ferret out those meanings and, in conversation, help the community think about these things from 70 angles or points of view.

Jesus, being Jewish, intended the same with his parables and stories. The gospel writers got into the habit of adding one interpretation to a particular story – but the oral tradition was to tell the story and let the audience figure out the meaning(s). The Beatitudes or Sermon on the Mount, however, was a SERMON – laying out a set of values that would be important to apply to one's life. There are questions about whether Jesus actually made that speech – or if it was built by the authors around some of his sayings. Such is mystery...

Luke 17 verses 1-10 is a compilation of diverse sayings directed to the disciples – the inner circle. There are two basic ideas in these 6 verses – both of which are “preachy” and very “Lukan.” The first is about the power of faith. The original saying in Matthew 17 and 21, Mark 11 and Thomas 48 and 106 ALL insist that faith can move MOUNTAINS. Luke has arbitrarily changed this to a MULBERRY TREE. Okay.

Then he talks about slaves and the concept of service. “Seeking to serve” is one of Luke’s favorite motifs. But here he portrays our compassionate Jesus talking about slaves as if he’s “untroubled by the inequalities of slavery.”

7 "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, '**Come here at once and take your place at the table**'? 8 **Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink**'? 9 **Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?...**"

He completes this traditional idea about how to treat slaves with his exhortation to service:

10 So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

The scholars' note says that the phrase “worthless slaves implies those **to whom nothing is owed.**” What is missing is any understanding that disciples of Jesus are volunteers in service to G-d – not enslaved humans forced to serve cruel human masters because of economic inequality – to whom MUCH is owed if you ask G-d.

Telling a humiliated person to humble themselves is ludicrous. It is unconscionable. It is not a Christian value I ascribe to. But it has been preached as gospel for millennia – along with other ludicrous and cruel ideas born of ancient hierarchical societies.

The result is the ripple effect of our guns- culture-and-bibles missionary efforts. The result is fundamentalist Christian movements forcing inequitable gender roles and subjugation of races onto entire populations. The result is generations of Christians who can't think for themselves but force their literalistic versions of inherited truth onto others – including their children – and in recent years – onto the general public in the form of political / legal policies.

Not just Christians – but in our case definitely Christians – have fallen into a reptilian-brain form of religious brain-washing that is dangerous hog-wash. It has led to self-righteous dismissal, harassment, marginalization, disenfranchisement, dehumanization, torture and murder of others due to “differences” based on color,

gender, age, ability, economic status, religion, nationality, political opinion – you name it.

We have a massive clean-up job on our hands. And, with most clean-up jobs, we have to start with ourselves: **washing our brains** of preconceptions, inherited filters through which we see the world. We have to consciously struggle to recognize antiquated structures of thinking and ideas that have been ripped out of contexts that no longer fit our circumstances.

A recent example for Mt. Hollywood is our struggle to think like non-owners of property. NOT owning a ginormous building changed us – changed our priorities – made us something different. And it is taking us a while to figure out what kind of power, freedom and flexibility that gives us in being a “mission oriented” group rather than a “survival oriented” group.

We also have to be VERY aware of all attempts in our society to brainwash us – commercial advertising being a clear model. Our educational system at its best is teaching our children to be good, self-motivated, free-thinking citizens. At its worst it is mimicking the capitalistic mega-machine that is molding all of us into good consumers.

And there is, of course, a political system that has completely derailed – moving from polite discourse about various point of view – into a competition over who can make the most people believe MY version of reality – regardless of the facts. Carl Rove is an obvious example of someone who intentionally circulated false rumors about political opponents to affect elections – which resulted in getting (among other politicians) the second George Bush elected president.

It is now an accepted tactic to brain-wash the public with false information about someone in order to undermine their public image, steal elections, influence governmental policy, make acceptable to voters what would be completely unacceptable in those voters' homes.

We are going to have to **move mountains** (forget mulberry trees) to move this country, this society, back toward a rational reality based on facts rather than reactionary, self-serving ideologies. The election on November 8th is one such mountain – and we have got to do what we can to move it.

And when someone asks us – as our text asked us this morning, “Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?” – it behooves us to return the question with our own questions in rabbinical style. What do you mean by “slave?” Who would do that to another person? Why would you “command” another person to do something against their will? Why wouldn't you pay someone one for work they have done for you? **Who – in G-d's name – do you think you are?**

Luke 17:5-10

5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6 The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

7 "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? 8 Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? 9 Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10 So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

1-10 diverse sayings to disciples

"If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' – usually move MOUNTAINS – tree = Luke – arbitrary

Mt. 17:20 and 21:21

Mk.11:23

Th.48, 106:2

For all his compassion for the poor and lowly, the Jesus portrayed by Luke seems untroubled by the inequalities of slavery

Israelite wisdom and Greco-Roman symposium traditions

Luke = **seek to serve** favorite motif