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Reclaiming Religious Language

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When I was a boy, I learned a lot of religious words early on. From the time I could spell out words phonetically, Mom kept me busy during sermons with a piece of paper and a pencil. When I heard a word I didn't understand, I wrote it out as best I could. Then when we got home, she or Dad would go over my list with me, so I could learn those words. Many years later, I realized there was more to that, than just a vocabulary lesson. Maybe that was what led me to be baptized, by immersion, when I was nine. Later on, I got re-baptized when I was an adult. And it didn't "take" either time.

One thing I've come to learn in recent years, is that much of the language used by modern Christians was borrowed and twisted by the early Church to mean things that had nothing to do with the original meanings. Other theological words have lost their original meanings, as society has changed and those words have become irrelevant. Take words like *miracle* and *cross*. As people have gained a better understanding of how the world works, it's become more difficult for us to understand the original meaning of the word *miracle*. We don't know really *what* happened when a *miracle* was performed by a first century healer. And as societies have replaced old methods of capital punishment with new ones that are just as lethal, it's

become hard to identify with the original stigma of *cross*. Because the words and the contexts don't translate, it's hard to express truths and extract meanings that, once upon a time, were a lot easier to articulate.

Many of us UUs have sort of given up on the old Christian ideas and concepts. We assume they're outdated, and just drop concepts that no longer fit our picture of the world. But this morning, I'd like to ask you to really stretch yourself, open up your mind, and consider some original meanings and original contexts of certain words. Perhaps you will find that some of those words and concepts are worth reclaiming. Or perhaps, where some words simply don't work anymore, you can substitute other words that help you rearticulate the original concept.

I already mentioned the word *cross*. In 1 Corinthians,¹ Paul refers to the cross as "scandalous" (as translated in four common modern English translations²). *Scandalous* – that seems pretty harsh. Why *scandalous*? Because in the Greco-Roman world, getting crucified ranked as the worst, most humiliating thing that could happen to you. Today, we think of crucifixion as horrible because of the intense physical pain. Sure, it *was* painful. But in the first century, people dreaded the *shame* of crucifixion even more than the pain of it. Crucifixion was reserved for outcasts, slaves, and common criminals. If you were crucified, that became your entire life legacy, for all time – "you had been such a wretched person that you didn't even deserve to exist."^{3,4}

¹ 1 Cor 1:23.

² The Amplified Bible, the Common English Bible, the New Testament for Everyone, and The Voice; see www.biblegateway.com.

³ Steve Seamands, "Recovering the Scandal of the Cross," posted Apr 1 2011, last accessed March 2, 2017, <http://goodnewsmag.org/>.

⁴ Geyer, Douglas W. *Fear, Anomaly and Uncertainty in the Gospel of Mark*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002.

And yet, today, *cross* has lost its original punch. Crosses make nice jewelry now. One of the co-pastors at the liberal Presbyterian Church where I'm doing my seminary internship has suggested taking down the 30-foot concrete cross in front of their sanctuary. He says they should replace it with a lynching tree. A lynching tree makes a lot more meaningful modern metaphor.

Another phrase from the New Testament – this one, I contend, didn't just slide into cultural irrelevance, but was *stolen* by the Church Fathers – is "kingdom of heaven." "The kingdom of heaven is at hand"⁵ is *all over* at least two of the Gospels. I grew up thinking of "kingdom of heaven" as an event in the future – a universal utopia, but *out there*, at some indeterminate point in time. That raises some really serious logical and ethical questions – like, if Jesus really is sitting up there, with the power to put everything to rights, then what is he waiting for? And why didn't he do it when he was here the first time?

But when you take all the scriptures together, it's clear that "the kingdom of heaven" being "*at hand*" meant, not "coming soon," but more like, "*right now*." Let's start with The Gospel of Thomas, which was dug up in the Egyptian desert in 1945, after being lost for 1600 years. It may have been written within twenty years of Jesus' crucifixion. If that's right, it predates any book in the New Testament. Here's what Thomas wrote about the kingdom of heaven: "[T]he kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you;"⁶ and "It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'here it is' or 'there it is.' Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out

⁵ Matt 3:2, 4:17, 10:7; Mk 1:5.

⁶ Gospel of Thomas 3 (available in many locations online; for this quote, I used <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gthlamb.html>).

upon the earth, and [you] do not see it.”⁷ Even Luke, which actually *did* make it into the Christian canon, reports Jesus as saying, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is *among you*,” and an equivalent translation is, “*within you*” or “*between you*.”⁸

Speaking of Jesus of Nazareth – that’s another place we’ve been sold a bill of goods about the nature of his ministry, and his goal as a public figure. For 200 years, theologians have been trying to figure out, from ancient texts and archeology, what the historical Jesus actually did and said and taught.⁹ This historical Jesus debate has gone through at least three reincarnations (resurrections?), and it’s still going strong. Many scholars today conclude, that looking for the historical Jesus is like looking in the mirror – you see what you are interested in. I found confirmation of this in two books I read this summer.

First, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, by Amy-Jill Levine,¹⁰ reminds us that Jesus was, first and foremost, a Jew in first-century Galilee – to paraphrase Bishop Desmond Tutu, Jesus was not a Christian.¹¹ Amy-Jill Levine seeks to understand, from her rather unusual position as a Jewish theological scholar who specializes in the New Testament, how first-century Jews would have heard Jesus, by running his words, as reported by the gospels, through the filter of the

⁷ Gospel of Thomas 113 (see above for source).

⁸ Luke 17:20-21. The alternate translations are found in the footnote to this verse in the New Revised Standard Version (at the bottom of the column, in any edition, not in the edition-specific commentary notes which are printed across the bottom of the pages).

⁹ Schweitzer (1906), *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p 401 (cited by Prof. Shively Smith in my Intro to New Testament course at Wesley Theological Seminary, fall 2015).

¹⁰ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

¹¹ Desmond Tutu, *God is Not a Christian and Other Provocations* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

Jewish rabbinical writings. Her work comes across as a fascinating portrayal of how easily we can be led into anti-Semitic interpretations of the gospels by blindly following the interpretations of their authors.

This summer I also read *The Ironsmith*, by Nicholas Guild,¹² who some of you know as the significant other of our own Cynthia Wood. *The Ironsmith* is the first novel I've read in years. It's a fictionalized account of the ministry and death of Jesus, told through the eyes of his invented cousin, an ironsmith named Noah. The value of *The Ironsmith* for me was that it totally reframed this Jesus character into a playful, funny, questioning, character who really cared deeply about other human beings and who was trying to find his own purpose in this world just like everyone else, through an account that is entirely consistent, not with the letter of the words of the gospels, but with human nature and how people can be expected to respond when put in extreme situations.

So based on the example of these two published works (and there are many others), I claim the right to define my own historical Jesus, as behooves my own spiritual faith and practice. What I see, when I look at the texts and the historical context, is a Jesus who was an itinerant Jewish preacher, in Galilee, in an unimaginably oppressed region of the Roman Empire, where 97% of the people lived at or below a subsistence level of income. The conditions in Galilee were comparable to what we see in North Korea today. Which means this itinerant preacher was preaching not about a military uprising – which would have been totally unrealistic. For me, Jesus was all about social justice ideals – the scandalous notion that everyone deserves *three square meals* and “a *free and responsible search* for truth and meaning.”¹³ He was preaching that if they could launch a revolution of

¹² Nicholas Guild, *The Ironsmith: A Novel* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2016).

¹³ UU Principle 4.

individual spirits and interpersonal community, they would have enough food and fish to go around, no matter what the Romans and civil-religious authorities did. *That* was why he wanted everybody to ignore the religious authorities and just take care of each other. *That* was why “the kingdom of heaven is within you and among you and between you.” It wasn’t a global, utopian kingdom, or an afterlife, where everything was going to be right, in the sweet by and by. The “kingdom of heaven” is *beloved community*.¹⁴ It’s right here, right now, in this room, in the loving relationships between us. All we have to do is just open our eyes and see it.

We UUs would be remiss if allowed the Church to get away with stealing *from us* these original meanings of *cross*, *kingdom of God*, and *Jesus as social activist*. UUs are not so post-Christian that our Christian history is irrelevant to us.¹⁵ And many of us are exiles from Christianity who have found religious sanctuary here. It is in *our own interest* to make peace with our religious pasts.¹⁶ So if Christianity has truths and concepts hidden in its crypts – truths that I can *resurrect* in order to make my models for social justice more realistic and more powerful – then I don’t want to miss out on that. In the field of social justice, it looks like we’ve got some real challenges ahead, and I need all the help I can get.

You might have noticed, a few minutes ago, that I mentioned *resurrecting* truths and concepts. *That* use of *resurrect* is a non-Easter-ish, *secular* way of using the word. Bernard Brandon Scott, in his book, *The Trouble with Resurrection*, shows that until the second century BCE,

¹⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Birth of a New Nation” (sermon, April 7, 1957), in the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project (p 162 of text), last accessed March 2, 2017, http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Vol4/7-Apr-1957_BirthOfANewNation.pdf, p 8 of pdf.

¹⁵ Carl Gregg, “After Buddhism,” UU Congregation of Frederick, Feb 26 2017, last accessed March 2, 2017, <http://frederickuu.org/sermons/AfterBuddhism.pdf>.

¹⁶ Commission on Appraisal of the UUA, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* (Boston: UUA, 2005), 147.

resurrection was a Greek secular word, never yet used in a religious sense. *Resurrection* is not a translation – it’s a transliteration. “Resurrection” means restore,” “revive,” “recycle.” *Translated*, it means, “to bring something that was lost, back into use.” *Resurrection* was first used as a *religious* metaphor in the book of Daniel – in a corporate sense, not an individual one. Daniel’s author claimed “God will vindicate the martyrs by raising them up from the dead.”¹⁷ These martyrs were the people who died in the revolution of 165 B.C.E. Daniel’s author wasn’t saying anything physical or supernatural would happen to their cold, dead bodies. He was saying that their *communal* ideas, ideals, and Truths would be resurrected, and live on, in the Jewish culture – a resurrection of culture that is has celebrated every December, by the Jewish Festival of Lights, up to this day. This “community” meaning of *resurrection* was *verified* in 2 Maccabees, written around 150 B.C.E., which lauded Daniel as the visionary of the cultural resurrection of the Jewish nation and religion, that had by that time occurred,¹⁸ through the Maccabean revolution, which ushered in a century of freedom for the Jewish nation that lasted until the Romans arrived 67 B.C.E.

For the next century and a half, religious resurrection remained a *corporate* metaphor. Scott maintains that resurrection *was never definitely applied individually, or in a physical way*, until about 80 or 90 C.E. – over 50 years after the lynching of Jesus of Nazareth – when the last of the four gospels was set down. He writes that, by redefining resurrection, the church

¹⁷ Brandon Scott, *The Trouble with Resurrection: From Paul to the Fourth Gospel* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2010), Kindle location 3968-3976. The points in this paragraph and the two that follow, continuing through the MLK paraphrase, are gleaned from throughout Scott’s book. Scott’s method is laudable: He examines scriptures and other relevant ancient writings in *chronological order*, tracking the development of both meaning and cultural context over time. Thus, he exhaustively examines the evidence for what a term meant at a particular time, in view both of the context of that time, and of all previous uses of that term and prior contexts in which it had been used, before moving on to the next point in time at which examination of the subsequent meaning of that term can be made. This linear approach represents the most reliable way of getting at the accuracy and precision of the meaning of a term as that meaning developed through time.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Kindle locations 751-758.

“literalized, narrowed, and constricted it, turned it into a creedal belief, and in the process forfeited [resurrection’s] great [cultural] claim and [idealistic] hope.”¹⁹

As an example of the value of the metaphor of “rebirth, new life, [and] resurrection”²⁰ in modern times, Scott turns to the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. Paraphrasing Scott:

Martin Luther King was a prophet. He was vilified and persecuted. Just as much as Jesus, King was a martyr. But Jesus was supposedly raised from the dead, and not Martin Luther King. Or is that true? In the *original* sense of “resurrection,” Martin Luther King was raised from the dead. King’s prophetic words and martyrdom helped raise a nation to a new standard of justice.... King exemplifies a resurrection in which all the people together will ultimately experience the victory of Truth over Injustice....²¹

Obviously, for those who have read the news this week, the battle is not finished. The resurrection, the revival, is an ongoing process. It is up to *us* to corporately resurrect the ideals of Amos who stood up against agribusiness in Israel in 750 B.C.E. It is up to *us* to *corporately resurrect*, in the living of our own lives, social justice martyrs from Jesus of Nazareth to Martin Luther King. It is up to *us* to prepare ourselves, should the need arise, to lay our lives down for what is just and right for our corporate heirs.

So what do we do with this? As we conclude this time together, I’d like to consider one other word that’s been stolen – the word, *conservative*. Rev. William J. Barber, III points out that *conservative* today is claimed by many

¹⁹ Ibid., Kindle location 4509.

²⁰ Ibid., Kindle location 4177.

²¹ Ibid., Kindle locations 4405-4516.

groups that bear no resemblance to people who were called to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.”²² He points out that religious liberals who act for social justice are following the ethical commands of the scriptures much more closely than religious fundamentalists – that many religious conservatives are using “individual freedom of interpretation” with an *absolute zero* of critical thinking, that they start with the scriptures and derive a philosophy of a whimsical god that loves well-off Americans and is indifferent to everybody else.

But the truth is this: The religious people who during slavery in America claimed scriptural support for their positions were not *true* conservatives. The religious right who accused Dr. King of not “acting like a preacher”²³ were not *true* conservatives. Evangelical Christians who look the other way when sexism and misogyny rears its ugly head, when the stranger is turned away at our gates, and when the politics of fear and division are used to steal money from science and education and spend it on bombs, are not *true* conservatives. People who advocate white supremacy and romanticize Confederate history, people who commit terrorism in the name of those things as we have seen this week, and people at the highest levels of our civil government who refuse to explicitly denounce those positions and activities, are not *true* conservatives. Parts of history that are indefensible to *conserve*, are in biblical terms, the most *liberal* parts of history. To call them conservative is to co-opt the word. And I’m not preaching partisan politics in the pulpit. Dr. King reminded us that we must continually stand up to the evil trinity of Racism, Classism, and Militarism.²⁴ When you’re

²² Micah 6:8.

²³ Wm. J. Barber III, *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement Is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 12-13.

²⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream: Writings & Speeches that Changed the World* (New York: HarperOne, 1992), 150.

talking about right and wrong, that's not politics; that's ethics. And the ethical *fact* is that the religious right and center in this country are *not* the true conservatives. They are in fact religious *liberals*, who have abandoned their own scriptures in the pursuit of what is comfortable and expedient. When we *so-called* liberals reclaim the original meaning of the word, and when we live up to it, it turns out that we are the true religious conservatives.²⁵

Some years ago, I began to hear an interesting word coming from the LGBT community. The acronym LGBT turned into LGBTQ, where the *Q* stands for *queer* or *questioning*. At first, for gay and lesbian people to claim the word *queer* was jarring to me, because when I was a kid, *queer* was an epithet. But now, people are *claiming* that word, taking *pride* in it, and throwing it back in the face of those who once used it as an epithet.

Now I'm not asking us all to go out from here and start calling ourselves religious conservatives in public, without explanation. But understanding the true meaning of all the words we've discussed this morning, provides us fodder for conversation with others, and spiritual assurance for ourselves, as we seek to protect and expand the kingdom of heaven, the beloved community, of which we are already a part. Like LGBTQs, we *can* stand up and reclaim language that has been stolen from us. This vocabulary is rightfully ours. When it's stolen and misappropriated, it ill serves the principles we stand for. So, in my own way, I *pray*: Let's take our language *back*.

Amen, blessed be, and let it be so.

²⁵ Op cit., Barber, 11-12.

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