

HOME BY ANOTHER ROAD

A sermon series preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church of Minneapolis

by the Rev. James Gertmenian

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HOME BY ANOTHER ROAD

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1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

February 6, 2005

the Rev. James Gertmenian

Text: Luke 11:5-13

I was rushing around the house the other day, bemoaning aloud the fact that I had too much to do and being generally cross about it, when Sam stopped me in my tracks.

“Slow down,” she said, in a tone that told me that after thirty-three years of marriage she understood the futility of her words. And then she said, hoping to be helpful, “Tell me about some of the stuff that’s on your plate.”

So I began to tick off some of the major projects I was working on, and described how far behind I was on various of them, and then I mentioned, “And on top of it all I’ve got the Men’s Retreat next weekend, and I still have to do all the planning for that.”

“Really,” she said, being an expert retreat leader herself. “What’s the topic this year?”

Without even thinking, I answered, “It’s about how men don’t know how to slow down ...”

I wish you could have seen the look on her face when she heard it. Bemused pity, I think it was. And, shaking her head and muttering something about the blind leading the blind, she turned and walked away.

OK, so we’ve established that I’m no expert on slowing down. But we’re going to have a great couple of days all the same beginning on Friday evening at ARC Retreat Center. All this is leading up to saying that there are still four or five slots open for the retreat, so if you’re interested, please speak to me after worship, or call the church office tomorrow or Tuesday.

Will you pray with me? Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O God, My Rock, my Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.

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The title of this morning’s sermon is taken from the title of a wonderful book by Jim Burklo, who is currently the minister of the Sausalito Presbyterian Church in California. It’s called *Open Christianity: Home By Another Road*, and a copy of it was given to me recently by one of Plymouth’s newer visitors. Sometimes when I read a particularly apt phrase, or an especially telling sentence, I think, “I wish I had written that,” and I have to confess that there was a bit of that feeling when I came across “Home By Another Road.” But even more than that, I simply thought, “What a gift!” For in those four words, Burklo has captured much of my own spiritual journey and – unless I’m mistaken – much of the spiritual journey of many of Plymouth’s members. But let me just speak for myself (and it’s important for you to remember through this sermon that I am speaking from that perspective alone), and you can decide whether this image works for you.

As a progressive Christian, or a liberal Christian, or a seeking Christian, or an unorthodox Christian, (none of the labels are really quite right), I’ve been questioned from time to time about whether I’ve journeyed so far beyond the traditional Christian perimeter that the name really doesn’t apply any more. I remember sitting in a

restaurant in downtown Minneapolis where a minister of another church looked me in the eye and said that he was concerned about the souls of Plymouth's members because of what I preach. I remember a meeting down in the Nancy Baltins Room where representatives of the Minnesota Fellowship of Congregational Churches questioned the leadership of Plymouth, suggesting that this church had abandoned its Christian heritage and had really become Unitarian, the assumption being that "Unitarian" and "Christian" are mutually exclusive terms. And, to be perfectly honest, and so as not to lay all the responsibility on others, my own inner questioner has asked, again and again, who I really am as a person of faith, and where I really belong in the scheme of things. I know that my Grandmother Christina, of blessed memory, and who was a very devout Christian believer, would find some of my views strange, some disappointing, perhaps some even anathema. I know that the training I received in Seminary prepared me for part of the terrain I've walked in my spiritual journey, but not for all of it. Some of that journey has gone into a far country, territory that some – and I myself at one time – might have considered beyond the Christian pale.

But here's what I believe. I believe that my journey has not been away from the heart of the faith of Jesus at all, but toward it. As a liberal Christian, I believe I'm on my way home, not by virtue of turning around, but by virtue of moving forward. And it is a home that should be, I think, recognizable, at least in part, even to the most traditional and orthodox believers who are also, to be sure, seeking it. It's something we hold in common. Let me describe it. In this home that I seek, God is a palpable presence giving depth and meaning to life. Because of that depth and meaning, people in this home care for one another, forgive one another, accept one another, embrace one another. From that family-ness, from that community, I get courage to do things that I could not otherwise do. With that courage, together with others, I am called to seek justice, work for peace, and protect those who are most vulnerable. And in the midst of that seeking, and that working, I discover a faith that is not a religious piety, but a deep, rock-solid assurance that all manner of things will be well, a calm at my center, a hope beyond my deserving. And one more thing. In this home, there is room for everyone. Everyone.

As I said, it's a vision of home that I think I share with most Christians ... with, in fact, most of the people of the earth. With most of the people of the earth, I yearn for it. These are deep and basic and elemental human longings. "As the deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my heart for you, O God." "Again, the kingdom of heaven [the realm of God] is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." That search for home is what the journey of my life is about. Do you recognize it, too? But there's a problem. I find that I can't get there by the road my grandparents used. Or by the road that many other, more orthodox Christians use. To the extent that it is a place where I once was myself, I cannot even get home by the same road that led there in my youth.

Let me explain very briefly here, with the promise that I will return to each of these themes in sermons between now and June for a somewhat fuller discussion.

First, and foremost, I can't get home by the road that suggests that Jesus is the only way or Christianity the only true religion. For me, at least, that road is blocked, closed off forever. Even if I wanted to – and I don't – I could not make my heart, my mind, my soul accept that God could be so foolishly exclusive and so arbitrarily mean as to confine revelation, or salvation, to one religious tribe. God, for me, is bigger than that, and less conveniently in my control than would be implied by saying that the religion I happened to be born into happens to be the only true religion. I want to get home, like everyone else. I want to get home to the essence of what Jesus taught. But the way of Christian exclusivism is blocked. I need to get home by another road.

Second, I can't get home by the road that demands that I subordinate the revelations of science to the revelations of religion. If the sign by the road says, "No evolutionists on this route," I can't go that way. If, on the old road, earlier wisdom about gender and sexuality cannot incorporate newly learned facts of biology and psychology and social science, the way will be blocked for me. If, on that road, the voice of reason cannot be in conversation with the whispers of the heart or the murmurs of faith, I'll be lost. Like everyone else, I have a

desire for home, the home I described earlier. But the anti-science, counter-intellect way goes nowhere for me. I need to get home by another road.

I can't get home by the road whereon the cross's meaning is that God demands blood sacrifice and that one person pays the price for the sins of another. I know that "substitutionary atonement," as the doctrine is called, is a way by which many people travel, and find God, and feel saved. I respect that way for them. It was a way I once traveled myself. But I can't go that way any more. That God seems now to me to be abusive and arbitrary and more like a keeper of ledger than a lover of humankind. I believe that the cross still has meaning as a symbol of how love triumphs over human cruelty and as a symbol of an unfathomable courage. I desire, deeply, to find the home where that love and courage are present, and where I may emulate them. But I can't get there in the old way. I need to get home by another road.

I can't get home by the road that implies that personal salvation is the ultimate aim of life and personal morality the ultimate value. I simply cannot imagine that the whole religious enterprise is about whether I personally get to heaven or not, whatever heaven may be. After years of traveling that road, I realized that it wasn't getting me anywhere. The moral questions which seem urgent to me, and about which I can imagine God being concerned, are the great questions of wealth and poverty, war and peace, power and justice, and the only salvation that makes any sense to me now is the salvation of all creation, not just my own safe arrival. I want to be in that home where salvation is real, but I cannot get there by the way that sees it as a test or a contest or a process of elimination. I need to get home by another road.

I can't get home by the road of Biblical literalism or canonical exclusivism. Somewhere along the way, I put my spade into the soil of scripture, and I found that there was a lot more down there than what could be seen on the surface. Somewhere along the way, scripture cracked open for me like an egg, and though it became much messier, harder to hold or pin down, I realized how rich and nutritious it was when I looked to it not for hard fact, but for living truth. And, what's more, I found that the shell around scripture, that defined which writings were in and which writings were out, wasn't nearly as firm as I thought it was. I found passages in the Bible where the spirit of God's voice seemed to have slipped away, leaving the words flat ... and I found passages beyond the Bible that seemed to vibrate with that spirit. I know that Scripture is a home for me. I love its many rooms, its hidden passageways, the way it evokes familiar stories and memories. I want to go there. But I can't get there through literalism. I need to get home by another road.

I can't get home by a road where God and country are fused together, where Jesus and Empire are identified with one another, where faith and nationalism are seen as one. I love my country. Like most children of relatively recent immigrants I am profoundly grateful for its gifts, deeply aware of its blessings. But the spiritual home I seek knows nothing of national boundaries and transcends national allegiances. The route to that home that demands I put my love for nation on a par with my love for God is no longer an option for me; it is no longer open. I need to get home by another road.

I know that there are those who will say, even say with intended kindness and love, "Look, if you can't get home by the old road, you can't get home at all." But I turn, here, to Jesus, who said so clearly: "Seek and you shall find. Knock, and the door shall be opened. Ask and it shall be given unto you." I believe that there is another road home. I cannot say that every step of the way is clear. Life is not that simple. But I am seeking, and I trust that I will find. I am knocking, and I believe that the door will be opened. I am asking, and I have faith that what I ask for will be given.

What has given me increased hope in recent years is having discovered this church, this congregation, which – it seems to me – is primarily a place for people who are seeking to find their way home by another road. That isn't true of everyone here, nor need it be. That some of our members find their way home by more traditional routes is good for us all. But different churches have different missions. Different congregations have different personalities. And different religious communities have different callings. Without casting judgment

on any other church, it feels right to me that this church own, proudly, its particular mission, its particular personality, its particular calling, it's particular language. This church, and others like it, are good places for those who want to get home – who want to find meaning, love, courage, purpose, peace, hope – but who, for various reasons, need to find another road than the one we originally came by, or the one our parents walked, or the one the tradition lays out. You might call that other road “liberal Christianity,” or “Christian Universalism” which are the terms that have been consistently, openly, and thoughtfully used for at least the last fifty years in this place. You might call the other road “progressive Christianity,” or “open Christianity,” which are phrases that are becoming more popular in various congregations. My own sense is that using all of those terms, and still others, makes sense for us.

But what is even more important is that we realize that we cannot take the journey alone. Through our newly forming Plymouth Center, we are called to be in conversation and community with other individuals and churches who are seeking the alternate road ... as well as with those who are on the more traditional way ... and those who are not following the Christian way at all but the paths of other faiths. What's more, while Plymouth Church has always had its doors wide open for those seeking another road, it is time now for us to put a light in the window, and perhaps one on the roof, too. In these difficult times, some seekers in the world are unaware that there *is* another road and that there are sincere Christians who are walking it. Many of them believe that they are alone on their quest, and that all the churches use only one road, one way. For them, we have a story to tell. We have news to bring. We have a home to offer. As I said, in the weeks ahead, we'll say more about that story and that news and that home. In the meantime, I'm eager to know of your experiences of the alternate road and what your hopes are for this church that we love.

Amen.

HOME BY ANOTHER ROAD:

The Welcoming Table

A sermon preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

February 13, 2005

the Rev. James Gertmenian

Text: Luke 14:15-24

Last Sunday I spoke about Christians who want to get “home by another road,” that is, who want to find again the place where the truest and most essential gifts of our religious tradition lie, but who can’t get there the old way, the way of Christian exclusivism, Biblical literalism, fantastic apocalypticism, and the rejection of science. While this band of us who are seeking another way could be seen as somewhat reactive – more defined by what we don’t believe than what we do – and while we must always be sensitive to that critique, we know that what is going on in the progressive, or liberal, Christian movement is much, much more than that. At the heart of it, our rejection of some traditional forms and beliefs of Christianity is not out of some pique or disdain for those who hold such beliefs and accept those forms, nor out of an across-the-board mistrust of anything old. Rather, it is because some of the older ways of thinking simply don’t work for us any more. They are inert; and we can’t make them live. They are dead-ends for us, and we can’t get where we’re going that way. But the motivator here is not iconoclasm; our agenda isn’t about tearing things down, certainly not anyone else’s religion. It is this, pure and simple: that we share with most other Christians, with most other people of the world, a desire for the joy, peace, meaning, and purpose of religious faith, and we share an inchoate belief that such faith is grounded in something ultimately real. We are moved and compelled and shaped by this truth that lives in us. What’s more, we sense that the demands of faith, spiritually and ethically, while profoundly challenging, are life-giving and, when met, work for the common good. And finally, we believe that we are not alone ... that there are a great many people of searching faith who are uncomfortable being identified with the forms of Christianity that are most often represented in the media and in the public arena.

Today, as we savor the joy of having folded thirty-one new members into our church family ... and as we anticipate coming together in the sacrament of communion ... we have just a few moments to reflect on one aspect of coming “home by another road:” our vision of Christianity as a radically inclusive movement, symbolized by an open table where all are welcome. Long-time members at Plymouth have heard this invitation, spoken before each communion service, many, many times: “No matter what faith tradition you come from, you are welcome at this table.” They aren’t empty words. We mean to say that the only requirement for coming to this table is the requirement of your own willingness, your own desire and that any other test is antithetical to the spirit of Christ. We don’t say it out of politeness, or of political correctness, or of a bland tolerance. It is a matter of radical hospitality which, we believe, is a glimpse into the heart of God. It is an expression of our universalist theology which holds that God is neither bound nor pleased by sectarianism that draws impermeable lines around the community of faith. It is, for us, a mirror of the spirit of Jesus who shunned no one, who consistently spoke in ways that broke down artificial barriers, and who, in his own life, was at table with all manner of people.

You see, we have a paradox here. Some of our more orthodox friends and those who would identify themselves as post-liberal want to suggest that the Christian community needs a clearer identity, particularly over and against a secular culture. They have a point ... to a point. They're right when they hold that Christianity has a unique and particular voice to raise in the world, a unique and particular vision of how the world is meant to be. They're right in arguing that sacraments like baptism and communion serve to build a sense of identity around that particular voice and vision. Such rituals and practices can strengthen community by reminding us who – and whose – we are. The paradox, however, is this: that the spirit of Christ, and so, the genius of Christianity, is that it moves against particularity, against sectarianism, against balkanizing people who come to God in different ways. Samaritans, for instance, were considered beyond the pale by Jews of Jesus day. But Jesus used a Samaritan as an example of the good neighbor. Whether it was women, children, tax collectors, people of ill repute – any who were outside the circle that society drew – Jesus drew them in, welcomed them in. And he didn't do it because they assented to a particular belief, even belief in him. He did it because he loved them, because he made himself open to them. Put another way: the most important thing about being Christian is that being Christian isn't the most important thing. What is most important is the desire for God, the desire for the holy in our lives, the desire to live in accordance with that holiness. It is the faith *of* Jesus, even more than faith *in* Jesus, that is at Christianity's heart. As I said, it's a paradox: to truly claim a Christian identity is to realize that our essential identity goes deeper than that.

There is paradox here, too, in that the sacrament is, at the same time, uniquely particular to Christianity and profoundly universal. The words we say, the story we remember: these bind us to our Christian tradition. We recall Jesus' life and teachings, and the love expressed in his last supper. It's a story that belongs to our particular faith tradition. But the symbols ... well, what could be more universal than eating and drinking? Beneath the Christian meaning of the sacrament is a still deeper meaning, namely that our humanity – symbolized by our physical needs, our physical hunger – makes us one with all the people of the earth, regardless of their faith, regardless of their beliefs, regardless of their station in life or their politics or their language or their personality. For many of us, this is “coming home by another road.” We can only embrace the uniquely Christian meaning of the sacrament if we can embrace, at the very same moment, it's universal meaning as well. “No matter what faith tradition you belong to, you are welcome at this table.”

Jesus told a story about a man who gave a banquet. Some of the invited guests didn't want to come, or were too busy to come. That was frustrating to the host; it made him angry. But the impulse even stronger than his anger was the desire that his table be filled, that he gather in all who would come to his banquet. His was an energetic, active, even aggressive hospitality, bringing people in from streets and lanes and even out on the country roads. Friends and strangers, people of every and any condition, the host wanted to bring them in. All that they needed was willingness to come. All that was required was that they desired to be at table with him. I think of God this way. It's an anthropomorphic vision, to be sure, giving God a personality like a human being, imagining God as the host of a banquet. But it is really the only language we have, so I imagine God pacing inside the house, looking out the window every few minutes, eager to see more guests coming up the walk, eager for more people to come and be at his table. There is no test of class, or social status, or religious background. There is no test of belief, or behavior, or being. Only the test of desire.

So, the question for each of us today is not whether we are worthy to come to the table. Or whether our belief system earns us the right to be here. Or whether by some ecclesiastical rule we belong here. Or even whether we understand the mystery of the sacrament. None of that is ultimately important. What is important – really the only important thing – is that we be able to say: “I want to be here. I am hungry and need to be fed. I am thirsty and need to drink from the cup. I am alone in the world and I need the community of these people. I am tired and I need rest. I am seeking meaning in my life and I need God.” Here, with the symbols of bread and a cup, we remember that God meets our need. Here with the telling of the story of Jesus and his disciples, we recall our identity as Christians. Here at the common table, to which all are welcome, to which the host eagerly and urgently draws us, we remember that just as the bread, though broken, is one loaf, we, though many, are one people. Come, for all is prepared! Thanks be to God! Amen.

HOME BY ANOTHER ROAD: The Faith of Jesus

A sermon preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

March 6, 2005

the Rev. James Gertmenian

Text: Luke 4:16-30

Three prefatory comments this morning:

First, as you may have read in this month's issue of the *Flame*, I am planning to preach three sermons in April – on the 10th, 17th, and 24th – that draw from the deep well of Emily Dickinson's poetry. This is no mere literary whim, though I do confess that I have a personal affinity for Dickinson and her work. But I have selected her for this special attention because her search for God seems, to me, to mirror the search of many Plymouth members. Insightful, honest, hungry for truth but never settling for the false food of pat answers, Dickinson paired intellectual integrity with spiritual passion and so lived an edgy, courageous, difficult, and refreshing kind of faith. I don't want to get ahead of myself – the series is some weeks away – but I'm mentioning this today because I want you to know that in April there will be other Dickinson-related opportunities for us. Philip is arranging for special music in those services based on Dickinson texts and my wife, Sam, will be giving two lectures on the poet late in April. And as a special treat – this is what I want you to take note of today – Plymouth will be presenting well-known actor Barbara Kingsley in a production of *The Belle of Amherst* – William Luce's one-woman play about Dickinson's life – in our own Howard Conn Theater. There will be four performances – April 1 and 2 (a Friday and Saturday) and April 9 and 10 (a Saturday evening and Sunday matinee). Tickets – a steal at \$10 – go on sale today in Guild Hall. We expect these performances to sell out, so I encourage you to get your tickets as soon as possible.

Second, you should know that I continue to wrestle with the question of whether, in this sermon and others, when speaking of “progressive Christians” or “liberal Christians,” I should use the first-person plural, that is, identifying myself with that point of view ... or whether I should somehow stand above any personal specificity. In the end, honesty – particularly with this congregation that I love and trust – dictates the former course. But the love – which in me is the true North Star of my work among you – tells me that I should also remind you that our bond depends on mutual respect, not congruent views on any given question, and that in our wonderful congregational way, disagreement with the preacher isn't only an honored tradition but is positively beneficial for the health and life of the church. So have at it! And remember today, when I say “we” progressive Christians, I am not blandly assuming universal agreement here ... but only trying to be authentic as I stand before you.

Third, I want to acknowledge that our opening hymn today, “Lift High the Cross,” with its glorious cadences and its soaring melody, yet presents us with a text and a theology that are at some variance with the direction of my sermon and may be, I think, problematic in other ways as well ... and to more people than just me. We may hope that the *spirit* of Christ – the spirit of God's love and peace – will be adored in all the world,

but few of us here, I think, believe that that necessitates a global victory for the Christian religion as the hymn seems to imply. At the same time, those verses represent views that are part of our history and so their presence in the service may be symbolic of an inner conversation that many of us are still having. We should talk about this. I'd be interested in hearing from you on it.

Will you pray with me: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock, our redeemer, and friend. Amen.

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This current series of sermons has the recurring title: "Home By Another Road," which comes from Jim Burklo, a Presbyterian minister in California whom I had the pleasure of meeting two weeks ago. The phrase is in the title of Jim's book: *Open Christianity: Home By Another Road*, and it refers to the journey that more and more people are taking these days: a journey into the heart of our religious tradition, the Christian tradition, but a journey that employs a different route than that of traditional or orthodox Christianity. Today, I want to invite you to imagine how Jesus looks from the perspective of that other road and to argue that this alternate view, while locating him in a place somewhat less central, still brings him into particular focus, a focus which, for many of us, makes him an even more compelling figure. And I would suggest further that while this new view moves beyond an older, more orthodox sense of Jesus, it owes much to that earlier perception, and that liberals who too easily dismiss the tradition, without proper gratitude and understanding of it, do so at the risk of eviscerating the faith. As I have noted time and again from this pulpit we liberals simply cannot afford to look down our noses at orthodoxy but, rather, should see it as the rich, nutritious loam, which can feed shoots of new growth. The image is apt, I think, since loam includes formerly living material that is breaking down and that supports new life – a thoroughly Christian idea.

So, let me get to it here. I want to make four assertions, or proposals, about Jesus from the vantage point of the "other road." Two of them today, then another on Palm Sunday, and still another on Easter. This is, of course, not an exhaustive list, but will be, I trust, enough to spur more conversation.

The first is this: that the Jesus of tradition needs to be released from the confinement of church doctrine, particularly as regards his supposed superhuman attributes. Even the most critical skeptics will not argue with the statement that Jesus, whoever he was, had a remarkable effect on people, so remarkable that they responded to him with a love, an awe, a devotion, a level of commitment they had never experienced before. That response, in the early years of the church coalesced into pools of stories about him – wonderful, rapturous, poetic stories, since more prosaic language could simply not bear the weight or compass the depth of their feelings. These stories, about a miraculous birth, about a man who could, say, walk on water, became the vehicles by which the Jesus-experience was conveyed to others because, as I said, more empirical accounts simply broke under the strain. Something needed to be conveyed that couldn't be contained in ordinary language. When I tell you that my wife's love for me has the power to make me "soar" or make me "ten feet tall," I don't mean that she can really get me to levitate or boost me beyond my actual 5'11" (well, ok, 5'10½"), but even with the best words in my quiver, I can't convey the meaning her love has for me without resorting to metaphor, to simile, to story. But with Jesus, here's what happened: as the years passed, and as the church had particular need to solidify its gains, the stories about him calcified, petrified, and became doctrines. So, for instance, the original experience of Jesus' extraordinary sensitivity to people and insight about them became a story about his "knowing," without being told, that the Samaritan woman at the well had had five husbands even though she said she had none (in the text that Jeff preached from last week), and then the same story hardened into a doctrine that says that Jesus was omniscient, that he knew everything about everyone, and that he could see into the future. Do you see the progression: from powerful experience, to poetic story about the experience, to rigid doctrine? So, too, then, an original experience of Jesus' obvious and special "in-touchness" with God had to be conveyed somehow to others, so it became a story about a miraculous birth, with God fathering the child, and then, as time went by, the story coagulated into a doctrine about the special nature of

Jesus' conception. The problem is that the images of Jesus, accounts of Jesus, poetry about Jesus, claims about Jesus, once they became doctrines, did the opposite of what they were meant to do. Originally the stories were meant to bring him alive to new hearers. But when they hardened into doctrines, they made him dead again. The doctrinal Jesus becomes an object, not a person. Those of us who look at Jesus from another perspective, from the perspective of the other "road," want to roll away the hardened stone of those doctrines and resurrect the Jesus who lived, and who lives, who changed people's lives not by supernatural power, but by an authenticity and openness to God that reached to profound depths and heights. For us, at least, the doctrines do not strengthen the case for Jesus; they weaken it. They don't show him as much as they shroud him. They don't enliven him, but entomb him. The breaking up of the concretized doctrines, then, is meant to get at the fleshy, warm, poetic, powerful, pungent stories that give us access, by means of metaphor, to the Jesus who lived and who lives. Such a deconstruction aims not to demean or demote him but, quite the contrary, to let him breathe again after centuries of doctrinal captivity.

Second, when we encounter this living Jesus again and view him from the perspective of the "other road," he does a paradoxical thing: he immediately, of his own accord, moves from center stage, avoiding the extreme focus that the church has inflicted on him over the years. When we strip away some of the accretions of the years, looking at the very earliest accounts, and if we temporarily set aside the Gospel of John (which was written much later than the others, and with a different agenda) we find a Jesus who does not make extravagant claims for himself, who does not demand that people worship him, and who rejects the incredible projections people put on him. In the earlier, synoptic Gospels, we find instance after instance of this. Take the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert – pictured on the bulletin cover this morning. When presented with inflated views of himself (you remember them: that he could cast himself down from the pinnacle of the temple without being hurt, or that he could turn stones into bread) Jesus repeatedly refused. "It's not about me, it's about God," he seems to be pleading. This is the Jesus who says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone!" This is the Jesus who, after bringing people to new health, warns them not to tell anyone about it. This is the Jesus who kneels before his disciples and washes their feet. One could almost say that the greatest battle of Jesus' life was not his struggle on the cross, but was the day in and day out struggle to deflect the projections and expectations of the people that he be more for them than he was meant to be ... and more than was good for them. People think they need a leader to carry their goodness for them. That's why they worshipped him. And people think they need an enemy to carry their evil for them. That's why they killed him. Jesus meant for us to acknowledge both our own goodness and our own evil, and to understand them both in the light of God's love for us. So, the Jesus we find when we view him from the "other road" is one whose aim was not to begin a new religion with himself as the center, but rather to direct people again and again to God, and to themselves as signs of God's presence. If a great artist teaches me how to paint, and my response is to spend the rest of my life praising the teacher instead of doing my own painting, I have dishonored both him and myself ... and I have left unused the gift which he meant to pass on. Jesus was about the art of loving and serving God, not about creating a cult around himself. When we get so caught in attention to Jesus that we cannot look beyond him, or through him, to the God whom alone he worshipped, then we break his heart as surely as if we were crucifying him again. At the same time, it's important to say, to rank Jesus as "just another teacher," is to ignore the surpassing profundity of his life and teachings. He was surely human; he was surely *not* ordinary.

As I said earlier, there are two other assertions that can be made from the "other road." One of them calls into question the idea of substitutionary atonement, namely that "Jesus paid the price for our sins." We'll look at that on Palm Sunday. The other looks anew at the reality of resurrection, and, of course, we'll talk about that on Easter.

Notwithstanding the claims of some that progressive Christianity, or open Christianity, or liberal Christianity, by raising these questions or making these assertions, represents a departure from the true faith, or an abandoning of Christian essentials, or – not to put too fine an edge on it – simple heresy, those of us who are on the alternate journey hold otherwise. We believe that the faith of Jesus, the faith that Jesus taught, the

faith that Jesus lived, is roomier, livelier, more expansive, more inclusive, and more accommodating of differences than has been traditionally held. So, we believe that in asking these questions we are not leaving the faith, but re-discovering it, that we are, indeed, going “home” – to the heart of what Jesus was about – albeit “by another road.” In fact, some of us would claim that the removal of doctrinal detritus from the face of Jesus makes him eminently more approachable, more worthy of our allegiance, more compelling as a teacher and as an embodiment of God’s presence with us. What’s more, when seen in this light, the faith of Jesus, far from being watered down or lost, turns out to be more demanding of us than the old way, requiring deeper commitment and more significant risk and sacrifice. So, the alternate road is not away from Christianity’s heart, but toward it. It does not move away from the rigors of discipleship, as some would claim, but, when seen aright, draws us toward them. People who choose liberal Christianity because it seems, on the surface, less demanding, less difficult, should look closer. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

At the same time, let me say this: that though we seek a new way, there is no need for us to denounce the old, or to deny its usefulness to others. We do not need to be polemical or iconoclastic, except when more widely held orthodoxies begin to impinge on religious freedom, or when they discount the faithfulness of those who follow a new way, or when they undermine the common good. So, when someone says, “The old way is the best way for me,” I want to be able to bless that person’s journey. But when those who walk the older road suggest that theirs is the only way, that I must follow it or be dismissed as non-Christian, or when they want to impose their way on others by force of law (this is not as far-fetched or unimaginable as it seems), then argument, vigorous but civil, pointed but loving, is necessary, and we should not flinch from it. For the most part, though, we simply want to speak for ourselves and say that *for us* the old road requires intellectual concessions, theological compromises, and spiritual contrivances that we can no longer make. Not with honesty. Not with any integrity.

Finally, it is also important to say that while this “other road” is a less-tried way, it is not altogether untrod. Not in the least. The fact is that throughout Christian history, from the very beginning, there has been a healthy, thoughtful minority who, out of devotion to God and moved by the example of Jesus, have taken alternative paths. From some of the medieval mystics like Julian of Norwich, who dared to see the feminine face of God, to seekers like Michael Servetus who, in the sixteenth century questioned the doctrine of the trinity, to preachers like William Ellery Channing and Horace Bushnell who held that Christianity was more a movement of the heart than an adherence to doctrine, to Plymouth’s own Howard Conn who brought to the faith a generous and visionary Universalism, there has been an inspired procession of people who found unconventional ways to Truth and to Christian essentials. In their time, some were branded heretics and others were tolerated with barely benign neglect, but in retrospect, many have eventually been called heroes of the faith. (To be in their company – and the company of those, today, who walk the alternate path, is, to my way of thinking a great challenge ... and an even greater joy.) So, while the “other road” is surely not like the well-paved highway of orthodoxy, neither is it a bushwhack through completely virgin territory. Rather, it is an adventure over challenging terrain, with occasional markers left by our liberal/progressive forbears who have blazed the way before us. There are risks, dangers, to be sure, but the former highway is simply not an option for some of us any more, since, despite its well-traveled wideness, it is blocked at several points for us. So, we set out, and we make our way, and we make our mistakes, and we find our way again ... and through it all we are encouraged, not only by the knowledge that others have gone before us, but by the great joy of discovering that so many pilgrims are on this path with us now.

That’s enough for today. We’ll continue talking about this “other road” next week.

Amen.

HOME BY ANOTHER ROAD: The Open Book

A sermon preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

March 13, 2005

the Rev. James Gertmenian

Text: Luke 4:16-22

The first act of Jesus' ministry in Nazareth was, as we heard earlier, when he stood up in the synagogue and read from Scripture. Sometimes, when we read scripture in our services, one of the ministers will add, "Listen for the word of God," or "May God bless to us this hearing of the holy word." These aren't just liturgical affectations. We mean to suggest that there is a real and palpable connection between what is read from the book and what is lived in our lives. We mean to say that the book's words connect in a real way to what we live day after day. I'm thinking of a true story I heard just a few weeks ago. A professor from one of our seminaries was lying in bed late one night when the phone rang. Maybe it was eleven, twelve o'clock. The caller was one of his former students, someone who had just graduated months before. After an apology for the late call, the student said, "Professor, I've got to do a funeral tomorrow. It's my first one, and I don't have any idea of what to do." The professor replied, "But, John, we did a whole unit on that. We studied that. Don't you remember? We went through it step by step." To which the student said, "But, professor, this guy's really dead!" We're trying to make a real connection here. And the fact is that some of you here today really *are* lonely. Some of you really *are* looking for answers to pressing questions in their lives. And some people, not very far from the doors of this church, really *are* living without a roof over their heads, or without having had a good meal in weeks. And in our city, people really *do* look for ways to live together in harmony though they are separated by race and economic status and social status. Then bring it back into this room. People here really *do* want to know if God has some connection to their own lives. And so we read from the book. And we're looking for a connection between the book and our lives. And we wonder what authority is in this book for us. It's not an inconsequential question. After all, among the deepest fault lines in American Christianity – and American culture – is the one that divides people by the way they read the Bible. On the one hand is the bumper sticker that reads: "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." In that case, the Bible has complete and unquestioned authority. On the other hand there are those who, like many in this congregation, ascribe special status to the scriptures, but who seek a way to access the Bible's power without resorting to literalism or authoritarianism. For many of us, the Bible has authority, but not in the same way as it used to. What do we mean when we say that this is "The word of God?" In the decisions and dilemmas of our lives – from war and peace to abortion and sexuality ... from the mysteries of love and death to the very question of God's nature, what may we expect from the Bible? I want to think with you today – and in a subsequent sermon in May – about these questions. First, will you pray with me? O God, we open the book and open ourselves and wonder if in the opening something miraculous can happen. We pray that it may. Amen.

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When I was a child, my grandmother, of blessed memory, told us children that under no circumstances were we ever to place any object on top of a Bible. Not another book, not a plate of food, not a pen or a pencil, not anything. There were two implications of this injunction. First, that a Bible was a sacred object – not only the content, but the physical thing itself: the pages, the cover, the binding – and because it was sacred, it was to be treated with reverence and honor. The other implication of my Grandmother’s rule was that the Bible was something to be used regularly and so should always be available, not hidden under anything but always, always, on top of the pile, ready. Early on, this was a fairly easy rule to follow, and in my recollection of my childhood, I was scrupulous about it. Later, when I was in college and seminary, and began to own several Bibles, to say nothing of commentaries and other reference works that included the Biblical text, it became somewhat more complicated. Was it acceptable to put one Bible on top of another? How about a copy of the Revised Standard Version (fairly new in those days) on top of a King James Version, my grandmother’s favorite? Could you put a concordance on top of a Bible? What about a Greek text on top of an English one? Of course I’m being a bit fanciful here, but not completely so. So deeply ingrained in me was the rule – nothing on top of a Bible – that to this day, I get a bit edgy, uncomfortable, if I walk into a room and see, say, a coffee cup, or an apple, or – God forbid – a novel sitting on a copy of the scriptures. Invariably, I try to correct the infraction – discreetly, of course, if it’s not my own house.

One needn’t look far to find out where my Grandmother got such a notion. My great-grandfather – her father-in-law, and the patriarch of our clan – was a very devout man, converted from the Armenian Orthodox Church to Protestantism by American Congregational missionaries who were working in central Turkey in the 1870s. One chapter in his memoir is entitled, “My Precious Bible,” and in it he describes the day when he was a teenager walking in the streets of Kars (a town in Eastern Turkey that Sam and I visited on my sabbatical) and came across a crowd listening to a native preacher who was reading from a book.

“What book is that you are selling, sir?” my great-grandfather, whose name was Sarkis, asked.

The man replied, “This book is the Holy Bible.”

“And what do you mean by ‘holy Bible?’” for it was a phrase Sarkis hadn’t heard in the orthodox church. The preacher explained: “The books covered with gold and silver crosses that you see in your churches –” but my great-grandfather interrupted, “Yes, I know about those.” He meant the *Ave Deran* or Gospel. Books which only the priests were wise enough to read. The preacher explained: “This Bible is like those, but with a difference; those are in the old Armenian tongue and you cannot understand them, while this one is translated so that you can read it as you would any other book!” So Sarkis asked, “Will you sell this book to me?” “Not this one,” the man answered kindly, “for it is the only one I have, but next week I will come again and bring you one.” A week later, the promise was kept ... the Bible delivered ... and it is because of that transaction – that homely little promise, that modest gift, made half a world away and a century ago, that I am here today. To his dying day, decades later in Southern California – and just months before my birth – my great-grandfather held fast to that central, profoundly seminal idea of the Protestant Reformation, namely, that scripture alone, freely held in the hands of the laity, was the sole authority for Christian life.

Move backward in time, now. The claim that the Bible – the accepted canon of the Old and New Testaments – is the sole source of religious authority for Christians came as an understandable reaction to the centuries-old claim of the medieval church that all authority flowed from *it* – the church, its traditions and its agents (popes, bishops, priests). Railing against the abuse of that assumed authority, the early Reformers said that the rule of life was not to be found in the teaching of the priests and bishops, but in the words of scripture. It was a revolutionary, democratizing, and liberating moment in Christian history. So, it was no accident, and no empty pietism, that drove my great-grandfather to refer to his Bible as “precious.” It was, for him, as it was for the reformers, a progressive, bold, and life-changing thing to say, for it symbolized their emergence from the oppressive and suffocating rule of the church. *Sola scriptura*, “scripture alone” was their motto and their

manifesto. (Modern Catholicism, we should note, is a far cry from its earlier incarnations on this issue, particularly since the Second Vatican Council.)

I give you all of this background not because I presume your interest in my family history, but because I want to invite you into the mindset – shared, undoubtedly, by a good many of your own ancestors, to say nothing of millions of people today – that holds these ancient texts to be uniquely authoritative, sacred in a singular and profound way. And I would want you to understand that whatever else I might say about scripture, and however far from an orthodox approach to it I may take, I, like my great-grandfather believe that the book is precious ... and I would want you to understand, with respectful deference, just why my grandmother taught us: “Never put anything on top of a Bible.” As I said last week, those of us who take a more liberal approach must do so with gratitude and affection for those who built the foundations of orthodoxy. The excesses of orthodoxy demand critique, even reproach in some cases, but the integrity of orthodoxy, and the commitments of its supporters, are still worthy of our humble respect.

But here’s the problem I want to begin to address today. As I go back to the scriptures, to reclaim their place in my life, I am confronted by three questions which effectively serve as roadblocks, preventing me from getting back to the texts the way I used to ... the way most of us used to ... and certainly the way that many of our parents and grandparents did. The first question/roadblock has to do, as I’ve already alluded, with the nature of the Bible’s *authority*. Just where does that authority reside? In the words printed on the page? In some words more than others? In some general idea that lies behind the words? In the original manuscripts, now lost to us? And how does the Bible’s authority stand in relationship to other authorities which we acknowledge – the authority of our own conscience and our own experience, for instance? The authority of reason and scholarship, some of which appears, on the surface, to contradict Biblical teaching as in, say, the stories of creation or some pronouncements on sexual ethics. As I said, I’ll make a brief comment about the authority question today.

The second question/roadblock, for instance, has to do with what is called *canon*. Why this particular book, or, to be more precise, these sixty-six books that are bound together in our Bible? The question seems especially apt when we begin to learn how those sixty-six got chosen ... in processes as human, therefore as potentially corrupt, as any other political machination. So why not preach from the Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, which didn’t make it into the Canon? May we grant equal status to, say, the Bhagavadgita or the Upanishads – the great scriptures of Hinduism – or the Koran? And what of more contemporary teaching? If we can preach from Isaiah, or Matthew, or Paul ... can we not also preach from Emerson, or Gandhi, or the Dalai Lama? As most of you know, I am going to take as homiletic texts in April, some of the poetry of Emily Dickinson. That may seem like an easy leap for some of you. For others – including myself – it is really quite significant, for I was taught that the only purpose of preaching is to interpret canonical scripture. I do not walk away from that teaching lightly. To do so opens a door not easily closed again ... and while Dickinson is one thing, what if someone stood in this pulpit and preached from David Koresh (of the Branch Davidians), or Dan Brown (of *DaVinci Code* fame), or Marx or Freud or Depak Chopra? What writings are worthy? Who decides?

And third, after authority and canon, is the question/roadblock of *hermeneutics*, or interpretation. How do we read the texts? Is the idea of metaphor the key to at least some of the great passages? Or is the suggestion that they are metaphoric their undoing ... an irreversible devaluing of what is written? May different interpretations be equally valid, or is there one authoritative, objective, “correct” interpretation which it is our job to unearth and understand? Is the intent of the original writer critical to my reading? Or is my own situation more determinative? How do we deal with texts which contradict each other? Or are, as some would contend, the contradictions simply illusory, evaporating if our understanding were complete?

Some of these latter questions I will reserve for a sermon in May, on the day when we give Bibles to our third graders. Today, though, let’s return to the question of authority. In the din of voices today that claim to

be authoritative, which ones actually are? With complex moral questions facing us – both as individuals and as a society – where do we look for an authoritative word? Where, when we face the deeper mysteries of life – the mysteries of love, of brokenness, of death – where may we find reliable wisdom? If we are to appeal to authority on questions about abortion, or war and peace, or personal sin and forgiveness, where may that appeal go?

As I said earlier, for centuries authority lay with the church – particularly with the hierarchy of the church as it interpreted church tradition. The Reformers said, “No, the only authority is in the scripture itself. It’s in the book.” Some of the more radical reformers, then, and proponents of liberal theology in the twentieth century, suggested that the only authority lay in the individual conscience. That is clearly the tradition out of which this church has lived for several decades.

I want to suggest that authority on the deepest questions lies in none of those places, at least in none of them alone. Each one, if taken alone, presents dangers, problems. If authority is in the church alone, it is subject, as we have seen in history, to the machinations and distortions to which all human institutions are prone. And some church teachings over the centuries – say, on slavery, or on the role of women – have turned out to be manifestly wrong. If, however, authority is in the scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) it tends to become wooden, rigid, lifeless and we get caught up in hair-splitting efforts as when I took too literally my Grandmother’s injunction about putting nothing on the Bible. Jesus certainly spoke against this placing of authority solely in scripture when he challenged the Pharisees on such questions as Sabbath-keeping and minute observance of the law which overshadowed the law’s deeper intent. But if authority lies only in the individual conscience, it is subject to all the vagaries of the individual psyche, of mood and personality. History is littered with the stories of those who, relying only on individual conscience, did profoundly destructive things.

Let me suggest this for your consideration as we close for today: that the most reliable authority – isn’t to be found in the book, or in the church’s traditions, nor in the depths of the individual mind. It is in none of those places. The Word of God – that ultimately reliable authority – is most likely to be found in that place and time when the words of scripture, and the collected wisdom of the church, and the searching of the individual mind all come together. Each element is inert by itself, but in those moments when they collide, by the grace of God, something electric happens. Just as the constituent elements of our bodies are common and inert when taken alone but partake of the miracle of life when brought together, so, too, Bible, tradition, and individual conscience are absolutely ordinary on their own, lifeless, but in those miraculous moments when they come together, something extraordinary is possible. Truth, then, is an event, not a commodity. It coalesces in a particular time and place – giving wisdom, and strength, and encouragement, and healing – and then it dissipates, only to emerge again somewhere else at another time, when, by the grace of God, the elements come together again. Just as the first Reformation rescued the Word of God from the confines of church tradition and found it in scripture, and then the more radical reformers took it a step further to the individual conscience, so we now need still another stage of growth that realizes that God’s word isn’t confined in church or book or individual mind, but that it lives and moves and has its being in those places where people gather, and search the texts, and remember their traditions, and share, in honesty and hope, the insights of their individual hearts. The truth isn’t in the book, even my precious Bible. The truth only comes alive when book, and mind, and community come together.

More on this, and on how it can happen in our own community, when we return to this subject in May.

Amen.

HOME BY ANOTHER ROAD: The New Rugged Cross

A sermon preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

March 20, 2005

the Rev. James Gertmenian

Text: Luke 19:28-44

It's Palm Sunday, and so begins in the Christian story a paradoxical procession of events that spiral downward from acclamation to accusation, and from accusation to crucifixion and then, from crucifixion down even deeper, so deep into the darkness that in the mysterious economy of God down becomes up, and loss becomes gain, and death becomes life. A parade of images marks this week: palm branches laid in the road on Sunday, broken bread offered at table on Thursday, a broken body on a cross on Friday, and then, on the third day after that, the most unlikely image of them all – an empty tomb. When faced with this climactic chapter of Jesus' story – this account of his death and resurrection – those who call themselves “progressive” Christians or “liberal” Christians often find themselves in a season of dis-ease, a condition of awkwardness. Those of the theological bent usually found in churches like this, where reason is respected and dogma often dismissed, are more comfortable in other seasons. Give us Advent, with its theme of waiting and longing. We can relate to that. Give us Christmas and its genteel customs. Give us Epiphany and the universalist notion of God being revealed to the entire world. Give us Lent, with its focus on moral demand and inner struggle, for those are realities that we know. For God's sake, even give us Pentecost, with its tongues of fire and its unlikely power. But Holy Week – Holy Week, with its stories about Jesus being sacrificed on a cross to a God who requires this violent death as payment for our sins, and Holy Week, which culminates in the unlikely, reason-wrenching assertion of bodily resurrection – this part of the Christian story (at least in its traditional interpretation) leaves many in our corner of the church straining against the tradition, or, at the very least, searching for ways to access the power of the narrative without surrendering reason and without buying into doctrines of the cross that glorify violence, that posit a vengeful and legalistic God, that imagine that this execution, as an execution, is somehow redemptive. “Jesus died for our sins,” we are told, over and over. But thoughtful people are appalled by this idea. If God's main attribute is justice, what justice is there in the punishing of one for another's sins? And if God is primarily love, what sort of love demands blood sacrifice, particularly the blood of an innocent? From the twelfth century theologian Peter Abelard, to early American liberals including Channing, Bushnell, and Bowne, to contemporaries like John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg and the Mennonite J. Denny Weaver, a consistent critique of this doctrine (which is generally called *substitutionary atonement*) has been offered up. But as strains of evangelical and conservative Christianity flourish, the more traditional idea crowds the field and floods the popular perception of our faith ... witness the colossal success of Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, which is a veritable paean to the idea of substitutionary atonement.

What we want – what I want as a preacher, and what I believe you want as people on a journey of faith – is not to toss the story of the cross aside because it makes us uncomfortable. Nor do we seek to gut the narrative in order to make it easier to swallow. Rather, we acknowledge – humbly – that there is something of great power here, and what we want is to get to the living heart of it and not be blocked by petrified doctrines that obscure that heart and that constrict it so much that one wonders if it can still be beating. The mysteries of

death and life, of suffering and redemption, of despair and hope are woven into the words of the Passion story. This is the real stuff of our lives, and we know it. No one who has pondered his own mortality, or who has stood stunned before the tragedies of Auschwitz and Darfur, Hiroshima and Baghdad ... no one who has seen the suffering of the poor or chafed, unbelieving, against the callousness of the impersonal powers that dominate ... no one who has ever, in time of trouble, cried out, even silently, the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ... no one who has tested the alloy of friendship and loyalty and found it wanting, as Jesus did ... no one who has gone to their knees, awestruck, before an act of radical self-giving ... in other words, no one who is even remotely aware of what it is to be alive can fully turn away from this story. Progressive Christians do not seek to ignore the cross; to the contrary, their hope is to reclaim it from the thrall of dried-up dogma.

Let me specify, briefly, two difficulties that lead to the misuse of the Passion story.

There is, to begin with, in some theological quarters and in some parts of the church, such a narrow focus on Jesus' death – a focus that borders on obsession – that everything else about him – his life, his teachings, his wisdom, his faith – appears inconsequential or of secondary interest. Again, note the approach of the Gibson movie, in which the only datum of the Gospels that really matters is the crucifixion. For some Christians, the statement "Jesus died for my sins" trumps every other assertion about him, as if the reasons for his death – his radical good news, his breaking open of social conventions, his threat to Roman authority – meant nothing at all. For them, it's Jesus death that gives meaning to his life. If he had not died as he did – and if he had not been raised from the dead – his life would have simply been that of another spiritual teacher. By contrast, some of us would contend, "No, that's backwards. It's not that Jesus' death gives meaning to his life, but that his life gives meaning to his death. Had he not taught as he did, lived as he did, believed as he did, he would simply have been one more of the hundreds of thousands executed by Rome by means of crucifixion." The absence of a prominent cross in this sanctuary is testimony to this second view. The implicit statement in this space around us is that it was Jesus' *life* that was important. And it is his *teachings* that draw us into this community. If there is anything about Jesus that "saves" us, it isn't that he died on the cross for our sins. It's that he showed a way of living that breaks down barriers, that offers freedom, that punctures old certainties and puts in their place the glorious and exhilarating dance steps of faith.

Stephen J. Patterson captures this problem in a telling analogy that appears in his new book *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Life and Death of Jesus*. He writes:

Imagine, if you will, celebrating the annual Martin Luther King Jr. holiday simply by fixing our gaze once again on King's death. Over and over again we would replay the film footage of his assassination at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis. Scholars and preachers might focus on his final twelve hours, his last meal, what he wore, his dying words. They might reflect on the significance of the weapon that killed him, his time of death, or the sort of casket in which he was laid out. Perhaps the actual moment of his death could be re-created and filmed. Imagine spending the holiday like this, all the while saying nothing about King's life. No interest in his great manifesto, "I Have a Dream." No concern for such great prophecies as the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." Not a word about civil rights, desegregation, the Vietnam War, or King's vision of peace and justice in a world torn by violence and hatred. To celebrate his death apart from the cause for which he lived would be ridiculous and meaningless.¹

Why, then, Patterson asks with us, the inordinate attention to Jesus' death and the notion that it – the death – is what redeems us and not the volcanic, seismic power of what Jesus taught and how he lived? Why an Apostles' Creed which affirms Jesus birth by the Virgin Mary and his death by Pontius Pilate with not one word about what happened in between? We say, give us Jesus' life as food upon which to nourish ourselves. Let us struggle with what it means to "love our enemies." Let us stand under the radical promises of the Beatitudes and the challenging demands of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Let us emulate a faith that

allowed Jesus to stand against both the religious and civil establishments of his day ... and a faith that proclaimed God's love for every creature. Let us be amazed by the forgiveness offered when the Prodigal son returned home ... be called to riskier service by the example of the Good Samaritan ... be reassured by the promise of the shepherd who seeks the one lamb in a hundred who is lost ... and be prodded to a more expansive acceptance of others by the vision of God's realm that is a banquet where everyone – everyone – is included. It is not that Jesus' death – and the conditions and details of it – are not important. But it is that their importance derives from the power of his life, and not the other way around.

The second difficulty goes to the heart of this idea of “substitutionary atonement.” It is, in fact, not one argument, but a host of them which have been raised – as I noted earlier – for centuries and which have been offered in an even more pointed way in the last generation by feminist, womanist, and Black theologians. Here, I turn again – as I have a couple of times in recent years – to Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker's book *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. And to Weaver's book *Nonviolent Atonement*, which rises out of his Mennonite tradition. In the briefest form, part of the argument goes like this: The basic transaction envisioned by traditional views of atonement is that: (1) human beings have sinned against God, therefore (2) God has a right to justice; a penalty is owed, a punishment must be meted out, or restitution must be made, and (3) Jesus, through his death on the cross pays the penalty, undergoes the punishment, makes the restitution. What, we ask, does this say about God? What kind of God acts this way? First of all, of course, there is a gross anthropomorphism; God is given human attributes that make God narrower, meaner, without the usual benefit of anthropomorphism, namely, bringing God closer. But set that aside. We are still left with a God for whom satisfaction of a legal requirement is more important than passionate love for the creation. We would hardly accept such an attitude in a human parent, let alone a spiritual one. But contemporary critics of the tradition go even further. This God appears, in offering up God's own “son,” for sacrifice, to be the perpetrator of child abuse on a cosmic scale. And too, if we are to take Jesus' death on the cross as the supreme moral example of willing sacrifice, an example that we are to emulate, what does this say to women, gays, and other oppressed groups on whom *unwilling* sacrifice has been pressed for generations? In fact, it is argued, the Passion story of Jesus has been used by ruling classes and ruling groups as an instrument of oppression, telling those who are oppressed that their suffering is required of them by God. In a searing story, Rebecca Ann Parker, a protestant minister, tells of Lucia, a Catholic woman who came to her with the report that her husband regularly beat her. Lucia said, “I went to my priest twenty years ago. The priest said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus. He said, ‘If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross.’”² Friends, this view of the cross is not simply an arcane dogma about which we can say, “Well, everyone has their point of view.” Though Lucia's story seems an extreme one, it points to the fact that this dogma, this view of Jesus' death, has been, itself, used as a ubiquitous instrument of torture. And if we call ourselves Christian, this torture has been done in our name. This seminal misconception, this glorifying of the violence of the cross, this idea that there is something redemptive about any execution, even the execution of Jesus, has seeped and stained itself into the general consciousness of western culture, and even those of us who struggle to free ourselves from its influence are nevertheless indelibly marked with it. As the Unitarian preacher Hosea Ballou said in 1805, “The belief that the great Jehovah was offended with his creatures to that degree, that nothing but the death of Christ, or the endless misery of mankind, could appease his anger, is an idea that has done more injury to the Christian religion than the writings of all its opposers, for many centuries.”³ From misconceptions about what forms of self-sacrifice are truly heroic and what forms are simply masochistic to the question of whether any violence can ever be redemptive, we are, whether we like it or not, formed by the notion of substitutionary atonement, the idea that “Jesus died to pay the price for our sins.” The best we can do is to raise our consciousness about its effect on our lives ... and raise our voices against its further crippling presence in our theology and our faith.

But we can't just leave things there. As I said earlier, though we may reject certain interpretations of the cross, and though we may, rightly, determine that it should not be a central image for our worship, still we may seek different interpretations that touch its real power and get beyond its chronic misuse. Many of these have been offered, historically. Abelard, for instance, whom I mentioned earlier, put forth the moral influence theory

of atonement, namely that the cross serves as an example of human cruelty which, when seen clearly by human beings – especially with its effect on Jesus who submitted to it voluntarily – will turn people away from that violence and move them to accept the love of God. Some of the early liberal theologians in American suggested, instead, that Jesus’ death on the cross was to be an example of courage and self-giving love, which all Christians are called to emulate. Liberation theologians, writing later, offered the view that the martyrs, including Jesus and, more recently, Oscar Romero, become examples of heroic suffering that confronts oppression and, with revolutionary fervor, inspires the church to stand against systems that dominate and dehumanize. And some of a more mystical bent see the crucifixion as an archetype about all of life ... about the fact that the truest life rises out of death and that all of existence is in a process of dying and rising. For me, the power of the Passion story lies most in the realization that God, through Jesus, knows my condition: the sense of abandonment and aloneness that comes over me sometimes, the smallness I feel, even as a person of privilege, in the face of the systems that control my life, the ache of physical weariness and of my mortality. I may, for any number of reasons, find it hard to get near to Jesus, but in the cross Jesus draws near to me. And it means this to me, as well: that when I look at the reasons for Jesus’ death: his facing down the powers of his day – domestic, civic, national – that he was willing to take his life in his own hands and with courage to face those powers. And so, in his name, and with him as an example, is it not right for us on this Palm Sunday, to ask questions that he would ask? Is it not right for us to ask on this second anniversary of the war in Iraq about the cost of that war to the American soul? Is it not right for us to ask honestly – simply to *ask*, acknowledging that there may be many answers – about the cost to the American soul of the degradations of Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo, degradations that go beyond torture and dehumanization to outright killing? Is it not appropriate, on this Palm Sunday, for us to ask – at least to screw up our courage to *ask* – whether the priorities of this nation as reflected in its budgets show more care for the rich than the poor, more for the temporarily able than for the disabled, more for those who have than those who have not? The meaning of the passion for me is that we cannot – I cannot – avoid asking those questions, and that I must begin by asking them of myself.

Now, you will consider, perhaps, that a preacher has not done his job if no conclusive answer to the problem is offered in the course of the sermon. Welcome to Holy Week. For this week is, truly, a descending spiral of experience which does not give itself to clear answers or easy solutions. But if you will pay attention to it in these unfolding seven days, if you will struggle with it, if you will immerse yourself in it, then you may get to that depth, that imponderable depth, where, as I said, in the mysterious economy of God, down becomes up, and loss becomes gain, and death, in the dawning of Easter Day, becomes life.

Amen.

¹Patterson, Stephen J. *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004, pg. 3.

²Brock, Rita N., and Parker, Rebecca A., *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001, pg. 20-21.

³*Ibid.*, pg. 30

Also cited:

Weaver, J. Denny, *The Nonviolent Atonement*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001, 246pp.

**HOME BY ANOTHER ROAD:
The Dawning Promise**

A sermon preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

*March 27, 2005
Easter Sunday*

the Rev. James Gertmenian

Text: Luke 24:1ff

This is one of those wonderful and unusual years, when, in the headlong race toward spring, Easter edges out April Fools by four days and arrives ahead of our Minnesota gardens by a few weeks, reminding us that the laughter of the season is rooted first in the soul and then in the soil. As the old Easter carol says:

The whole bright world rejoices now,
Hilariter, Hilariter
The birds do sing on every bough,
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Then shout beneath the racing skies,
Hilariter, Hilariter
To him who rose that we might rise,
Alleluia, Alleluia!

The best news is that the various heralds of spring aren't in a race with one another at all, but rather an elaborate, exuberant dance in which fools and flowers and the faithful are choreographed together for good tidings, a resurrection dance in which mirth is woven into every step and earth is the scene of cosmic gladness. Christ's resurrection isn't the same thing as daffodils coming up in the garden or the playful mischief of human beings ... but all three are responses to the same rhythm pulsing through the universe: the irrepressible rhythm of Life. So, let joke and jonquil come in their time, and let us relish them both, for this year we see them for what they are, the wondrous rippling out of our elemental Easter joy. Let us pray:

Rise in us, O God. Bloom in word and flower in wisdom ... and let them be your word and the wisdom of your people. Amen.

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Several weeks ago I found myself with a couple of hours to spare in the Indianapolis airport. Glad, actually, for the respite – if not for the location of it – I settled into a seat just across from a young man – thirty, perhaps – who was deeply engrossed in a book. I was curious to know what he was reading, so I found myself tilting my head at a very unnatural angle (trying to make it look all the time as though I were stretching a kink out of my neck) in order to get a glance at the book's cover. Well, that didn't work, but luckily he got up a few moments later to walk around, and he left the book in plain sight. It was, it turned out, one of the volumes in the *Left Behind* series, the contemporary novels about the return of Jesus and the end of the world, based on the

predictions of some 19th century theologians who perched their imaginings precariously on a few passages from the book of Revelation. The series has sold millions upon millions of copies. You've heard some of the scenarios: the Rapture (in which Christian believers are swept up into heaven leaving everyone else behind), the tribulation (when those who remain suffer great torment that is intended to turn them to God), the coming of the anti-Christ ... all of that. When the young man came back ... well, I just couldn't help myself. I went over and sat down next to him, introduced myself, told him what I do for a living, and then I said, "I noticed that you're reading one of the *Left Behind* books. Would you mind telling me what you think about it ... how you feel about it?" He was very earnest. He said that he was from Chicago, that he made his living with a medical technology firm. He said he was a Christian and that he pretty much believed that things would happen just as they were described in the books and in the Bible. When I pressed him on this, he asked, in a friendly and non-argumentative way, whether I believed in an eternal Hell for those who don't accept Christ. When I said I didn't, he was clearly startled. And he was surprised, further, when in answer to another question I told him that I accept, pretty much intact, the theory of evolution. He listened for a while, occasionally shaking his head, and then at one point he leaned in a little closer, as if to confide a truth that he was amazed I hadn't already grasped. "It's all in what you believe," he said. "You have to believe that Jesus died for our sins. And you have to believe all of what's in the Bible. And you have to believe that Jesus rose up, in his body, on Easter. That's how we're saved." I nodded, appreciative of his candor and genuineness, but then I found myself saying what I have felt for a long time but have never quite articulated in so many words. "You know, I'm not so sure it's all about belief," I said. "I think perhaps it's about a different kind of commitment, one you make not with your head, or even your heart, but with your whole body, your whole self. I'm not sure belief has that much to do with it in the end of the day." He was completely astonished, absolutely bewildered. It was as though I had spoken to him in Greek. As I said, he wasn't angry or argumentative. He simply couldn't comprehend that I – a minister – would say, "I'm not so sure it's all about belief."

But as time goes by I'm more and more convinced of it. This is my 58th Easter, my 33rd as a minister, probably my 27th or 28th Easter sermon (since in my first parish Sam, my wife, preached some of the Easter sermons). I've watched the faces over the years – your faces. I have seen the burdens people have brought in here, Easter after Easter. The worries, the weariness and the wariness. The personal disappointments and pains, the concerns about where the world is headed, the wrestling with the great imponderables of life and death. With all of that, I've seen the earnest, honest desire for some palpable experience of the Easter joy. For some reassuring word of the good news. For some taste of the promised peace. But I have also seen too many of you, before you got what you needed, stopped cold by the requirement of belief, as though the only way to the truth of the Easter story, and the only way to be a Christian, is to believe something over the objection of your honest doubts. One man said to me, "The music is wonderful, but I feel like something of an imposter when I sing, 'Christ the Lord Is Risen Today' because I don't believe in the bodily resurrection." Perhaps you imagine that you should feel less skepticism when you hear the resurrection account read from the scriptures. You may even wonder whether you really belong here at all on Easter morning, because at points in the service you find yourself saying, "I just can't believe that."

But getting to the heart of the Easter story, or, for that matter, the heart of the Christian story as a whole, isn't about belief, at least not primarily. If belief were the only way to the truth of Easter, few of us could get there, unless we were to shut our minds down altogether, something I am sure God doesn't want us to do. We'd be stumped.

R.S. Thomas, in his poem, "The Answer," speaks of the difficulty of standing before the questions of the faith, the difficulty of believing. In particular, he describes one question – undoubtedly the resurrection – which "towers immovable before us." But then he goes on to say, with hope, that there is another way of coming at the questions ... a way "other than thought." Listen:

Not darkness but twilight

in which even the best
of minds must make its way
now. And slowly the questions
occur, vague but formidable
for all that. We pass our hands
over their surface like blind
men, feeling for the mechanism
that will swing them aside. They
yield, but only to re-form
as new problems; and one
does not even do that
but towers immoveable
before us.

Is there no way
other than thought of answering
its challenge? There is an anticipation
of it to the point of
dying. There have been times
when, after long on my knees
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled
from my mind, and I have looked
in and seen the old questions
lie folded and in a place
by themselves, like the piled
graveclothes of love's risen body.¹

Thomas is saying that there *is* a different way. You can get "Home By Another Road," to use Jim Burklo's phrase. It isn't about *believing* the resurrection. It's about *living* the resurrection.

We all know people who live every day as though death, or the fear of death, has them pinned down and counted out. They cling to possessions and to people. They tend toward rigidity. They often act out of one sort of fear or another. And the interesting thing is that when they are asked about traditional Christian tenets, some of them are skeptics and doubters and some of them are believers. It doesn't seem to matter. There seems to be no correlation. On the other hand, we know people who live as though some sort of unquenchable life were flowing through them. It's not that they're without their problems, but they seem buoyed somehow, more flexible, braver. And again, some are believers and some are not. The question on Easter day is not whether you believe the resurrection, but whether you are living the resurrection.

Resurrection is the victory of "seemingly powerless love over loveless power." It is life taken to such depth that life's brevity loses its threat. Resurrection is the report of one man's defeat of death used to illuminate the illimitable nature of life in the whole universe. Resurrection is not an article of belief; it is the very life in you, unfettered, untrammled, lived more boldly, more courageously, more generously, more joyfully than you ever imagined it could be lived.

When you carry lightly the things that you own and share them easily, whether you are a believer or not, you are living the resurrection.

When you can experience both joy and sadness and neither cling to the former nor shun the latter, whether you are a believer or not, you are living the resurrection.

When you find yourself fully in your body, trusting that it is good, knowing both its pleasures and its limitations, whether you are a believer or not, you are living the resurrection.

When you hand your addiction over to God, surrender it up because it's stronger than you are, whether you are a believer or not, you are living the resurrection.

When you ground yourself both in the mundane and the mysterious, the practical and the transcendent, the physical and the spiritual, whether you are a believer or not, you are living the resurrection.

When you no longer cede power over your life to external authorities, systems, institutions but find the courage to face them down when necessary, whether you are a believer or not, you are living the resurrection.

When you act out of a sense of kinship with all people, free of judgment, ready with forgiveness, and when the boundary between self-love and love of others begins to melt, whether you are a believer or not, you are living the resurrection.

When you think of death and still can let joy and wonder and love flow through you, as long as you have breath, even when you are afraid, then, whether you are a believer or not, you are living the resurrection.

And when we, as a gathered community find a voice rising in us that is not about protecting our own privilege but about the rights of the poor, when we act out of the assurance of abundance rather than the fear of scarcity, and when we know that our identity as individuals finds its fullest meaning in our identity as a people, whether we are believers or not, we are living the resurrection.

If belief is given to you, that's wonderful. But to live the resurrection is the higher calling and – I can assure you – much more costly than simply believing it. The commitment demanded is deeper, the risk greater, the price more dear. This is not easy good news. But it *is*, if we dare it, news that will change our lives.

The fact is, some people who live the resurrection are Christians and some are not. Christians are those who, in seeking to live resurrection lives, find themselves encouraged, and inspired, and guided, and taught by the example of Jesus of Nazareth ... and who take the account of his rising from the dead not as a doctrine to be believed, but as a sign to be followed, as food for the journey, as encouragement in times of loss, as light to make things clear. In him, we find such companionship, such assurance, such joy that in our belief and our unbelief alike, the stone of death is rolled away, a new depth of life opens up and we are able to say, with full voices and fuller hearts: "Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed!"

Amen.

NOTE: This sermon was preached at the 11:00 a.m. service on Easter Sunday, 2005, at Plymouth Church. It was preached in slightly shorter form at the 9:00 a.m. service.

¹Thomas, R.S, "The Answer" from *Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry*, edited by Robert Atwan, George Dardess, and Peggy Rosenthal. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pg. 529.