
How They'll Know We're Christians

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Easter 5 – Year C

In the name of God: “Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.” Amen. —*The Hymnal*, 388, v.5

Today’s gospel takes us to a deeper level in our journey through Eastertide. We get to a new level with Jesus’ new commandment. It’s the commandment to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). It’s a commandment that one of our own parishioners has commented on with full blown irony—not to say provocation. He says it’s the one teaching of Jesus on which no church or denomination has been founded as its explicit mission statement. Did I mention his comment is not only ironic but also provocative? [Smile]

For my part I would add Jesus’ new commandment to my list of scriptures that few of us attempt to take literally. No matter how fundamentalist we are it’s this new commandment that we often make symbolic or metaphorical rather than literal. To that we may add the commandment from the Sermon on the Mount to “love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44). Taken together these two are among the three scriptures that make up Jesus’ love ethic, adding the third—his summary of the Old Testament law. That summary, you recall, first commands us to love God with all our being. But then a second command is like it, Jesus says: “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). But here, how could I resist hauling out once again that old Bible joke by Mark Twain: “It ain’t those parts of the Bible I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”

Be that as it may I want to share with you a non-Christian story that relates to Jesus’ new commandment. It’s a Buddhist story about ‘the Shambhala warriors.’ Some scholars believe that this term, “Shamb-há-la” or Shamb-ha-lá, is the origin of the name “Shangri-La,” a mythical kingdom in Tibetan Buddhism. But despite its mythic or legendary features it was actually searched for by both eastern and western explorers as if it were a literal kingdom located in the Himalaya Mountains (Victoria LePage, *Shambhala: The Fascinating Truth Behind The Myth Of Shangri-La*; 1996). Indeed if you’re a baby boomer like me you likely remember the movie, “Lost Horizon,” a 1937 film directed by Frank Capra. That film was based in turn on the 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*, by British author, James Hilton.

[Since then] Shangri-La has become synonymous with any earthly paradise ... a permanently happy land, isolated from the outside world. In the novel ... the people who live at Shangri-La are almost immortal, living years beyond the normal lifespan and only very slowly aging in appearance ... In the ancient Tibetan scriptures, existence of seven such places is mentioned as ... idyllic, sacred places of refuge for Buddhists during times of strife (Johan Reinhard, “Khembalung: The Hidden Valley,” *Kailash, A Journal of Himalayan Studies* 6(1): 5–35, Kathmandu, 1978)
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shangri-La>

Now there’s a different Shambhala story that I find so haunting that I often recount it. Let me commend to you this version popularized by one of our foremost spiritual activists living in the world today, Joanna Macy. Here’s how Macy heard the story told by her revered Tibetan Buddhist teacher.

“There comes a time when all life on Earth is in danger. Barbarian powers have arisen. Although they waste their wealth in preparations to annihilate each other, they have much in common: weapons of unfathomable devastation and technologies that lay waste the world. It is now, when the future of all beings hangs by the frailest of threads, that the kingdom of Shambhala emerges.

"You cannot go there, for it is not a place. It exists in the hearts and minds of the Shambhala warriors. But you cannot recognize a Shambhala warrior by sight, for there is no uniform or insignia, there are no banners. And there are no barricades from which to threaten the enemy, for the Shambhala warriors have no land of their own. Always they move on the terrain of the barbarians themselves.

"Now comes the time when great courage is required of the Shambhala warriors, moral and physical courage. For they must go into the very heart of the barbarian power and dismantle the weapons. To remove these weapons, in every sense of the word, they must go into the corridors of power where the decisions are made.

"The Shambhala warriors know they can do this because the weapons are *manomaya*, mind-made. This is very important to remember [the teacher told Joanna]. These weapons are made by the human mind. So they can be unmade by the human mind! The Shambhala warriors know that the dangers that threaten life on Earth do not come from evil deities or extraterrestrial powers. They arise from our own choices and relationships. So, now, the Shambhala warriors must go into training.

"How do they train?" [Joanna] asked.

"They train in the use of two weapons," the teacher answered.

"The weapons are compassion and insight. Both are necessary. We need this first one," he said, lifting his right hand, "because it provides us the fuel, it moves us out to act on behalf of other beings. But by itself it can burn us out. So we need the second [weapon] as well, which is insight into the dependent co-arising of all things. [Insight] lets us see that the battle is not between good people and bad people, for the line between good and evil runs through every human heart. We realize that we are interconnected, as in a web, and that each act with pure motivation affects the entire web, bringing consequences we cannot measure or even see.

"But insight alone," he said, "can seem too cool to keep us going. So we need as well the heat of compassion, our openness to the world's pain. Both weapons or tools are necessary to the Shambhala warrior."

www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=236)

So that's the Tibetan story. And here's how it connects with our gospel story for this fifth Sunday of Easter. The connection occurs right at that point with the insight that "the battle is not between good people and bad people ... [but] runs through every human heart." Suddenly we are in a completely different story than we thought at first. Now the story is not just about some mythical kingdom somewhere in 'never-never land.' Rather the story is about our living in this real world here today. With its evocation of the battle waged in every human heart we have our own hearts called to account. And even more keenly for us Christians we find an interfaith convergence between that Tibetan story and today's gospel story; we find an interfaith connection between the Shambhala warrior ethic and Jesus' unconditional love ethic.

Recall in this connection that "you cannot recognize a Shambhala warrior by sight, for there is no uniform or insignia, there are no banners." Similarly Jesus commissions his followers with no heraldic devices, battle armor or coat-of-arms. Instead he declares, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). It's the insignia of his unconditional love ethic that Jesus pins on his first disciples. And it's that same insignia of unconditional love that we inherit from those first witnesses to his resurrection life. As their successors in the world today we too are recruited, enlisted, and enjoined to bear that single identifying mark.

Now let's also take into account our Epistle reading appointed for today. Notice right away that our scripture from Revelation is literally elevating because it's about a new heaven and a new earth ... [and] the holy city ... coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. "See," Revelation proclaims,

the home of God is among mortals. [God] will dwell with them as their God; they will be [God's] peoples, and God's [own]self will be with them; [God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away ... See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:1-5).

And here's where I myself have recourse to a more symbolic and contemporary term than the term, "kingdom of heaven" evoked in our epistle reading today. It's a contemporary term that so many of us are fond of invoking nowadays: the term

popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “beloved community.” Now “beloved community” was not original with Dr. King. Rather it was coined by the early twentieth century American philosopher, Josiah Royce. In his 1913 magnum opus, *The Problem of Christianity*, Royce introduced beloved community as a framework for encompassing and exploring issues of betrayal and loyalty. [See further below. [\[1\]](#)]

In particular Royce declared three propositions for connecting the issues of betrayal and loyalty in a beloved community. He declared, first:

No baseness or cruelty of treason so deep or so tragic shall enter our human world, but that loyal love shall be able in due time to oppose to just that deed of treason its fitting deed of atonement;

and secondly,

The world, as transformed by this creative deed, is better than it would have been had all else remained the same, but had that deed of treason not been done at all (Royce 2001 [1913], 180) Parker, Kelly A., "Josiah Royce", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2004 Edition), E.N. Zalta (ed.), URL= <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2004/entries/royce/> accessed Oct. 11, 2010);

and finally,

since the Beloved Community is in ideal the community of all [humanity] ... No one is excluded from Christian love ... [And since that] ideal of the universal community has not been realized in time ... the cardinal principle in all Christian morals remains this: “Since you cannot *find* the universal and beloved community—*create* it.” E.A. Jarvis, *The Conception of God in the Later Royce* (Springer Science & Business Media, May 31, 1975), p. 115.

So now, with this exhortation to create the beloved community especially where we cannot find it, we come full circle back to our Tibetan story of the Shambhala warriors. Like Shambhala warriors we Christians too must train with the complementary weapons of compassion and insight in order to defeat worldly powers that keep the kingdom from appearing. But here we are theologically informed by our own tradition to invoke not only the heat of Buddhist compassion but also Jesus’ unconditional love ethic, on the one hand. On the other hand we are also an Easter people. And so we have a resurrection proclamation that not only converges with the cool insight of the Shambhala teaching. That’s the insight that “the line between good and evil runs through every human heart,” and the insight of that karmic principle that “we are interconnected, as in a web, with each act of pure motivation affecting the entire web and bringing consequences we cannot measure or even see.”

Rather, as an Easter people we invoke the insight of our “paschal mystery”* that this battle has already been won by our risen Lord in his triumph over the powers of this world. In addition to Buddhist “insight into the dependent co-arising of all things” we bear insight into our radical dependence on the victory of Jesus’ resurrection life over all contesting forces of evil, destruction and death.

In that connection what sort of new heaven and new earth—what sort of beloved community would we discover if we were bold, faithful and creative enough to try excluding no one from the reach of our Lord’s “saving embrace” (*Book of Common Prayer* 1979, Morning Prayer Rite II, Collect for Mission, p. 101). Likewise what ‘fitting deeds of atonement’ could we boldly and faithfully create for our own betrayals and transgressions; deeds committed out of our own traitorous hearts? We will never know if such atoning possibilities are true or fanciful unless we attempt to perform them. These are among those things that cannot be proven in theory but only by ‘practice, practice, practice.’ Even one such success out of every ten, twenty, or a hundred attempts could immeasurably advance the kingdom of God or the beloved community.

Finally, Royce himself conceded that these claims “cannot be proved true ... but human communities can assert ... and act upon [them] as if [they] were true.” Thus, he concluded, Christian doctrine takes these claims as “a report concerning the supernatural works of Christ” (Royce 2001 [1913], 186). That is to say, Christian spirituality makes such claims *by faith*.

And now to sum up all these considerations we can do no better than to pray more fervently our Collect appointed for today:

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ

your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.
http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Easter/CEaster5_RCL.html

*Compare this invocation of “paschal mystery” in the collect of the day appointed in the Roman Catholic Church USA:

Almighty ever-living God, constantly accomplish the Paschal Mystery within us, that those you were pleased to make new in Holy Baptism may, under your protective care, bear much fruit and come to the joys of life eternal. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/calendar/day.cfm?date=2016-04-24>

[1] Two related reflections on issues of betrayal and loyalty are particular pertinent to Royce’s treatment of beloved community. The earlier is the 1984 treatment by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*.

Before even the risen Jesus can be preached to the city which has killed him, he must return to those closest to him (those whose task it will be to preach his good news) and show them *their* part in his death. ... They must learn the truth of their collusion with the violence which destroyed Jesus, learn that before they can preach to others they must themselves repent and turn--acknowledge their identity of failure before they can again be apostles, missionaries. They must experience the juxtaposition of God’s unconditional grace in the face of their own violations of God, self and others.

This juxtaposition is built into every Christian celebration of the Eucharist. The narrative of the institution is introduced with a reminder that the sacrament of Jesus self-gift originates in the same night that he was betrayed. Those who eat at Jesus table are his betrayers, then as now; yet from the death and hell to which our betrayal condemns him, he returns to break his bread with us as before. The Eucharist is never a simple fellowship meal, not even ... with Jesus. Its imagery always and necessarily operates between the two poles of Maundy Thursday and Easter Sunday, between Gethsemane and Emmaus, between the Upper Room before the crucifixion and the Upper Room to which the risen Jesus comes. All meals with Jesus after Calvary speak of the *restoration* of a fellowship broken by human infidelity: the wounded body and the shed blood are inescapably present.

We do not eucharistically remember a distant meal in Jerusalem, nor even a distant death: we are made present to ourselves [cf. remember = make present; Greek: *anamnesis* vs. ‘amnesia’] as people complicit in the betrayal and death of Jesus and yet still called and accepted, still companions of Christ in the strict sense--those who break bread with him. The Eucharist recapitulates the Supper, the betrayal and the cross, but it does so as an *Easter* feast.

Because of the highly concrete nature of what is done, the stress on *present* fellowship, it is a meal like that at Emmaus--never innocent of the memory of Gethsemane and Good Friday, of our illusory hopes and the destruction they unleash when their untruth is manifested, yet never stopping at the stage of shame or even penitence alone. And here is ... the manner in which the Church’s life is a perpetual Easter, and its mission the universalizing of Easter. —Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Pilgrim, 1984), pp. 38; 40-41

A second key reflection, also excerpted here, is Frederick Niedner’s 1998 reflection on the place of Judas as an archetype of betrayal and loyalty in Western spirituality and Christian tradition.

We are no strangers to such brokenness, either, or to its accompanying pain. In our generation we have known the pain of broken churches. We all bear the name of Christ, but there are some with whom we would not eat his meal. We all claim to be the heirs of Abraham, our father in the faith, but some among us cannot abide even the presence of a real, live Jew. Our families, too, know the pain and shame of places at the table where no one sits any more. We ache and we sob over friendships that were put to death with hasty, angry, bitter words. For each of us, at least one Judas wanders about in the night unforgiven. From another perspective, each of us is Judas, slipping about in the shadows, unforgiven, unloved, utterly alone ...

We who are baptized and have lost ourselves in that Lord of ours [are called to] now search out whomever it is that has become Judas for us that we might lose ourselves in the pain that he or she has inflicted upon us, or we have inflicted upon

him or her. And in that losing ourselves, the Risen Christ promises us, we shall find ourselves. We shall live, and we shall find our real selves, loved, forgiven, and seated again as friend at the table with one who has betrayed me, or whom I have betrayed, one with whom I had lost the capacity to share humanity . . .

Jesus gifts the world with his love by losing himself in this community which still has its agents out looking for Judas, a community restless forever with the love of the one who gave the new commandment the moment Judas left the room on a mission from which he still has not returned. If you would find God in this lonely world, then look for the community that has its messengers out searching the ditches and hedgerows for you, and for me. There you will find the love of God. There you will find God. There you will find yourself. —As quoted by Paul Neuchterlein in “Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary” for the 5th Sunday of Easter, Year C (Easter 5C, Revised Common Lectionary); excerpting Frederick Niedner, “Proclaiming a Crucified Eschaton,” (Institute for Liturgical Studies, Valparaiso University, 1998), pp. 10-14; accessed 4/22/2016 at <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-c/easter5c/>