

The Teachings of Jesus

Rev. Don Garrett, delivered December 4, 2011

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“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

What did Jesus teach? He taught the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, envisioned as a world transformed by people who had entered into a new, broader, more inclusive way of thinking, moving, and being in the world; people who were as different from normal adults as children were different, and it's pretty clear that he was referring to a way of being embodied in the simplicity, trust, and guilelessness of childhood.

This is a way of being in the world that is rooted in curiosity, joy, and affection. A way of being less concerned with issues of survival and competition than with discovery and connection.

The poet, William Wordsworth, referred to this state in his classic poem, *Intimations of Immortality*, which says, in part:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
 To me did seem
 Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream,
It is not now as it hath been of yore; –
 Turn whatsoever I may,
 By night or day,

The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

and later, Wordsworth adds that,

. . . trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
 Upon the growing Boy,
But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,
 He sees it in his joy;

This is the child in Jesus' gentle embrace, made ready to enter into the beloved community of the Kingdom of Heaven by natural innocence and trust.

It is in this light that I realized that Margaret Wise Brown's story of *The Runaway Bunny* contained the essence of an important part of Jesus' teachings. The mother in the story is like God, or the Spirit of Life. No matter what we think of the Spirit of Life, it is always with us. Whether we run to the river or the mountain, the garden or the ocean, the Spirit of Life is always there with us in its fullness, sustaining and supporting us with gifts that come from beyond ourselves. Even in rebellion, the essence of our relationship with the Spirit of Life is one of serenity and trust, just like the little bunny who decided to stay with his mother after all.

This message has a parallel in a Sikh teaching story, where "An aged spiritual master calls his two most devoted disciples to the garden in front of his hut. Gravely, he gives each one a chicken and instructs them, "Go to where no one can see, and kill the chicken." One of the men immediately goes behind his shed, picks up an ax and chops off his chicken's head. The other wanders around for hours, and finally returns to his master, the chicken still alive and in hand. "Well, what happened?" the teacher asks. The disciple responds, "I can't find a place to kill the chicken where no one can see me. Everywhere I go, the chicken sees."

Everywhere we go, we see. There is no darkness. Even as adults we are still trailing those clouds of glory, even if we don't notice them. Everywhere we go, the Spirit of Life sees through us. There is nowhere we can go to escape the Spirit of Life because it is with us and within us and we have our being with and within it. Once the runaway bunny realizes there is no where to run, the need to escape disappears.

There is another verse that says, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Most Christians tend to think this means that Jesus is the cornerstone. But I think there is a clearer interpretation. The light of the world, the Spirit of Life, is the cornerstone. The eye that sees, the mind that understands, the heart that connects – the ability to be open to experience without defensiveness – this childlike quality of accepting presence is the cornerstone of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is the ability to love our experience in the moment, to be open to those we like, who like us, and even those who hate

you, as Jesus said, “Love your enemies and be concerned for the welfare of those who hate you.”

Childlike? Perhaps. But a powerfully different way of being in the world. Such is the nature of Jesus’ revolutionary message of the Spirit of Life.

Jesus’ message was one of childlike simplicity and guileless curiosity. And the promise of a love so deep and true that it cannot be lost.

Jesus told a parable not too far from that of the runaway bunny. We know it as the parable of the prodigal son.

Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what

was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

“ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ ”

Jesus’ version is somewhat more dramatic than that of the runaway bunny, considerably grittier. Here the son squanders a considerable amount of wealth in immoral, even corrupt entertainments. When he realizes that the pigs he is feeding are better cared for than he is, he finally hits bottom and returns, slinking back home without much hope. And he (and his more faithful brother) is startled to discover that there is no anger or rejection, no punishment or retribution – just joy and delight at his return.

This is just like the Spirit of Life. We can ignore it, betray it, even deny its existence, but the moment we turn to the source of our being with humble gratitude we are filled with its wonders beyond measure. We don’t have to qualify for it; we can’t lose it even if we try. Such is the Kingdom of Heaven.

In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus says, “I am the light which is over everything. I am the All; from me the All has gone forth, and to me the All has returned. Split wood: I am there. Lift up a stone, and you will find me there.”

This verse points at the answer and toward another question. The answer is that it refers to the omnipresence of the spirit – it is inside the wood before splitting, under the rock before lifting. Like the chicken, there is no where we can go where it is not.

But the other question is one which has bogged down Christianity for millennia. These darned “I am” statements seem to make the person of Jesus some unique cosmically important individual. After all, Jesus is inside the wood and under the rock! Elsewhere he says things like, “I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to God except through me.” Again, this smacks of what

the Unitarian Minister, Theodore Parker, would call, “An unwholesome emphasis upon the person of Jesus.” In his 1841 sermon on “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” Parker said that “Almost every sect, that has ever been, makes Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, and not the immutable truth of the doctrines themselves, or the authority of God, who sent him into the world. Yet it seems difficult to conceive any reason, why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than the truths of science on that of him who makes them known first or most clearly, It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority.”

One of the keys to understanding the teachings of Jesus is that he often made it quite explicit that he was neither overly special nor unique. He called himself “The Son of Man,” not the Son of God – that came later.

Much of the difficulty in our trying to understand Jesus is the way his teachings have come to us. The Christian Scriptures were written in Greek, translated into Latin, and then into English. Greek, Latin, and English all have structures rooted in duality, clear distinctions between self and not-self. The basic unit of meaning in these languages is, more or less, “this is this and not that.” But Jesus spoke Aramaic, a language with a very different basic unit of meaning. Aramaic presumes that things are not separate, but connected, interdependent. Aramaic makes no distinction between one’s interior psychological experience and that of the community of which one is a part. For example, the phrases, “The Kingdom of Heaven is within you,” and “The Kingdom of Heaven is among you,” are exactly the same words in Aramaic, but translated differently into English.

Aramaic is a language rich in depth and subtlety. Each word can be translated into many different English words, depending on the context. So the process of bringing the Aramaic Jesus into English involved myriads of choices, and those choices usually favored the person of Jesus rather than the interdependence of our experience. Many of the “I am” statements could easily

have been rendered as “We are,” or even “The Spirit of Life is,” or “God is,” rather than being put into Jesus’ mouth as first person statements.

This understanding makes a huge difference in how we can understand the original teachings of Jesus. Neil Douglas-Klotz, a scholar of the Aramaic teachings of Jesus, points out that the opening lines of one of Jesus’ most famous teachings, the Lord’s Prayer, could be translated quite differently. Instead of the familiar “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,” he suggests four different, equally accurate renditions:

1. O Thou, the One from whom breath enters being in all radiant forms;
2. O parent of the universe, from your deep interior comes the next wave of shining life;
3. O fruitful, nurturing Life-giver! Your sound rings everywhere throughout the cosmos;
4. Father-Mother who births Unity, You vibrate life into form in each new instant.

As we delve more deeply into the Aramaic sources, the difference grows even greater. I’d like to close with Douglas-Klotz’s rendering of the famous, “I am the way, the truth, the life: No one comes to the Father, except through me.” He says,

The “I Am” is the path, the sense of right direction and the life force to travel it. Simple presence illuminates what’s ahead, frees our choices, and connects us to nature’s power. No one comes into rhythm with the breathing life of all, the sound and atmosphere that created the cosmos, except through the breathing, sound, and atmosphere, of another embodied “I” connected to the ultimate “I Am.”

The teachings of Jesus are rich, deep, and profound. They have also become incredibly biased through millennia of misinterpretation. But despite all the distortions, his message of a new way of living in Beloved Community still speaks to us today. May we remain open to the deepest truths even as we set aside any falsehoods we discover.

The teachings of Jesus are even deeper and more powerful than Christianity itself. May we remain open to their transformative power of abiding connection and love.