

January 17, 2010

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

Phoenix Affirmation One

Even before this last week, the need for progressive Christianity to raise its passionate voice in the public square, in the media highways and byways of the 21st century, was clear. Even before this last week, the need for progressive Christianity to speak and live the truth it knows through the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith was clear. The need was already deep and urgent.

In the several weeks preceding this last week, the need for a public, progressive Christian voice was painfully palpable as the news came from Uganda of a bill seeking to authorize imprisonment and even execution for gay men and lesbians and then as we began to learn of the message that some “Christian” leaders from the United States have been spreading in Africa. The need for a progressive Christian voice became painfully clear as we could read and hear these preachers and activists warning their Ugandan counterparts of the “evils” of homosexuality, of the dire nature of the homosexual “threat” to children, families, and life itself, and of the necessity to act against gay men and lesbians as quickly as possible.

In the several weeks preceding this last week, the need for a public, progressive Christian voice was clear as we heard of a news commentator urging a world-renowned athlete to reject Buddhism and convert to Christianity, because Buddhism could never bring the help, hope, and healing into his life that the “Christian God” could bring.

And then, last week, came the earthquake in Haiti. The earliest news reports were alarming, grim, and frightening, and then, with the passing of each hour and each day, the reports became grimmer and grimmer. The news became more and more heartbreaking, the reality in Port au Prince, more and more incomprehensible. People around this nation and around the world tried to absorb the devastation and the horror, and millions begin asking, “How can I help? What can I do to reach out?”

And as so many of those people began to take action, to help in the ways that they could, a man who has claimed to be preaching the Christian gospel for decades “explained” the devastation and the horror. He “explained” that the Haitian people had long ago made a pact with the devil and had thus brought the earthquake on themselves, lo these centuries later. In the name of God in Christ, this man proclaimed a message utterly lacking in love, common decency, and common sense. To a people in shock, grief, and despair, this “Christian” man offered scorn and self-righteousness. To a hungry and thirsty people, this man offered rancid words and poisoned ideas.

I wish it was only in the last several weeks that the loudest – or at least the most prominently reported – “Christian” voices had offered intolerance, arrogance, and lack of compassion. I *wish* it was only in the last several weeks, but it hasn’t been. The most frequently reported “Christian” voices for years have been those of people who insist every word in the Bible is literally true, despite all of its inconsistencies and contradictions; who insist that Christianity is the only true religion; and who insist that

only right-believing Christians will go to heaven, while everyone else will burn in hell for eternity.

So many of the self-appointed and media-appointed spokesmen and women for the Christian faith over the last thirty years have described a faith that's unrecognizable that members of this church and churches across the globe have become embarrassed to tell their friends and co-workers that they go to church.

This reality has prompted many different people in many different communities to come together and begin to name more publicly the God in Christ that they encounter in their lives and the Christianity in which they find love, blessing, challenge, and guidance. Wanting to tell the world that the loudest voices are not the only voices, people throughout the world have been claiming, describing, and trying to live a *different* Christian vision, a *progressive* Christian vision.

The last couple of months, I've been talking, preaching, and writing about one particular description of progressive Christianity, the Phoenix Affirmations. UCC minister Eric Elnes describes how the affirmations developed and what he understands them to mean in two books, *Asphalt Jesus* and *The Phoenix Affirmations*.

In *The Phoenix Affirmations*, he starts with a story that explains why he believes it is time for progressive Christians to speak clearly and publicly about their faith. One day, Jenny, a member of his church came to talk with the Rev. Elnes and told him she was tired of being a "Christian butt," as in rear end, caboose, behind. He had no idea what she meant, so he asked Jenny to explain.

I'm tired of having always to qualify the word *Christian* when I tell people I'm going to church. I might as well say I'm radioactive. They get a surprised look on their face and say, 'Not *you*, Jenny. You don't seem like the Christian type.' So I find myself throwing in more and more *buts* all the time: 'I'm a Christian, but ... but ... but. I'm a Christian, but I don't think homosexuals are evil ... I'm a Christian, but I believe women are equal to men ... but I'm concerned about poverty ... but I care about the earth ... but I don't think people who believe differently from me will fry in hell for eternity ...'

And, after this past week, she might have added, "I'm a Christian, but, even if I believed that a people could make a pact with the devil, which I do'nt, I don't for a minute think God would punish them by killing any of them, much less tens of thousands of them."

For people like Jenny who are tired of saying, "I'm a Christian, but ..." the Phoenix Affirmations provide twelve ways of saying, "I'm a Christian, *and ... and* I believe that God speaks through the ancient testimonies in the Bible *and in many other ways*. I'm a Christian, and I believe the Spirit moves through all people and all of creation. I'm a Christian, and I believe both faith and science serve the pursuit of truth. I'm a Christian, and I believe all people are loved beyond our wildest imagination. I'm a Christian, and I believe in the separation of church and state."

For churches like this church, the Phoenix Affirmations provide a way of exploring who we are, how we understand the Christian faith, and what message and ministries we are called to offer. For churches like this one, who may or may not realize that they already are progressive Christian churches, the Phoenix Affirmations provide an opportunity to understand that identity more deeply and to claim it more joyously.

Last month, we briefly explored and experienced Affirmation Four, which embraces faithful worship as an expression of love shaped by vibrance, sincerity, and the arts, as well as being grounded in scripture. Throughout the rest of the year, on the third Sunday of each month, except July, I'll be inviting you to join me in exploring Affirmations 2, 3, and 5 through 12.

This morning, in the first month of the new year, I invite you to join me in spending some time with the first affirmation, which is printed the bulletin as the Prelude Meditation: the love of God, neighbor, and self that is the core of the gospel is a call to walk "fully in the Path of Jesus without denying the legitimacy of other paths that God may provide for humanity."

It's so simple ... The Christian path is the path of loving God, neighbor, and self as Jesus taught, and the fullness of God, the fullness of the sacred web of life, does not express itself only through Christianity. That fullness does not draw people near only through a single religious path. The Spirit of life, love, and peace Christians experience through Jesus moves through other people, other cultures, other traditions, other faiths.

This first Affirmation isn't a new thought in Christian history, and it certainly isn't a new thought here, in the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC. But is it a *Christian* thought? Is it true to the gospel? Is it true to the meaning and message of Jesus? Or is it merely a post-modern attempt in a pluralistic society to make an ancient tradition seem not quite so ancient and not quite so irrelevant?

Oh, my beloved friends, it is one of the truths at the *heart* of the gospel. If I didn't believe that ... if I didn't experience that ... if I didn't trust that that expansiveness, that lack of exclusivity is at the heart of the gospel, I wouldn't be standing here today, and I most certainly wouldn't have taken the ordination vows that made me an ordained *Christian* minister almost four years ago.

In the teachings, stories, and parables that the earliest of Jesus' followers remembered and repeated, Jesus is forever trying to help his listeners understand that God, the Spirit that enlivens all of creation, is a God of surprises, a Spirit that does not conform to human limitations. Jesus teaches that, in the commonwealth of God, the greatest of all is not the most powerful, the most eloquent, or the loudest but is, instead, the one who serves. He teaches that divine love and forgiveness know no ending, even though human love and forgiveness can often be in very short supply. Jesus teaches that the human hierarchies placing Pharisees over tax collectors, men over women, Judeans over Samaritans – the kind of hierarchies, in other words, that place Christians over everyone else – are nothing but *human* hierarchies that God ignores and even turns on their heads.

At first glance, this morning's reading from the Gospel of John, in which Jesus is remembered as having turned water into wine, may not seem to have anything to do with the first of the Phoenix Affirmations or with progressive Christianity. At first glance, the story of the wedding at Cana appears to be one of the many miracle stories in the gospels, stories that describe Jesus as a healer and a miracle worker ... stories that 21st century readers can choose to interpret literally or metaphorically.

But remember that the Gospel of John, more than any of the other gospels, portrays Jesus as the very Word of God incarnate in human flesh. In a way particular to the community that brought us the Gospel and Letters of John, the Gospel of John wants us to see God in Jesus, to see God in everything Jesus says and in everything he does.

With that in mind, think again about the story of the wedding at Cana, and hear the words of the chief steward: “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

If this story isn’t really about things as mundane as wedding guests and wine ... if this story is, instead, about how God, the Spirit at the heart of creation, acts in and among us ... then maybe this story has everything to do with the progressive Christian belief that Christianity is not the only pathway to God. If the story isn’t about wine at all, but about the differences between how we human folk often act and how the Spirit of Life acts, we can hear something different in the chief steward’s words. Perhaps he’s saying, “Human beings may act as if there’s a finite supply of spiritual truth. We may act as if ‘the good’ can come only once, and it has come to our group. But you, O God, have an infinite supply of that truth, and you offer it throughout human history. You offer it in different ways to different peoples through different revelations.” Perhaps the chief steward is saying, in the words of the Phoenix Affirmations, “But you, O Holy Presence, provide many legitimate paths for your people.”

Even the Apostle Paul, who seems to have been as vulnerable to self-righteousness and arrogance as you and I are, caught glimpses of this larger vision of God and God’s work through Christianity. Even as he preaches the rightness of the Christian path, he catches glimpses of an unimaginably expansive, inclusive God. Listen again to the words from this morning’s reading: “There are *varieties* of gifts, but the same Spirit; *varieties* of services, but the same Lord; *varieties* of activities, but the same God activating them all. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good.*” In these words, I hear that deeper truth: there are varieties of true spiritual paths, gifts of the same Sacred Source, and each one is given for the common good. I hear one of the truths that Progressive Christianity seeks to share with the world.

Progressive Christianity seeks to be true to the Path of Jesus, while honoring and learning from other paths of the Spirit. Progressive Christianity, with both boldness and humility, proclaims that the commonwealth of God made known through Jesus is one of expansive love, extravagant welcome, and tender care for all of creation. This church has been shaped by this progressive Christian vision, and it is being called to share it. Please join me in seeking to discover and live that call, over the next year and over our lifetimes.

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
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