

Easter Sunday April 8, 2007
Open Prairie United Church of Christ

“Time to Change Our Tune” Rev. Curran Reichert

I remember a few things from the Easters of my childhood- waking up early on Sunday morning...that weird smell of vinegar and hard-boiled eggs in the air, which meant the promise of an Easter Egg Hunt. Every year we got a basket with something fuzzy (stuffed chicks or bunnies) and a white or dark chocolate rabbit. My brother Thad never had a hard time with this part of Easter; he didn't have any trouble with the big ham dinner, or the homemade carrot cake with cream cheese frosting often in the shape of a rabbit or little lamb. I've been trying to replicate that cake for years, but that's another story.

The part where it got dicey at the Reichert house was when it came time to get dressed and go to church. I was always so excited to put on my frilly Easter dress and patent leather Mary Jane's that I never paid much attention to my brother's distress. He hated going to church for Easter. In hindsight, I wonder what would've happened if my parent's had stopped the holiday freight train long enough to ask my brother why he didn't want to go to church. Instead of screaming and yelling and insisting that he go-what if we'd sat down as a family and talked about it. What's Easter, what is the significance of the story, why does it matter?

But like most of your households, I suspect, there wasn't a lot of room for conversations like that one and certainly not when there were two sets of Grandparents to visit and a ham to put in the oven.

So, every year we went to church; along with all the other families whose children's eyes were puffy from having thrown their best tantrum. And I suspect what grew in my brother was an ever increasing distain not only for Easter- but also for church in general. "Stupid Christians," my brother is fond of saying- "they're more trouble than they're worth."

What does my brother think of me being a Pastor, not much from what I can tell. He might secretly think it's OK, he doesn't let on. The thing is, my brother knows me well enough to know that I tilt pretty far to the left, so he must also assume there's a fairly significant difference between what I believe and what we do here, versus the traditional version of "church." But my brother has never once asked me why I do what I do, or what I believe.

This week, as a group of us in the "Saving Jesus" class wrestled with various meanings of the crucifixion and resurrection, I got some insight into why that may be. I realized that sometimes as progressive folk, we're more invested in defending our disbelief, than we are in transforming what do believe.

My brother, for example, would rather be angry at all organized religion than have to admit that there is great diversity amongst religious people. He is proud of his skepticism; wears it like a badge of courage, in fact he's quiet smug about it and very comfortable judging others from his vantage point. Thad has defined himself as a skeptic for so many years he wouldn't have the first clue who he was if he began to let some of that go. Implicit in his attitude seems to be an unwillingness to be transformed by... anything. If I were to venture a guess, I think Thad fears what most of us fear, that we aren't really capable of transformation.

But what is the Easter story about- if not transformation?

Transforming the fear that keeps us entombed in our own little realities so we don't have to make ourselves vulnerable and risk getting hurt, or disappointed. Transforming our attitudes into a willingness to live life fully and be changed by the present moment. I think that's where the Alleluia's come from-those light bulb moments when transformation is actively taking place. What a shame to deny oneself and Alleluia. I preach a lot about incremental steps and taking as long as we need to get to the truth, but here's the thing about Easter you can't really hate it and be transformed by it at the same time. For those of you who love Easter-God bless you just hold on, were coming back to you. I don't loose sleep over you-it's the folks who are still refusing to receive the blessing of Easter that I am troubled with this morning.

See if we are going to get something out of it, this morning's resurrection story demands that we let go of old theology that keeps us from committing. This resurrection story tells us that in order to find new life, we're gonna have to shed the negativity and skepticism that have made it possible for us to skirt around the edges without ever fully stepping in. Like the beloved disciple Peter, we like to skirt around the edges- one foot in, one foot out- trying' to die just a little, we don't want to have to die the whole way, don't want the whole truth- we just want enough truth to pass for another year. But Jesus is onto our game, half-truths don't add up too much he wants our wholeness and will not be satisfied with less. Jesus says to Peter, "you'll deny me three times before the sun comes up," to be part of this resurrection story you've got to be in all the way.

Now don't get nervous, I 'm not gonna ask you to believe what you don't believe-if you don't believe that Jesus died for our sins, if you're not sure that he physically rose from the dead well, you are in good company, look around-these people have the same doubts as you do. But we are never going to make any progress towards the core of the Easter message if we are more committed to our doubts that we are to the possibility of transformation.

I'm not foolish enough to believe that one sermon can reverse the suspicion or mistrust that some of you have been building against the church for years, but just like when my brother was little, I don't want to miss the opportunity to help get you unstuck.

Here's what I think- I think we can't get to talking about the resurrection until we are clear up some stuff about the crucifixion. That's the place where most of us get hung up. Let me break it down, what most of us were raised with is a theory called the "atonement." It's the idea that Jesus had to die to atone for the sins of humanity-that he died to set right the estranged relationship between God and humanity. That theory comes from the ancient world, where it was not unusual for religious people to restore relationship with their god or gods through animal sacrifice. Judaism practiced animal sacrifice for countless years and early Christians picked up on the idea of Jesus' death as sacrifice.

What's the problem with that? Well, the first is that this interpretation of the Jesus' murder perpetuates the idea that God is some blood thirsty, judgment monger, who would make an example of his own child just to prove a point. I can't get behind that theory, it is completely incompatible with Jesus' message of God as a loving and compassionate parent.

According to scholar -- John Cobb, "The atonement doctrine, which puts an emphasis on Jesus' blood as being the sacrifice is really a mistranslation of Romans chapter three, where it is simply being said that Jesus' faithfulness unto death is the saving factor." Not his blood, not even his death, but his faithfulness to the work that God was doing through him. There are all kinds of theories that fall in line with the idea of the atonement, and to me they are all equally disturbing.

Substitutionary Atonement presumes that God would just as soon kill us for our sins, but the slaughter of the Jesus, who was in all way innocent, satiated the divine's lust for blood. There is the Martin Scrocese-esk **Ransom Theory** that Jesus died to pay off Satan in order to win our freedom and the **Victory Theory**, which supposes that Jesus' death eradicated the power of evil for all time, which we know all too well, is simply not true.

By process of elimination we are left with one last idea, it is called the **Moral Theory** and it is the only one that makes sense to me. It makes the point that what is significant for us as Christians today about Jesus death, was his commitment to his convictions up and until he drew his last breathe. In the face of those who would kill him he offered forgiveness, in relationship to the prisoner who died alongside him, he witnesses to compassion and in doing so Jesus provided an example for humanity to follow – but you see it's hard to get the whole truth of that message if we spend all our time railing about that in which we don't, can't, wont believe?

There is a Native American storyteller who begins all his stories by saying, "I do not know if it happened exactly this way, but I know the story I am about to tell is true." We'll never know exactly what happened from the time Jesus was put to death to the moment when the women arrived at the grave to find he wasn't there. We'll never really know what took place in the exchange between Jesus and the women, and later between Jesus and the disciples-but what we know is this.

Beyond Jesus' death, people who believed in what he stood for continued to have very real experiences of him. (Alleluia) And not of him as they had known him in the past-but transformed experiences of him, mystical experiences-some of you have had, I've had mystical experiences of the living Christ. It's hard to find words for those experiences, but they are very real.

Someone asked this week, if there is so much resistance to what it has traditionally stood for why do we celebrate Easter? It's a good question. We celebrate Easter because we cannot afford to forget that justice and those who stand for it are vulnerable in this world. We celebrate because even though injustice continues to flourish- God is with us when we stand up against it. We celebrate Easter because it teaches us that we are God's beloved- and the good news this morning is that Jesus will stand beside us as we figure out what that means.

Resurrection is about trusting that even cynical old dogs like us can learn a new trick or two. It is about knowing that it's never too late to be transformed by our convictions. And finally that ongoing experiences of the risen Christ are there to assure us that nothing and I mean "nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love.¹ God is doing a new thing in us this day... alleluia...alleluia...amen.

¹ Romans 8:38-40 The Message

