

## LOCAL UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Texts on Sunday, January 31, 2010

*John 14: 1-7, 25-27*

When you were new to New York and its subway, and you were down under headed somewhere, do you remember the tension, feeling you're not going the right way? *Going fast, going down, getting hotter, forever!* Just a little irrational taste of hell, you know. Trying to find the one right way through bad directions for assembling a children's toy can darken a Christmas afternoon. Trying to find the right way to please a boss—or a spouse—whose mantra is *My way or the highway* can cast shadows on everything. In stark contrast, actually finding the one way is: Yesss! The perfect shot. A great recipe. Two smooth subway transfers to a meeting on time! Yes! Finding the one right way and following it is a major theme of our days, like it or not. So how do you feel when you hear the passage from John's gospel, and Jesus is saying, "I am the way . . . No one comes to the Father but through me?"

Let's be plain. In this room, there are a hundred Christianities, and perhaps not a small number of no-thank-yous on top of that, so of course there isn't just one way to respond to Jesus' "I am the way." Nevertheless, the range of possible responses seems obvious: From *No, he isn't!* over here, to, over here, Yess! And many variations between.

Wherever you might find yourself on such a continuum, I hope today you might hear something to liberate you from the tight box of the one-way doctrine. The very question, *Is Christ the only way or not?* already betrays the questioner as a Westerner, a modern who supposes herself outside and looking down on a system to judge its adequacy and its dangers, just as we once stood outside the subway system, judging it or fearing it. Whether you who are listening now are Jewish or Christian or Muslim or skeptic or angry or amused. . . consider this possibility: There is no place to stand to judge the truth of a religious path you are not on. Put another way, when we make absolute judgments about religious propositions, Yess! or No!, what is in our sights is not "the truth" about that way. What's in our sights is our selves only, our fears, our hopes, our self-protection. Now, be on guard against human distortions of the reality of God! God knows, religion is constantly falling into human hands who twist it and mold it into what my friend Samir Selmanovic calls "a God-management system."<sup>1</sup> Be on guard. But then consider that if you deplore what you see, what you see is merely deplorable. It is not the path, it is not the way, it is not the truth, it is not life.

For a series called *The Power of Myth*, Bill Moyers interviewed the great scholar of religions and myths, Joseph Campbell. Moyers asked this man so thoroughly acquainted with the stories, claims, and hopes of religions whether he had ever held to any of the traditions he studied. In a word, *Have you been a believer?* Campbell said he had not. He acknowledged then that in a critical sense, he did not fully know any religion, because he had not walked its path. Wise man, I thought. At some point thereafter he said he thought what the world really needed was a new "planet religion," as he put it—a universal religion to draw people together, not divide them. Utopian error, I thought—and more evidence that he had never walked *in* the path of a religion, but only around them, fascinated by their intricacies, while yet maintaining always his objectivity—his self, if you will.

Even as I was watching this series some twenty years ago, an image flew to mind for our religious life. It was the board game called *Parcheesi*. At the outset of the game, each of the players has all her pieces in separate corners of the board. At the throw of dice, a player brings her pieces into play, tramping step by step around a serpentine path on which other players' pieces also move, sometimes interfering with one's own progress. The object is to get home in the center of the board, which is called "Home,"

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<sup>1</sup>Samir Selmanovic, *It's Really All About God* (Jossey-Bass, 2010)

and—here I am reading from the directions—“each player has his own home path and may not enter another's. So, when a piece is on its own home path, it can no longer be [interfered with]. Once a piece [is in the] home path, it can no longer be moved except to move all the way home.” (Wikipedia) That, I thought, is like religion. At the end of the game, the several players' pieces are mostly all together in the home space. But each got their along its own way.

Now this figure, if winsome, is crude and inept in many ways, but it suggests something of the weakness of wishing for a planet religion, for a wiping away of all real religions in favor of a longed-for universal that will not embarrass me with its particularity and localness and relativity and distortions. The error in that wish is, If this *is* the game—if the only way home, whatever Home might be, is by way of a particular path, then knowing that several paths exist is not much help, compared with actually getting in the game and taking the home path that is given you. The wish for a planet religion resembles a wish for a planet body—one neither male nor female, with all that alarming particularity and shape, but something higher, something less gross, more humane. No. The only human way home is the embodied way, male or female. Is one better than the other? There is no place to stand to make that judgment. That's how it is with this spiritual body, too. The only way to receive what a spiritual path gives is to take it, body and soul. Can it be that a path to the universal begins—even must begin—through an ordinary hinged door? You must try the handle. Or, in the words of Jesus from John: Trust in God, trust also in me.

The liberation here is to unhook from the 'Western obsession with being right-and-wrong. That obsession is about self-preservation. It arose, historically speaking, to protect the chrysalis of individuality as he and she stepped out of tribe and clan into their own authority. But now every clan touches every other. The power of our religion—I am speaking of Christianity now, not as one religion superior to others, but as one who knows he has no standing to speak of any other but his own—shows itself timeless, for while this path can help draw the individual up from the mass, now the encounter with “Christ within me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,” calls the individual still higher—to lose your life, not defend it; but to lose your life, that you may receive life anew, graceful and given. *This* is the path. It involves no weird beliefs contrary to nature and reason. Those who preach Christianity as punching a set of right beliefs on a card needed to get to heaven squander the precious time and energy of all who heed them.

On this matter, Jesus is utterly plain. *The last shall be first, the first last. Lose your life, that you may receive life. Take up your cross and follow me.* In John's story, Jesus says first, “You know the way where I am going,” and then, responding to Thomas' expression of ignorance, “I am the way.” Do the math with me. If  $a=b$ , and  $b=c$ ,  $a=c$ , right? Jesus says, “I am the way to where I am going.” If that sounds like a Zen koan, good. Break free from the tyranny of right-and-wrong. The invitation of Christ is not at all into the error of holding right beliefs that qualify you to stand in the safe set above others. The invitation of Christ to his way is not at all to the evil of supposing that particular things, including religion or church, are absolutely good. The invitation of Christ to his path is an invitation, in the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, to “permanent revolution.”

“The self we loved is not the self God loves, the neighbors we did not prize are his treasures, the truth we ignored is the truth he maintains, the justice which we sought because it was ours is not the justice that his love desires. The righteousness he demands and gives is not our righteousness, but greater and different. He requires of us the sacrifice of all that we would conserve and grants us gifts we had not dreamed of—the forgiveness of our sin, rather than our justification; repentance and sorrow for our transgression rather than forgetfulness, faith in him rather than confidence in ourselves, instead of peace and joy of the world, hope of the world to come.”<sup>2</sup>

You see, although Campbell and a host of critics of Christianity, including the mockers like Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens and Bill Maher are all of them obviously accurate in seeing hateful

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<sup>2</sup> H.R. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, (Collier, p. 138)

divisions among religious people, they are surprisingly blind to the cause of all that division. It is plainly not the paths themselves which cause or strengthen hatreds. "Islam" means submission. Buddhism is committed to the compassion. Judaism was Jesus' religion. This path, Christianity, calls you to take the low seat always. Can it be more obvious that the cause of division and war is fear and self-defense and ignorance of who we really are? Not less religion is needed, but more! Further in and further up, as mighty Reepicheep declares in one of the Narnia stories of C. S. Lewis. The irony of taking a hobbled version of Christianity into the ring and wrestling it to the ground with universal sounding principles is that when the fight is over, you've won, Sam, Chris, Bill. Big deal. Now you're on top. Now what? You have utterly missed the path, and saved only yourself. But Christian faith was an invitation to so meet God and so love God and all that God has created that you have no fear to save yourself. And you see that the way home for you, for you—I am talking to you, says the Lord; do not be troubled about the others; in my house, there are many, many mansions; no, I am talking to you, and for you—is in this body, this local universal church where "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Trust in God; trust also in me. This is your way home.

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