
Our Righteous Youth and Ourselves

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The First Sunday after Christmas – Year B**

As many of us know, I was a college religion professor for more than 30 years. While retired, I still care about students and young people. I still think about them often; how I would say this or that if I were standing in front of a classroom yet again. As one slang expression puts it: 'I love me some college students!' And as a priest and pastor in this current period, I'm particularly eager to show my care when students are assailed by so many social forces of change and discouragement. In a few minutes I want to return to one of the issues that most concerns me for the future of our youth. But first let me share with you a related example of my efforts: an example of how I tried in my religion classes to lighten things up with humor, and at the same time create teachable moments about religion and spirituality.

Over the years I collected a few religion jokes to share in class. As I said, they had a dual purpose. First, to lighten the mood by giving us all a chance to laugh with amusement and a little entertainment. But I also wanted to leverage that laughter: to create learning and insight about our subject matter. Now here today I'd like to do something similar; here on this First Sunday after Christmas and at the end of this year 2023. True to my calling, of course, I'm going to ask you to play to role that I would ask of my students: to think with me about the implications of what I say for our subject matter here today: the subject matter of our scripture readings on this occasion in our church year.

The joke is popular, by the way, so you may well have heard it told before—maybe even by me. It's sometimes called, "The Guy on a Bridge." It's about a man who was so depressed that he was about to end his life by jumping off a bridge. The joke goes like this.

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!"

He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes."

I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too!"

What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912."

I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

So that's the joke. It will interest you to know that it's also been called, the "Best God Joke Ever," and the "Funniest Religion Joke of All Time." (By Emo Phillips accessed 12/30/2023 at <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion>) And that brings me to my assignment for you today. As your self-appointed college professor for today, I ask you to think with me about why that little story would be called the "Best God Joke Ever," or the "Funniest Religion Joke of All Time." What is it about religion that makes a joke like that ring true? Or what is it about human nature and the human predicament that makes us laugh when we hear something like that? What's so true to our universal nature as human beings about that ridiculous set of questions and answers—that series of Q&A—followed by that outrageous ending?

Seriously, I'd be interested to hear your responses to my assignment in the days ahead. But for now here's my own response, including how the joke connects to today's scripture readings, and also connects to my care and concern for our youth in the present period.

I offer you my shortest possible response. I'd say that joke is a perfect illustration of the truth that, 'The last temptation of the righteous is self-righteousness.' (Source?) For sure: you may have other insights about what makes the joke so insightful. One friend was struck by how much the two characters have in common. And yet the narrator still finds a way to turn commonality into difference and conflict. Now that's true to human nature, isn't it? But I'm partial to my moral of the story: 'The last temptation of the righteous is self-righteousness.' I'll say more about that in a moment. But here's the context and connection to today's scriptures.

Here we are, church family and friends of Christ, gathered together on this First Sunday after Christmas. Our assigned scripture readings are celebrating not only the birth of the Christ Child, but also our own righteousness: our righteous status as Christian "children of God." For our gospel reading says:

[That] to all who received [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

And not only our gospel reading declares our Christmas good news of our religious status as children of God. Also our epistle reading hammers this point. "But when the fullness of time had come," St. Paul writes referring to Jesus incarnation in the Christ Child—

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Galatians 4:4-7)

Notice right away the emphasis in those verses about people who were first "born under the law," but who were then "redeemed;" redeemed so that they were no longer slaves under the law but "children" and 'heirs through God.' Now if we want to get a feeling for what those verses might have meant when the apostle Paul first wrote them, I propose that we consider how our college students are reacting to the war news out of Israel and Gaza at the end of this year.

Surely you've heard how our college campuses have been impacted by the war news out of Israel and Gaza these past weeks. The level of intense feeling by both Jewish and gentile students on our campuses is painful but instructive. And why is the intensity so high? Because our youth have been raised and educated to rely on the closest parallel that we have in the modern period to a set of laws comparable to Torah law in the Hebrew Bible. It is our United Nations Charter and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

That's right I suggest: the closest parallel that we have in the modern period to a set of laws comparable to Torah law in the Hebrew Bible is our 1948 UN Charter and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\)](#) is a milestone document in the history of human rights. [It was drafted] by representatives with different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world . . . [and] proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 ([General Assembly resolution 217 A](#)).

[It provides] a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. It sets out, for the first time [in history], fundamental human rights to be universally protected and it has been translated into over [500 languages](#). The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights] is widely recognized as having inspired, and paved the way for, the adoption of more than seventy human rights treaties, applied today on a permanent basis at global and regional levels . . . (Accessed 12/30/2023 at

<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>)

[Now] One of the key areas in which the United Nations supports human rights is in providing accountability for serious violations of humanitarian law and gross human rights violations. Addressing such atrocities through the rule of law strengthens peace and security and development.

In the Declaration of the High-level Meeting on the Rule of Law, Member States reaffirmed a universal commitment to ensuring that impunity is not tolerated for the worst human rights violations: [violations like genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity . . . [para.22]. The rule of law is essential to addressing such atrocities, which can otherwise undermine peace and security and hamper development. (Accessed 12/30/2023 at <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/thematic-areas/international-law-courts-tribunals/human-rights-law/>)

Now when I consider how our youth have been taught ethics and justice and the rule of law under the influence of these principles and precepts, I can easily appreciate why today's campus protests and conflicts are so intense. But not only that: when I also bring all of that into connection with our scriptures for today, I'm further instructed at an even deeper level about the spiritual issues at stake here.

At the level of spiritual depth, consider here our epistle reading for today; a reading that calls all people beyond righteousness based on law and morality—and, indeed, beyond self-righteousness based on law and morality. As the reading puts it: before Christ came people were “imprisoned and guarded under the law,” and such laws served as “our disciplinarian.” And consider further the verses immediately following our assigned reading—verses that the assigned reading omits. Indeed, these omitted verses have become a kind of diversity and inclusion charter for many of us today; for many who call it the foundation for a ‘beloved community.’ “For in Christ Jesus,” St. Paul goes on to say:

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith . . .

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26, 28-29)

And what is that promise? It is the promise made to Abraham in the Hebrew Bible, that through his offspring ‘all peoples on earth will be blessed’ (Genesis 12:3). Now Christians believe and affirm that this promise is fulfilled in the birth and life of the Christ Child. As we read today, ‘when the fullness of time had come, God sent God's Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law.’ But for people who are not Christian this prophetic promise also has merit. For people of all faith traditions, and indeed for people of no faith but secular humanism; for ethical humanists and for people who espouse secular ethics, it can still be true that Jesus Christ is a gift to humanity by proclaiming a righteousness not based only on law or the rule of law.

Rather, after the advent of Christ and his universal love ethic we are all challenged to imagine new spiritualities in the world based on redemption beyond the rule of law. Regardless or inclusive of all our diverse identities, how can we all move forward even when violations of human rights and the rule of law occur? Indeed, that is the moral challenge facing our youth on college campuses today. Imbued as many of us are with the highest principles of our time, our youth—like the rest of us—are just as much at risk for incurring the dark side of righteousness: runaway self-righteousness based on moral indignation and outrage.

Yes, it can feel like true righteousness. But it can lead down a slippery slope to what has been called: ‘becoming what we hate,’ and what I have called, ‘the last temptation of the righteous is self-righteousness.’ The moral struggle and, indeed, agony that we're seeing in our youth today shows us how much we are all at risk: all of us in jeopardy of succumbing to the dark side of righteousness. That is the experience that some of us have learned to moderate and manage after our long history of religious traditions that undermine their highest ideals by ‘becoming what we hate.’ And isn't that the moral of the news out of Israel and Gaza this year?

Now who will get a message about being redeemed from all that to our youth and to the rest of us in this upcoming new year? Who can intervene so that they do not become mirror images of our own failures and excesses; our failing to live out our higher calling to embody something more transcendent: more redemptive than the same cycles of blame and retribution that prevail in our histories? That is the spiritual challenge of our time, and it confronts not only Jews and gentiles, Christians and other religious folk, but all of us who aspire to

right action in the world today.

Yes, we are all called to such a 'beloved community.' And in this upcoming Epiphany season I invite us to reaffirm the promise made to Abraham for the blessing of all peoples. And may that promise be fulfilled for the descendants of all the Semitic peoples in the Holy Land today. Indeed, may we all see the fulfillment of that prophecy found in our Old Testament reading appointed for today but omitted in our service leaflet; the prophecy that says:

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness . . .

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations . . .

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.

The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.

You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
(Isaiah 61:10-11; 62:1-3)

But here today, until that day dawns for our youth and ourselves, let us continue to invoke the blessing of the angels who attended the birth of the Christ Child. Let us persist in proclaiming with the hosts of heaven: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, and good will toward all people." (Luke 2:14) Amen.