

Happy's Good Friday
A Unitarian Universalist Minister's Reflection on Jesus' Crucifixion
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
May 14, 2017

A short time before Easter, just a few weeks ago, my good friend, the Reverend Happy Watkins, of the New Hope Baptist Church, called for my thoughts about a sermon he was preparing for Good Friday. He asked, "What's your take on the Centurion who stood before the cross and said, 'Surely this was the son of God?'"¹ I wanted to give it some thought so we scheduled a time to get together and wrestle with the passage just a few days later.

As a graduate of the Bible Department at Howard Payne University, a Southern Baptist college in the heart of the Bible Belt in Brownwood, Texas, I know more about the Bible than its casual reader, who presumably hasn't had the benefit of such an education. This doesn't mean I understand it's meaning better than anyone else, but I have earned both undergraduate and graduate degrees requiring me to understand what are mostly questions about the origins of its various writings, their dates and authorship, discrepancies between the original manuscripts and later versions, the historical and social contexts in which they were written, comparative analysis of the texts from both a literary and religious perspective, the different frameworks, or hermeneutics, for interpreting their meaning, and so on. By the time I'd graduated from college, I'd even translated and read much of the New Testament in the original Greek.

I bring this up to point out that much of my formal education has focused on the Bible, and this knowledge remains a big part of my thinking, just as Philosophy, Psychology, and Communications, the other three areas I've formally studied, do. Although I am no longer a Southern Baptist, nor a Christian, for that matter, I still have no trouble finding profound meaning in the Bible. Though I should also say, at the outset, I don't really like referring to it as "the Bible." *Bible* means "book," and implies, incorrectly that it is one book, a unified story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It should really be called, "The Binder," because it's a collection of ancient manuscripts written at various times over the span of more than a thousand years, by countless authors, most of them unknown, was heavily redacted over the ages by others, and was written in different cultural and historical contexts to address diverse social, cultural, and political problems—all of which has been mostly lost in translation. So, we can be almost sure the various manuscripts piled together in the Binder mean something very different to us today than they did when they were first written.

So, whenever considering a specific story or passage in the Binder, I begin by considering the historical and social contexts during which it may have been written, in an attempt to grasp the mindset of its original audience. I realize that sounds so audacious as to be foolish. Of course, it's not possible for a modern man to think like an ancient person from another culture altogether. But at least I try, which is far more than most who read the Binder can

¹ Matthew 27:54

say. And I think it is only right that anyone who seeks inspiration from the writings of other cultures should try to understand what it must have meant to those for whom it was written.

Unfortunately, this is far easier said than done. For there are many different methods of interpreting the Binder, the two worst of which I've already loosely alluded to are called the "Literal approach" and the "Canonical approach." The literal approach doesn't consider what is written in any kind of historical, cultural, literary, or any other critical context. It simply takes what is written to mean what it appears to mean in our modern context. If it says, "God said let there be light and there was light," then it is taken as literal history. The Canonical approach refers, again, to considering all the different manuscripts contained in the Binder, to be one complete book, *the* book, the Bible, the meaning of which is unified and can be understood from one perspective, usually from a very narrow, modern, Christian perspective.

There are several other hermeneutics, or interpretive approaches to the Binder, far more reliable than these two very misleading methods, including those that consider the historical, social, cultural, political, mythical, and psychological contexts of its writings. I like to take most of these into consideration in my interpretations, but the hermeneutic I most favor is the Liberation approach, sometimes call the Social justice approach. In other words, I begin by asking myself what a passage has to do with the liberation of oppressed people. Liberation theology was first coined in the early 1970s, to describe the actions of Latin American Catholic priests who, in the 1950s and 60s, felt informed by their faith to work against poverty, inequality, injustice, and State sponsored violence.

Although all the approaches I've mentioned could rightly be called biases, since they reflect the mindset through which one interprets the writings in the Binder, some of them seem to be more legitimate than others. A couple of the biases, as we have seen, like the Literal and the Canonical approaches are entirely unfounded. There is no sound reason, that is, based upon any hard evidence, for interpreting these writings outside their historical or cultural contexts, or for treating this collection of disparate ancient writings as a unified book with a beginning, middle, and end. The other interpretive biases are based on lots of academic and scientific empirical evidence, which should give them more weight.

The reason I believe a Liberation approach is sound is because most of the writings contained within the Binder were written from the perspective of oppressed people seeking to be free. This is further reason, I think, that people concerned about liberation and justice, should prize these ancient writings like a precious treasure, because this perspective is exceedingly rare among such literature. It is unfortunate the more usual and fallacious Literal and Canonical approaches have obscured this fact, but, for the most part, ancient literature was commissioned by those who could afford it, the ruling elite who oppressed their subjects. In other words, it was written from the perspective of the oppressors, and, thus, painted them in a more favorable light than they often deserved. We see this same sort of thing today under dictatorial regimes in which there is State controlled media, and here in the U.S. where Donald Trump continues to vilify, bully, and shut out the Free Press, in an effort to portray himself and his decisions in only a positive light.

So, we are fortunate to have so many ancient writings written from the unusual perspective of oppressed people gathered up in the Binder, perhaps the most obvious of which is the Exodus story. As Bible scholar, Anthony Ceresko writes, "It is the story of those who were at the very bottom of Egyptian society, effectively non-persons in the greatest empire of the day. It is not an account of a king and his battles or of great alliances and wealth. It is the story of a small group of slaves, their suffering and poverty and struggle, which later Israelites saw as the central moment and source which gave meaning and purpose to their life as a people."²

To appreciate this difference, let's briefly consider just three of the Ten Commandments. From a literal perspective, the command to "honor you father and your mothers" is about obeying the authorities, or continuing the ways of dead people. From a liberation perspective, however, it's about having a social security system in place to care for our elders, "so that," as the command goes on to say, "you too may live long in the land."³ Likewise, from a literal perspective, the Command to "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy," is a prohibition against any kind of work or activity on the seventh day of the week. But from a liberation perspective, it is the first labor law in human history. As former slaves, those who came up with this law, never got a day off, so when they were finally free they made sure no one, "neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns,"⁴ should go without a day off. This is an incredible law including prohibitions against child labor, gender discrimination, and animal abuse.

And the very first Commandment, which many reduce to just, "Have no other gods before me," says in its entirety, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You should have no other gods before me."⁵ From a literal interpretation this is an absolute prohibition against believing in any other god, but from a liberation perspective, it says, amidst all the choices you have, the plethora of religious beliefs, the decisions you must make about what you're going to devote your life to, make sure you don't put anything before your freedom or the freedom of others. Make sure yours is a liberal religion, that your beliefs are not binding, but liberating.

It's not a leap to further suggest that liberation and social justice was the core concern of most the Hebrew prophets. Indeed, it's difficult to interpret what they often said to mean as anything else. Micah famously says, "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what the Lord requires of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."⁶ Micah also admonished those in power who used their position to legally rob families of their sacred land. "They covet fields," he said, "and seize them; houses, and take them away, people and their inheritance."⁷ This is not unlike Amos who also complained, "they sell

² Ceresko, Anthony, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1992, p.12.

³ Exodus 20:12

⁴ Exodus 20:10

⁵ Exodus 20:2

⁶ Micah 6:8.

⁷ Micah 2:2

the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way,"⁸ or Jeremiah who simply instructs us to "Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place,"⁹ or Zechariah who said, "show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another."¹⁰ Isaiah says, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?"¹¹ The literalist claims Sodomy is an evil sexual act, by the prophet Ezekiel claims sodomy is greed and heartlessness. "Now this is the sin of your sister Sodom," he says, "she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed, unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy."¹² (So next time legislators passes a law that harms the poorest among us, let them know they are Sodomites.)

In the Christian scripture, Jesus also epitomizes Liberation theology through his concern and inclusion of the outcasts, the demonized, and the unclean—those his own society most oppressed—a concern that is likely what got him executed by the Roman state. It is Jesus who is also reported to have violated unjust laws, even the Ten Commandments. when they threatened the welfare of others. "The Sabbath was made for man," he said, "not man for the Sabbath."¹³ And one account claims his arrest and execution came after he turned over the tables of those enriching themselves by taking advantage of the poor.

So, I do not consider the Liberation approach an unfounded bias or wishful-thinking on my part. There is good evidence to believe this is the best means of understanding the original intent of the writings contained within this ancient collection of works I'm playfully calling the Binder. Thus, when my friend Happy Watkins asked me to think about the meaning of the Roman Centurion's statement about Jesus being the son of God, something I'd never given thought to before, it took only moments for me to see its rich meaning.

Before continuing, however, I should say at the outset, like so much in the Gospels, we can be almost certain the encounter between Jesus and the Centurion is complete fiction. At best, we can only claim there is some truth to the sayings and parables attributed to him, but even these had been altered through oral tradition until the Gospel writers eventually recorded them in the fictional contexts we call the Gospels. So, the question for us today is what was the original intent of this story, which is included, though slightly altered, in the three synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

Again, from a literal interpretation, it rigidly suggests Jesus was the Son of God, the Christ of faith, that emerged through Church doctrine centuries after his life and death. But from a Liberation perspective, it must have something to do with the Liberation of oppressed

⁸ Amos 2:6-7

⁹ Jeremiah 22:3-4

¹⁰ Zechariah 7:9-10

¹¹ Isaiah 58:6

¹² Ezekiel 16:9

¹³ Mark 2:27

people. Taking this into consideration, along with the historical and social circumstances of the time, as a Roman military officer and commander, the Centurion represents the oppressor in the story, the embodiment of the tyrannical authority of the Roman Empire. Standing before the cross tells us he was overseeing the executions going on at the time. And no symbol could more epitomize the terrifying extent of Roman tyranny than the cross. The gospel tradition says Jesus was crucified near two other criminals, but to help you envision what it was really like, imagine, rather, an entire field of crucifixes, perhaps thousands, all with bodies in different stages of death and agony. According to the ancient historian Josephus, the Romans crucified thousands of people near Jerusalem during Jesus' lifetime, and sometimes conducted mass executions, involving as many as five-hundred crucifixions a day.¹⁴ Seldom would these mass events have included Roman nobles, the equivalent of our "white-collar criminals," but were reserved mostly for the poor and the minorities, just like our criminal justice system today. As John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed tell us in their book, *Excavating Jesus*, "crucifixion was not the punishment of citizens and aristocrats, but of slaves and servants, peasants and bandits."¹⁵

Crucifixion would have been so commonplace that even those communities most impacted by this horrific injustice would have become numb to it, going about their lives as if it were barely happening; just as today most of us are able to go about our lives without thinking much about the millions of Americans who live in caged boxes, guarded by indifferent jailers in a system that barely recognizes their humanity, most of whom are from poor, minority, and otherwise, marginalized circumstances. So, understanding all of this, when I turned my mind to Happy's question about the meaning of the Centurion's statement upon Jesus' death, "Surely this was the son of God," it took only seconds for me to realize the answer. To help you grasp its meaning in the same way it hit me, however, let's take a more recent example.

Prior to just a few weeks ago, the State of Arkansas hadn't executed a Death Row convict in nearly a dozen years. But when they realized the lethal injection drugs they use were about to expire, they made plans to kill eight in less than two weeks. The first to go was Ledell Lee, a 51-year-old African American man, born into extreme poverty and suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome, who spent his last 22 years on Death Row for the murder of his neighbor, Debra Reese, a crime for which he always maintained his innocence. The judge in his case was having an affair with the prosecutor, whom he later married, and Lee's court appointed attorney is said to have come to court intoxicated. Nor was there any physical evidence conclusively proving his guilt. Nevertheless, even after a Federal Appeals Court had placed a temporary stay on his execution, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 5 to 4 decision tipped by the new and illegally appointed Justice Neil Gorsuch, permitted it to happen, less than three weeks ago, just four days after Easter.

Now imagine if instead of waking up to the news of Lee's execution, or SCOTUS' politically motivated, lopsided decision, the headline stated, "Gorsuch Calls Lee a Child of God Blocking Execution." Now, I hope, you begin to grasp the impact this story of a Roman Centurion calling a convicted Jew a "Son of God," would have had on its ancient audience. Given his

¹⁴ Crossan, John Dominic, & Reed, Jonathan L., *Excavating Jesus*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2001, p. 246.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

proximity to Jesus, his mirror neurons fired and he felt empathy, that is, something in common with the condemned man he presided over. He realized, in that moment, they were equals, and it becomes extremely difficult for us to mistreat those we see as our equals, those our mirror neurons tell us we are like, those for whom we have genuine empathy. To oppress others, we must first convince ourselves we are their betters and that they deserve to be treated as something less.

As Happy and I came to this realization, it gave us both a new appreciation for the Apostle Paul, who, like the Centurion, was also a Roman citizen charged with persecuting Christians. But when he came to his senses, he too considered Jesus' death the focus of his transformation. "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified,"¹⁶ he wrote to the Corinthians. Until a few weeks ago I had always considered his fixation on Jesus' death to be a morbid premise upon which to build an entire religion, but now I understand it wasn't a symbol of death for Paul, but an image that awakened his compassion and empathy for those he'd once tormented. This explains why Paul's authentic writings, just seven of the thirteen letters attributed to him, so often state that breaking the law isn't enough to condemn us, that we are still loved, and that we must build communities based on equality, without ethnic, economic, or gender bias. "For there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,"¹⁷ he said.

If, like me, you don't believe in a personified god, there are other ways to express this same epiphany, "Surely this is a human being," or "Surely you are my equal," or "Surely you deserve kindness, and respect, and dignity," or "Surely your life has value."

Imagine if Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, instead of asking why young healthy people should be taxed so there's enough to care for the aging in our society, he understood, "Surely their lives have value." Imagine if, instead of voting to repeal the Affordable Care Act, Cathy McMorris Rogers' mirror neurons fired and she realized, "Surely the 24 million people this decision will impact are my equals and deserve the same quality, government healthcare as me." Imagine if, instead of calling them rapists and drug dealers, or watching with indifference as their children wash up dead on the beach, Donald Trump tweeted, "Surely these immigrants are children of God, surely they deserve kindness, and respect, and dignity. Surely their lives have the same value as mine. Surely this Mexican is a child of God. Surely this Muslim is a child of God. Surely this woman is a child of God. Surely, surely, surely, we are one America, and one world, and one people who deserve to be treated equally."

What we need today is for those in power to have a Centurion moment, to be moved with compassion and empathy by recognizing the humanity and equality of us all, so that there should be no differences between us, neither black or white, neither 1 percent or 99 percent, neither Democrat or Republican, neither gay nor straight, transgender or cisgender, native or immigrant, believer or nonbeliever, Christian or Muslim, because we are all part of the human family and deserve compassion and justice.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:2

¹⁷ Galatians 3:28

Happy's Good Friday