

Lives of Extraordinary Love

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith

First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, Utah

March 14, 2010

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If anyone feels a little depressed about our new gun-toting society where you can order a cappuccino at Starbucks while resting your hand on the cold barrel of a colt-45, (if this is getting to you...)I welcome your company. In this era of “in-your-face” states rights, a euphemism for neutering all regulatory commissions from industrial pollution to pharmaceutical fraud to bankers and brokers accessing embarrassing profits, to drill baby drill on federally protected lands...don't you wonder where this is all going...(if it's getting to you...)I welcome your company.

An historian I much admire, Jon Meacham, who is also an editor for Newsweek, recently shared his despair about us – the American people. We may want to blame the dysfunctionality of our democracy on the partisanship in Washington, but Meacham contends we're only seeing ourselves reflected in the mirror along the halls of congress.

Too many Americans have a stake in the status quo which then precludes any real reform to bring changes that help lift up the poor and powerless in our society. We are enmeshed in an “I got mine” mentality where entitlement supersedes any regard for making short-term sacrifices for long-term benefits. Who knows how our self-indulgent ways evolved? I'm happy to leave that to sociologists to figure out. But as a minister, I can't help but be reminded of what was once the proud city of Babylon, the greatest and largest city in ancient times straddling both banks of the Euphrates River. Babylon became synonymous with extravagant and opulent wealth in the midst of extreme poverty. Every Old Testament prophet worth his salt predicted the downfall and demise of Babylon, and why not? It was too easy to forecast. You and I would have made the same predictions back then.

In our reading this morning by Thomas Friedman, written almost a year ago to the day, he says: “we can't do this anymore.” Is he a prophet for our times? Probably in some guise, but what makes us think that **WE** will heed the call of the prophet any more diligently than did the ancient Babylonians?

Friedman brought the economic crisis and the environmental crisis together under the same painful umbrella: greed. And the solutions to these respective crises revolve around the same question: How do we control our greed?

The conservationist, Peter Raven makes a helpful observation: “from the time of Aristotle to the 18th century, economics was considered a subdivision of ethics; the good life was understood to be based on such values as the common good, justice, and limits. Having substituted the insatiable greed of market capitalism in place of these values, we are now without the means to make the qualitative shift in thinking that's required.”

Peter Raven helps me understand why Americans seem so repulsed by what we refer to as “European Socialism.” We are entrenched, it seems, in pursuing a good life without setting limits for. The common good be damned. And this philosophy, if we want to call greed a philosophy and maybe it is, applies not only to the economic collapse, but our failure in caring for the welfare of the whole ecological organism called the planet: The common good of all creatures and eco-systems are snubbed and disregarded in favor of selfish pursuits striving for pleasures and luxuries and recreational opportunities.

In January, I accompanied a woman rabbi who heads the Connecticut Interfaith Power and Light, an environmental group to which I serve on the Board for the Utah Interfaith Power and Light...we traveled to the BYU campus where she addressed a gathering of students on eco-spirituality. The students failed, or perhaps the rabbi wasn't clear enough, but the students simply could not make the connection between the environment and spirituality. They asked repeatedly, “why is this a spiritual crisis?” The students were not alone in failing to make the connection.

Borrowing some from the theologian, Sally McFague, I think we can build a case. One of the functions or activities of religion is the formation of basic **assumptions** regarding human nature and our place in the scheme of things. Through stories, images and metaphors, religious traditions create (often) **unconscious assumptions** about who we are and how we should act. We live according to who we think we are and how our relationship with the earth is defined.

Until the scientific revolution, the organic quality of the earth was never questioned. Native religions are a good case in point. But then it became increasingly profitable to think of the world more like a machine than a living body. People began relating to the world as a thing for our use that satisfies our needs, desires, and recreation. And when the earth as machine breaks down, why then we fix it like cars with new parts substituting for faulty ones. And so it becomes hard for people to see the tragedy of clear-cutting forests or the implications of global warming.

The basic, underlying Christian understanding of the relationship between God and the world, is that the world from the beginning is loved by God and, in fact, reflects the divine. Air, water, food, and habitat thereby are inherently religious matters. If the world is a reflection of God, then the world must be fed and cared for. The world must be sustained for the indefinite future.

And so we return to Aristotle's model of economics being a subset of ethics, understood as committing to the common good; respecting and appreciating others with whom we share this earth. So if we place economics as a subset of ethics where it rightly belongs, then we must pay attention to **LIMITS**. We need to understand the earth as a finite body. All life-forms, earth and people, must have food, fresh water, clean air, and a habitat. Limitation is paramount.

There are some who commit their lives to the common good. We tend to regard them as saintly. Wow – look at the sacrifices they made.

Some of the big names who come to mind include Mahatma Gandhi, Simone Weil, Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr. and so forth. They are models of people whose lives bore extraordinary love...love for others. Just as St. Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Philippians that God took the form of a slave, so too have these remarkable people I just noted substituted humility and vulnerability in place of the normal human propensity towards insatiable appetites to fill the self. They have all sided with the poor and oppressed, using power not as a means for inflating the self, but to allow others to live with dignity.

Allow me to reiterate the primary function of religion: To inform us through story and metaphor, who we are in the universe while shaping our assumptions of how we need to live our lives. A metaphor I find particularly helpful is what Christians have called “kenosis,” a characteristic that the enlightened saints of old and modern times share in common.

Kenosis means “self-emptying.” Rather than the ethic of filling oneself materially, kenosis goes the other direction whereby we empty ourselves because it is only as an empty vessel that we can be filled by the divine power...by God’s perfect will, and thus live with limits in order to serve the common good. Unitarians might look at kenosis by asking: “Must I not live with less in order to understand the moral imperatives...a transcendent demand that I set limits in my life and evolve into a more giving person for the sake of others and the earth?”

An ethic of self-emptying, according to Sally McFague, begins with paying attention to others...a thoughtful ethic for our times of climate change and economic recession. Can our world be sustained unless we shift our ethic entirely and adopt a lifestyle that can support us all on the planet?

What lies at the heart of kenosis (self-emptying), is exactly what Americans abhor the most: placing limitations on ourselves and making sacrifices for the common good that embrace the poor and the planet. The shift in thinking, I believe, comes when we stop reserving the language of limits and sacrifice for “saints,” and begin to adopt it as an ethic for us all.

Self-emptying – kenosis – speaks to me of an egoless self, and thus I turn to my love of Buddhist teachings to understand another religious dimension to what this may mean for me (or us) personally.

I have shared with you through the years how Mary and I always visit Green Gulch, a Zen working farm in West Marin County where we return each year. Reb Anderson, a roshi at Green Gulch, offer insight about the non-self. I think the Buddhist non-self accurately parallels kenosis in the Christian tradition.

Reb Anderson begins with “renunciation.” What we need to renounce are our delusions about what we think our place is in the universe. It’s not about us and the attachments we grasp. We must let go of (or renounce or empty ourselves) of our attachments and our deluded views of who we are.

The delusion stems from feeling that we are separate from the world. People are over there; the land is over there; walls are over there. There’s life external to ourselves that exists on its own. The delusion is that you are separate from others and thus need to hold on to yourself. The significance of oneself then becomes way inflated in the scheme of things.

The BIG SELF does not hear or observe or feel the suffering of others. But through renunciation of this delusion of separateness, we can begin to sit with...and feel the suffering of those around us. This is the Buddha spirit – or, emptying oneself to make room for the Divine Other to enter. When the Buddha spirit then fills you, you can’t sit at the edge of suffering, as though suffering was a place and you’re kind of in the suburbs. As Reb Anderson puts it” You’re in the downtown of suffering.” You’re right there and see more and more clearly that holding on to stuff that you believe offers you significance is so delusional. There are no separations between you and others so let go of your desire to control so you can appreciate and bring love to other suffering beings. Love is the context of renunciation.

Love is the context through which Gandhi and King lived their lives. Their lives existed in the heart of “downtown suffering.” They understood their place in the scheme of things.

We live within the assumptions of who we think we are. We are delusional, in both Christian and Buddhist worldviews, if we believe that we are separate from other human beings and separate from the grandeur of the creation. Once “emptied” of such delusions...once “emptied” of the need for excess, we can begin to understand and become receptive to the need for limits and sacrifice because we see our place in the world as it really is. We need to lose the life of self-importance, or empty ourselves of such ego and vanity in order to find the life of extraordinary love.

The prophet, Thomas Friedman, proclaimed that our dual crisis of climate change and financial chaos stem from the same source: Because of our greed we are in debt financially and ecologically. And once again the people turn deaf ears to the words of the prophet.

Saints set limits and sacrifice much in their lives. **We** are not really prepared to sacrifice. That’s not in our purview of what life is all about. But the proposition takes on a different hue for me when I stop considering sacrifice and ask myself: Do I lead a life of extraordinary love...or just lead a life of love? Call it kenosis or emptying or non-self or renunciation, it’s all about gaining a totally new perspective on my place in the scheme of things, the common good, limits, and reflecting God’s love for the earth. It’s all about living a life of love...not the love of material gain and comforts

and everything that makes me separate from others. Free of delusions of self-importance, I can truly love the other who is I. I can truly love the earth and all its creatures because there is no separation.

If the world is a reflection of God, then let us live accordingly...with extraordinary love to hear the cries of anguish of those who suffer. We do not need to become saints in order to respond to the common good. But if we make economics a part of our ethical framework, then we will live more in keeping with all that is sacred in this world. We, too, in modest ways, will be able to lead lives of extraordinary love. Amen.