

**“Albert Schweitzer’s Religious Philosophy of Reverence for Life:
Part VII: The Sacredness of All That Lives”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
“Easter Sunday,” March 23, 2008
Rev. Bruce Bode**

Quotation for Order of Service

“The Essence of Being, the Absolute, the Spirit of the Universe, and all similar expressions denote nothing actual, but something conceived in abstractions which for that reason is also absolutely unimaginable. The only reality is the Being which manifests itself in phenomena.”

(Albert Schweitzer, from Civilization and Ethics, p. 237)

Lighting of Chalice (spoken in unison)

We come together this Easter Sunday
To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness and beauty of life;
To reaffirm the way of the open mind and the full heart;
To reclaim the vision of an earth more fair, with all her people one.

Opening Words

From e.e. cummings, after being released from the darkness of a prison cell into the light of day:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun’s birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any – lifted from the no
of all nothing – human merely being

doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

(e. e. cummings (1894-1962))

Responsive Reading

This morning's Responsive Reading are words of Dr. Albert Schweitzer on the mystery of life:

MINISTER: We may say that there are two kinds of naiveté.

CONGREGATION: The first is one which is not yet aware of all the problems, and has not yet knocked at all the doors of knowledge.

MINISTER: The second, a higher kind, is the result of having looked into all the problems, having sought counsel in all spheres of knowledge, and having come to see that we cannot explain anything.

CONGREGATION: The deeper we look into nature, the more we recognize that it is full of life, and the more profoundly we know that all life is a secret.

MINISTER: A true acquaintance with the world consists in being filled with a sense of the mystery of existence and life, a mystery that only becomes more mysterious with each advance in scientific research.

CONGREGATION: The more profound a religion is the more it realizes this truth: that what it knows through belief is little compared to what it does not know.

MINISTER: To be filled with the mystery of life is like that which is called in the language of mysticism the "knowing ignorance."

CONGREGATION: The highest knowledge is to know that we are surrounded by mystery.

(Albert Schweitzer, adapted)

A Time for All Ages

Good morning, children. This is “Easter Sunday,” a time of great celebration.

The first thing we celebrate on Easter is the coming of spring and the renewal of life that is happening all around us – flowers blooming and trees budding and grasses growing.

You will be celebrating Easter this morning with an Easter egg hunt, because eggs are a sign of new life. New life comes out of eggs. And so that’s why we have Easter egg hunts.

Then a second thing we celebrate at Easter is the birth or the beginning of the Christian religion, which is the religion from which Unitarian Universalist congregations, like ours, originally came from. And the Christian religion comes out of the life and teachings of a person named Jesus of Nazareth, who lived about 2000 years in the country of Israel.

There are two main ways that Christian groups think about Jesus. The one way, which is the most common way, is that Jesus was different than other human beings. Not only was he a human being, but he was also God at the same time – God come down to earth from heaven. And he came to earth to save people from their sins ... which makes some sense, because there are some pretty bad things that people do.

As a matter of fact, one of things people did was to kill Jesus in a very horrible way by crucifixion. But most Christians believe that after Jesus died he physically came to life again. This is called “the resurrection.” That is one way Christian groups think about Jesus.

But there is also another way of thinking about Jesus. And this is that Jesus was a human like everyone else, but a human who was a very special teacher – a teacher of love, mercy, and of treating all other humans as brothers and sisters.

Now you may remember that I’ve been talking to your parents about another person, namely, Albert Schweitzer, a man who was a very greater thinker. Remember, I showed you pictures before of him thinking.

And one of things he thought about was who Jesus was. As a matter of fact, he wrote a whole book about who Jesus was – I won't read it to you now – it's titled, THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS. And it asks: Who was Jesus in history?

And he concluded that Jesus was a human being and a great teacher, but not a deity, not a god. He could even be wrong on some things. But still he was a person from whom we can learn a lot. And so even though he died, his spirit and the lessons that he taught can still live on in other people and can still influence them.

And Albert Schweitzer himself was a person who was deeply influenced by the spirit and teaching of Jesus, so much so that he became a medical doctor so that he could help others – which is in the spirit of Jesus.

So that is a second thing to celebrate at Easter: the fact that the spirit of a person can live on after them, even though they have died.

And whether you believe Jesus came alive again physically after he died, or whether his spirit lives on even though his body remained dead, the important thing is to live a life of love and forgiveness and mercy such as Jesus lived.

Congregational Announcements

If some of you have been thinking that Easter has come a bit early this year, you would not be wrong. The last time Easter was this early was in 1913, and the next time it will be this early is 220 years from now in 2228 ... if there is still a celebration of Easter, and if there is still an eco-system that can come alive in the spring. But I won't go into all of that today.

The dating of Easter is based on the lunar calendar that Hebrew people use to identify Passover, which is why it moves around on our Roman calendar. Passover, this year, is being celebrated beginning on Saturday evening, April 19 – on the far end of this lunar cycle.

But Easter is celebrated after the Spring Equinox on the first Sunday after the first full moon. This year the Spring Equinox was Thursday, March 20, the first full moon was the day after that on Friday, March 21, and today is the first Sunday following the full moon.

It's possible, as you quick calculators may have deduced, for Easter to be even one day earlier than it is today, namely, on March 22 – which it was in 1818 and will be again 277 years from now on 2285.

Reading

In my sermon series these past several weeks, I have been talking about Albert Schweitzer's religious philosophy of Reverence for Life, which for Schweitzer is essentially an approach that expands the ethic of Jesus.

And as I've previously mentioned, prior to Schweitzer's becoming a medical doctor and founding a hospital in Lambarene, Gabon in Equatorial Africa, he made important – and controversial – contributions in the academic world, not the least of which was his study of the historical Jesus. In this study he maintained that the “Jesus of history” was one who expected God, in very short order, to bring an end to this present evil age and to re-create upon this earth a new age, a Kingdom of God, in which Jesus, as God's Messiah, would rule, along with his disciples, as agents of God in this new creation, this new age.

Schweitzer believed that the purity of Jesus' ethical teaching – such as you find, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount – was due in good measure to the fact that it didn't have to conform to the realities of the present world – to its current social and political conditions – because he believed that this world was about to pass away and that God was about to break in and re-create this earth.

So what Jesus was preaching was an ethic that belonged to the coming world, the kingdom of God, a kingdom of love, justice, mercy, forgiveness, and peace, for which people should prepare their hearts. This is why Jesus began his ministry crying, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is close at hand.”

And, additionally, show your seriousness, your fitness, for this coming Kingdom by beginning to live it now. Live that ethic of love, justice, mercy, forgiveness, and peace now.

This was Jesus' message and he died for it. He died believing that the Kingdom was about to dawn. And his closest followers, though shocked

that the Messiah must die – because what Jewish person had ever heard of a Messiah that needed to die? – his disciples were initially shocked, but shortly recovered, and continued to await the Kingdom of God in which a resurrected Jesus would rule as God’s agent in the new age.

But this didn’t happen. Jesus was wrong, according to Schweitzer. He was historically wrong. But spiritually, says Schweitzer, he was right. His ethic stands. So let the rest go.

The world-view of Jesus and his followers, a world-view that could expect a cataclysmic change, belongs to that time of history. But let it go, peel it off like the husk that surrounds a kernel of grain. The kernel that remains, and which is nourishing, is the ethic of Jesus. Let the rest go.

And so it is that throughout his life Schweitzer was inspired by the ethic and the spiritual force that he felt emanating from Jesus. For Schweitzer, Jesus was the ethical master of his life, even as Johann Sebastian Bach was his musical master. And Schweitzer remained loyal to both throughout his life.

My reading on this Easter Sunday – in case you were wondering whether I had one – is from an often-quoted passage in Schweitzer’s, The Quest of the Historical Jesus:

There is silence all around. The Baptist appears [John the Baptist], and cries: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man [the Messiah] lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It [the wheel of history] refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions [the conditions of the end of ordinary time], He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.

“THE SACREDNESS OF ALL THAT LIVES”

Introduction

On this Easter Sunday, when by tradition we celebrate the renewal of life both within and without, I bring to a conclusion my sermon series on Albert Schweitzer’s religious philosophy of Reverence for Life.

As in my three previous years with you, this sermon series has been designed to follow the Lenten calendar of the Christian tradition, a 40-day period of inwardness and introspection during the latter part of the winter season that culminates in Good Friday and Easter and the coming of the spring.

In these past several weeks, in putting before you Schweitzer’s religious philosophy, it has been my intention to encourage you to consider and weigh your own religious philosophy or your own world-and-life view by having a point of comparison with his.

No doubt, the degree to which you have done this will vary from person to person, but, even if you have not closely followed this series, today you have a final chance; and, indeed, today it is my plan to briefly wrap and tie Schweitzer’s religious philosophy together so that you can see it in its wholeness.

Comments of the ethic of Reverence for Life

Last week I spoke of the ethics of Reverence of Life, indicating that for Schweitzer the fundamental principle of morality consists, on the one hand, of maintaining, promoting, and enhancing life and, on the other hand, in refraining from destroying, injuring, and limiting life.

Additionally, as I said last week, Schweitzer refused in theory, though not in practice, to set up any scale or hierarchy of value between higher and lower forms of life, between more and less complex forms, preferring instead to put forward an *absolute ethic*, somewhat similar in structure to the absolute ethic of Jesus, in which one should try to save every life that one could and to refrain from destroying life of any kind ...

... for, as Schweitzer says, "...life as such is the mysterious value with which we have to do." (Out of My Life and Thought," p. 270) Not this life or that life, not only life that is fuzzy, warm, cute and responsive to us; not only life that is directly useful for us, but life as such is precious. Life as such is an unfathomable miracle, every shining particle of it. All life is sacred and to be revered; no life is to be disrespected or disregarded.

But the question, of course, is: How can you possibly live such an ethic in this world where life feeds on life, and where life and death, creativity and destruction, are component parts of the larger whole?

We might wish that reality were otherwise than it is. As a matter of fact, we do wish that reality were otherwise than as it is! ... which is why we create visions upon this earth of the wolf lying down with the lamb, or visions of other heavenly realms apart from this one where there is no death, and there is no slaying and being slain.

But Schweitzer could not bring himself to believe in such other-worldly realities, but rather took as real this present, concrete, earthly reality, in which he encountered, both within and without, a mysterious life-force or will-to-live that sought to live itself out, and which in us humans, with our capacity for reflection and empathy, became desirous of solidarity or union with other life.

But, again, to repeat the question: How can you possibly bring about this union, this solidarity, this relatedness, this love for other forms of life?

You can't! – at least not in the way Schweitzer would have it. And so he stood transfixed before what he described as "... the puzzling and horrible law of being obliged to live at the cost of other life, and to incur again and again the guilt of destroying and injuring life." (Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography)

The ethical person, he says, is one who "...strives to escape whenever possible from this necessity, and as one who has become enlightened and merciful to put a stop to this disunion of the will-to-live so far as one's influence reaches."

But it simply doesn't work! And, in a way, we find Schweitzer admitting this, for there are places in his writings where, perhaps not quite

consistently, he adjusts his absolute ethic ... so that it becomes the commandment not to kill per se, but rather the commandment to not kill wantonly, or needlessly, or unthinkingly, or inattentively; but rather to realize that life has to be seen more corporately and less individually, with the less complex forms of life being sacrificed to the more complex forms of life ... but, indeed, this giving of one life for another is to be done in the spirit of a sacrifice, and with compassion and gratitude.

An e-mail response

In response to last week's sermon a member of our congregation e-mailed me, in part saying:

Did Albert Schweitzer ever enjoy a cup of tea, knowing the water was boiled? I think one major point we need to dance with is that death and decay *is* life and fertility, and the 10,000 worms in my worm box feast on mold and microbes and happen to excrete the very topsoil in which my vegetables grow. I think Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life" could be broadened to "reverence for life-cycle," understanding the dead salmon on the river bank is not a sadness but a great glory: instinct fulfilled, eggs fertilized, and now expired body becomes food for eagles and eaglets and bears and raccoons and gulls and nutrients for fauna. But, yes, "reverence" indeed. I wonder if Albert Schweitzer ever read Jeffers...

This congregational member is referring here to the poet, Robinson Jeffers, who I have often quoted before. And, no, I don't recall Jeffers' name ever coming up in any of Schweitzer's writings; it would be a bit unlikely for him to have encountered Jeffers' poetry.

But it was interesting in my own life and religious and philosophical development that, after spending years studying and thinking and living with Schweitzer's work, it was the naturalistic poet Robinson Jeffers who next gripped me – Jeffers, who stood at some distance from life and praised its beauty, saying:

...however ugly the parts appear, the whole remains beautiful....

...the greatest beauty is
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of

the universe. Love that, not man
Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions, or
drown in despair when his days darken.

(Excerpted from "The Answer")

And so I agree with this congregational member that the adjustment that he speaks of, namely, "reverence for life-cycle," is exactly the kind of adjustment needed for Schweitzer's ethic of Reverence for Life.

And, as I've said, it's what Schweitzer followed in his practice, and which in some places in his writings he also more or less speaks of.

Ethical Mysticism

Before I end this series, I want to speak a bit more about what Schweitzer was struggling with and what he was after ... because he also wanted to connect with the whole of things, but he believed that you connected, not primarily through thought, or through art, but through ethical action, through devotion, care, and love of other sentient beings.

Schweitzer's religious philosophy of Reverence for Life is what he called an "ethical mysticism." And I'm sorry to have to spring this term on you on Easter Sunday, when perhaps you only want to celebrate the springing of the year. But hang in with me for a bit, if you would.

I know that "mysticism" often mystifies people. But it's not that hard a concept to understand. At its root, mysticism – and there are many different kinds of mysticism – has to do with the experience of the collapse of boundaries and divisions between things, the overcoming or transcending of distinctions and separations, so that you feel that you and the other are one; that there's a fundamental identity between you and the other, and the felt knowledge that you and the other are one being, one body, one life, one reality; you are one before you are two. You are two as well, but underneath that twoness is a oneness.

Mysticism is also non-rational in character – not irrational, but non-rational. That is to say, it's a different way of knowing, not a knowing so much of the mind and intellect, but a knowing of the heart and soul.

“Rational knowing” has to do with the experience of drawing distinctions between things; whereas “mystical knowing” has to do with the experience of the unity and identity of things ... so that the distinctions which the rational mind perceives – and rightly so in their context – these distinctions are overcome.

Thus, there is no necessary conflict between these two ways of knowing. Indeed, Schweitzer believes that rational thought and rational knowing must necessarily lead to non-rational or mystical knowing.

But a lot of mysticisms purport to be unions with realities that are apart from this concrete, real world. And Schweitzer was critical of these types of mysticisms, or he could not believe in them.

He believed that we fooled ourselves with our language. Language expresses itself in symbols, which arise from contact with concrete realities. But sometimes these symbols take on a life of their own. So, for example, he says, as in the quotation I have at the top of the Order of Service today:

The Essence of Being, the Absolute, the Spirit of the Universe, and all similar expressions denote nothing actual, but something conceived in abstractions which for that reason is also absolutely unimaginable. The only reality is the Being which manifests itself in phenomena.”

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 237)

Schweitzer felt that most mystical world-views took one away from this world, and away from ethics. One becomes absorbed in the All, in the Absolute, in the Godhead, and lost to this reality, lost to concrete, loving devotion to other life. “Mysticism,” he says, “is not a friend of ethics but a foe. It devours ethics.”

But before you think he is rejecting mysticism, read further, for his next sentences state:

And yet the ethic which to satisfy thought must be born of mysticism. All profound philosophy, all deep religion, are ultimately a struggle for ethical mysticism and for mystical ethics.

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 234-235)

What that means is that what Schweitzer wants is a concrete mysticism – a here and now union with other life. And the way to unite with other life is to serve it directly, to care for it, to assist it, to promote it, to encourage it, and to have sympathy for it. He says:

There is no essence of Being, but only infinite Being in infinite manifestations. It is only through the manifestations of Being, and only through those with which I enter into relations, that my being has any intercourse with infinite Being. The devotion of my being to infinite Being means devotion of my being to all the manifestations of Being which need my devotion, and to which I am able to devote myself.”

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 238)

And so the thing to do is devote yourself and give yourself to those manifestations of life that are present in your little corner of the world. He says:

Only an infinitely small part of infinite Being comes within my range. The rest of it passes me by, like distant ships to which I make signals they do not understand. By devoting myself to that which comes within my sphere of influence and needs me, I make spiritual, inward devotion to infinite Being a reality and thereby give my own poor existence meaning and richness. The river has found its sea.

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 238)

How does one practice devotion to life?

Now, how you will devote yourself, how you will give yourself to other life around you, that is something you as an individual will have to struggle with and decide. We are not talking law here. We are talking about the connection of one life with another life. We are talking about seeing and feeling the identify of other life in your own life.

As I've mentioned before, Schweitzer was agnostic with respect to what such devotion to other life meant in universal or world-process. What reality and the universe has in mind, if anything, we cannot fathom. We leave that question unsettled. We only know that the will-to-live, as we meet it in ourselves, demands that we reach out to other life. And when we obey that will, we find we our own life. The river finds its sea.

Only by serving every kind of life do I enter the service of that Creative Will whence all life emanates. I do not understand it; but I do know (and it is sufficient to live by) that by serving life, I serve the Creative Will. It is through community of life, not community of thought, that I abide in harmony with that Will.

(“The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” Christendom, Vol. I, Winter, 1936, p. 234)

That is Schweitzer’s ethical mysticism: union with the power of life, the Creative Will, through loving devotion to life in its concrete manifestations. One’s spiritual connection and union with life and reality comes about, not first of all through thought, but through devotion. One unites with life by serving it, however one is able.

Indeed, in the end, one’s intellectual understanding of this is relatively unimportant. Says Schweitzer, and with this I conclude:

...the difference between learned and unlearned is entirely relative. The unlearned person who, at the sight of a tree or flower, is overpowered by the mystery of the will-to-live which is stirring all around him or her, knows more than the scientist who studies under the microscope or in physical and chemical activity a thousand forms of the will-to-live, but, with all his or her knowledge of the life-course of these manifestations..., is unmoved by the mystery that everything which exists is will-to-live....

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 241)

Conclusion

So I’ll leave it here – though there’s much more that could be said. And, as I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon series, this has been for me a return to studies from about 35 years ago. It has been quite wonderful to revisit those more youthful studies. And my respect for Schweitzer’s work is no less now than it was then – perhaps, in some ways, even greater.

I hope you have gotten something out of this sermon series for your own lives. And, I’d suggest, if you want to go further into his work that you might begin with an anthology of quotations from his writings, titled Albert Schweitzer: An Anthology, which was edited by a Unitarian minister, Charles R. Joy.

And, incidentally, in 1961, at the age of 86, Schweitzer accepted membership with Unitarian Universalists through the Church of the Larger Fellowship, a Unitarian Universalist congregation of far-flung religious liberals who are connected by mail. Schweitzer also remained a Lutheran minister.

A second book I would recommend to start with is Schweitzer's autobiography titled, Out of My Life and Thought, a book with nicely summarizes his main ideas from the various disciplines in which he made contributions.

And, then, finally I'd recommend the biography I recommended at the beginning of this series, a biography of British author James Brabazon, titled Albert Schweitzer: A Biography, edition two. This is the most widely-researched and best-balanced of the biographies on Schweitzer.

So that's it. Let me wish you a most happy Easter. And let's conclude with the Easter hymn #270, "O Day of Light and Gladness."

Closing Words

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time
There shall be no ugliness or death
For yourself or for any life that your life touches.

Seek goodness everywhere; when it is found
Bring it out of its hiding-place
And let it be free and unashamed.

Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption.

Encourage virtue into whatever heart
It may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow
By the shame and terror of the world.

In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time
You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world,
But shall smile instead to its infinite delight and mystery.

(Preface to "The Time Of Your Life" by William Saroyan)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish our chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the Easter sermon given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on March 23, 2008. This sermon, "The Sacredness of All That Lives" is the seven and final sermon on "Albert Schweitzer's Religious Philosophy of 'Reverence for Life.'" The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)