

The Sacred and the Profane

Rev. Deborah Mero

March 23, 2008

UFWC

Many years ago, faced with trying to figure out what to write and say about Easter, I opened up the newspaper and took a hard look at the ads that various churches had placed. This was when I lived in the Portland Oregon area. The newspapers on the week before Easter usually had a huge spread of ads placed by the area churches touting their special Easter Sunday services. The one that got my immediate attention was the one that declared in bold letters at the top, "The Bunny Is Winning." This was actually an ad for a radio evangelist and his "relevant, practical series of messages counting down to Easter Sunday." Alas, the power of advertising didn't sway me or pique my curiosity enough for me to want to tune in. But the title was very catching. There was quite a variety of offerings for this special Sunday. They included: "The Glory of Easter, Celebrating Easter A 300 member cast consisting of choir, orchestra and drama. Experience the spectacular resurrection and unbelievable ascension scenes." There was also, "The Promise, A musical with a cast of hundreds, a full orchestra, the triumphal entry, the crucifixion, live animals, a full staged dramatic musical." I wish I had saved that page to show you all. It is still hard for me to believe it was real, but it was.

I have confessed to some of you already that I struggle with Easter. This is part of the reason why. I am so grateful for Jane Rzepka's simple reading, "Blessing the Blend" because it puts right out there the conundrum we face as Unitarian Universalists when Easter approaches. For many in our seats and in our pews there is no desire to hear about Jesus and certainly not about the resurrection event which is the central focus of Easter. Easter is about new life, Spring, flowers and maybe eggs too. And as for the bunny, believe it or not in one of the congregations I previously served it was about the bunny, or should I say bunnies. You see they had one member who only came on Easter and brought with him at least a half dozen rabbits and bunnies for the children to pet. I titled the sermon "The Bunny is Winning" having heard that he would be bringing bunnies to church on Easter. What I didn't know was that upon arrival that morning I would find cages with rabbits in them surrounding the pulpit! It turned out that for long time members of the congregation, that was an expected ritual of Easter. It was to them, almost sacred. For newcomers coming to that church for the first time on Easter, well they could have been charmed, amused or deeply bothered. It's hard to know. It all depends on one's expectations and one's cultural norms.

These past few weeks there has been quite a to do about the words of one preacher to his congregation being taken out of context to brand a candidate assuming guilt by association while the association other candidates have to their favored firebrand preachers have not been challenged. Expectations and cultural norms were, for the most part, not a part of the dialogue.

But back to our Easter conundrum. Again, I reach back to those early days when I was new at this. In my first year of ministry I made a trip to Barlow High School in Boring Oregon at the invitation of a student. It was a senior humanities class and it took place in May. Remember what it was like to be a senior in May? To say that the students weren't exactly focused would be an understatement. On top of that, the visit turned out to be a bit of an ambush. There were two other ministers there who were wielding their bibles like weapons. One of them was young and good looking and as you can probably imagine, the eyes of the girls were trained on him the whole hour. Of course I was asked to talk about Unitarian Universalism as none of them knew anything about us. I started in with the principles and values we hold dear. They were having a hard time grasping what I was trying to say and after a few minutes of watching their eyes slowly glaze over, I changed tack. I asked the class how many of the students considered themselves practicing Christians. Most, if not all of them raised their hands. I then asked if their belief in Christianity was

founded on the example of the life and works of Jesus, or on the death and resurrection of Christ. They looked at me with blank stares in their faces. I had to explain the question. When they finally did get it, the answer they all chose was answer "b." They were Christians who based their understanding and belief in Jesus Christ because he had died for their sins. Therein lies probably the main theological difference between that group of students, much of the Christian world, and us. While our Unitarian and Universalist historical roots are in Christianity, what we have found most valuable in the story of Jesus is the example of his life and teachings, not his suffering, death and resurrection.

In various congregations I have served I have arranged showings of the movie "Jesus of Montreal." It is a contemporary film centering around a production of the passion play, the life and death of Jesus, that was one of the annual events of a catholic church in Montreal. The priest in charge of the play had written the script many years before and felt that it had become somewhat stale and needed a bit of re-writing to make it fresh. He gave the job to a local actor/ director. The actor did research into the life of Jesus. He traveled around the city gathering his cast. Very early on, the parallels to Jesus' life begin to surface. His gathering of the cast is like watching Jesus gathering his disciples. They forsake other jobs, some of them lucrative, for the insecurity of working with this man. There is the contemporary money changers in the temple scene, there are the two women who are very similar to Mary and Martha, there is the court who questions his actions, thinking him possibly to be crazy.

The new version of passion play which he creates begins by saying that we really don't know much about the real Jesus. It talks about history and speculation. The stations of the cross are presented and the honesty and emotions of the performers are quite evident. Not all that they have to say pleases the church—it doesn't cling to orthodoxy—and the production is cancelled. They attempt to continue anyway and police are called in to stop the performance. The clash with the police takes place when Jesus is on his cross. In the ensuing melee, the cross is toppled, the actor sustains a head injury. There is no room for him in the emergency room in the catholic hospital. After a prolonged wait, he gets up and leaves the hospital only to collapse on a subway platform, He is then taken to the Jewish hospital but it is too late. They ask permission to remove vital organs for transplanting to save other lives. Jesus is resurrected in other bodies by giving his heart to one man, and his eyes to a woman. This is not a story about prolonged suffering. It is a story about challenging the prevailing authority, standing up for what is right and losing one form of life in the process.

Contrast that story with the Passion of the Christ which came out several years ago which focused on the last hours, the torture and crucifixion of Jesus. Very different focus given to a story which is fundamental to the faith of hundreds of millions of people. Given the choice of viewing and understanding the portrayals Jesus in two very distinct films, we Unitarian Universalists would probably find more meaning and understanding in the story of the actors grappling with a sacred story than in the portrayal of the suffering servant. Both are interpretations of books handed down through the ages. One is blatant in presenting an interpretation. The other is one director's interpretation of a sacred story that was being marketed and accepted as the "gospel truth" by millions of people. Different audiences would consider one sacred and the other profane.

I wonder if those students at Barlow High would have tuned in to the message of Jesus of Montreal? My guess is that many of their pastors would have condemned the actions of the acting troop in the movie just as the priest in the story did. The film is powerful. It portrays characters we can identify with in our society. It crosses back and forth between life and story, between real

people and character roles. Its symbolism is profound just as profound as the story within the story is. It pushes at the edges of the sacred making us look at our own interpretations of what we accept as truth and where we draw the lines at freely interpreting familiar and to some, holy, material.

This brings us to the question of what is sacred and why is it so. For most Christians, the idea of the resurrection is sacred. For us, the values of a great teacher are sacred. For others, a liturgy with its words and symbols is sacred. Who decides? In our pluralistic society, how can we possibly come up with any rules or guidelines that will not infringe upon someone else's needs to separate the sacred from the profane? How is it that we even try to determine what is sacred?

We talk about the sacred all the time. Often it is directly linked with religion. Sacred scriptures are foundational for some faith traditions. For others, rituals are considered sacred. For some, there are holy people who spend their lives trying to interpret the processes of living and dying for others. For some faith traditions, there are tangible objects that are considered sacred. For all of these people, for all of these traditions, the sacred, the holy is something that is connected in some way with God or some kind of higher power. There is some kind of connection with a power that is of another world so to speak.

Max Stirner, a German writer from the early nineteenth century wrote:

" Before what is sacred, people lose all sense of power and all confidence; they occupy a powerless and humble attitude toward it. And yet no thing is sacred of itself, but by my declaring it sacred, by my declaration, my judgment, my bending the knee, in short, by my conscience." ¹

On this Easter Sunday millions of people are looking at an object, two wooden planks, one shorter than the other, nailed together, and they find hope and consolation. Others see mass destruction of indigenous peoples for the greater glory of God, and still others see threats of hellfire and damnation. Symbols can be powerful things. And this being Easter Sunday, there is symbolism abounding of a most profound nature. For some the symbolism is sacred, for others, profane.

For good or ill, I am one of those people who is not convinced by all of the pomp and glory of Easter and the resurrection. Personally I have a hard time envisioning basing my faith on the cruel death of one man. I am at a loss to imagine any one person, indeed any group of people being sacrificed in order to eradicate the sins of others. I struggle every year with the whole idea of holy week, death and the supposed miraculous return to life of one person given the aura of being one and the same with God. And yet I have profound respect for the faith that my friends and colleagues have who are believers and followers of Christ. What is sacred to them does not fulfill that function for me.

I want to put my faith in something that will help me to live my life here, today, in this society. I want some kind of guidance as to how best to help or serve others. I want to have some kind of inner guide to what living rightly is. The Buddhists don't focus their energy on the death of Sidhartha Gautama. The Hindus aren't wrapped up in the deaths of their gods. The Muslims read their Koran for inspiration on life's issues. The death of Muhammad is not the focus of their faith.

And yet, Christianity claims this story of the agony and ecstasy as it's core Whether or not it makes sense to me is irrelevant. For some, Easter as one of the two times a year that they feel compelled to go to church. It's the time to buy new clothes and pretty hats. Its the time of year when the patter of little feet is made by new patent leather shoes. As Jane Rzepka reminds us, some of us would much rather harken back to the pagan symbols of eggs and rabbits. We have passed the vernal equinox. Hard as it is to believe, Spring is here. March 23 is the earliest date for Easter in our lifetimes. A christian colleague noted on this online writing:

“Remarkable but true: because of the way Easter is calculated (basically the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Spring equinox), the feast is limited to a range of dates from March 22nd to April 25th.

The last time Easter was as early as it is this year was 1913. The next time it will come around is 2228. Even crazier, the last time Easter was on March 22nd was 1818 and the next time it will get there is 2285. So no one alive has ever seen Easter come earlier than it will this year, nor will anyone alive see it come earlier in the future.”²

That being said, it feels way too early for flowers and colored eggs and the full bloom of Easter which feels more satisfying to the pagan sensibilities within our congregations. But for our pagan sisters and brothers—of which there are many in Unitarian Universalist congregations—the symbols of spring, the egg, young animals, yes, the bunny, and other signs of new life, are what Easter is all about. Which is sacred and which is profane? The answer to that depends on who is asking the question and who is answering it. And clues to the answer of that question come to us in both sacred and profane settings—movie theaters, classrooms, religious sanctuaries.

Here, under this roof, surrounded by this congregation of good souls the issue at hand really is about blessing the blend. We are grateful to be able to question and learn and doubt and wonder and do it out loud among fellow journeyers without fear of judgement—at least not judgement of belief or lack thereof. And that, I know is why so many of us are here.

May we continue to be free to ask and challenge, and seek, and maybe even find our own understanding of the sacred and make note of it's importance in our lives.

¹ Seldes, George, **The Great Thoughts**, (New York: Ballentine, 1985) p. 401

² <http://www.streetprophets.com/storyonly/2008/3/21/155531/339>