

A World Baptized in Love
based on Acts 16:1-15, David Jahnke, 8/10/14

Instead of reading my Bible the other morning, I saw and picked up the essential teachings of the Dalai Lama. And while I was reminded of many important commonalities with Christianity like the centrality of love, compassion and healing kindness, I also came to a new realization of some profound differences as well, including the Buddhist belief that man is meant to be his own master; and that we are the creators of our fate.

There is much affinity to a modern humanistic point of view of view here which is why Buddhist spirituality has been so appealing in the west over the last few decades.

I saw an example of this in an interesting article called “The 9 Lies we tell ourselves that keep us from being happy.” The first eight are on top of the piano along with the counter-truths we should be telling ourselves. But the 9th “lie” was the cliché “It’s in God’s hands.”

The writer admits it’s not a total lie, he says that “thinking that a divine source decides everything robs us of the will to make commitments, to follow our heart, to discover how awesome life is and how powerful we are.” You will see the affinity here to the Dalai Lama’s understanding of creating our own lives out of our own power, which on one level, I agree with. We do choose, every day to live into the love and peace of the Kingdom which is near or reject them.

But believing that things are in God’s hands does not rob us of free will or responsibility. Believing in a loving God actually drives us to follow our heart’s call to love others as God loves us. And a belief in the wonderful sovereignty of God leads to awe and commitment, rather than detracting from them. Such faith brings connections and meanings and calls to commitments everywhere. And conversely, I am not quite sure what would lead to awe and commitment in a godless universe or one with a benign, impotent abstract god.

Today’s baptism reminds us that the entire world has been baptized in the love of God through Jesus. He is the loving Word of God through whom all things were made in the beginning and through whom all things have been reconciled in his life, death and resurrection. And at Pentecost his Spirit was poured out upon all flesh, according to Acts 2.

A church member suggested that the Acts of the Apostles should be titled The Acts of the Holy Spirit, because it is the Spirit of God, unleashed upon the church in tangible ways is the source, means and ends of everything good that happens in the book. And by extension, the Spirit poured out upon all flesh is behind all acts of love and other virtues.

The Spirit guided Paul and his group to Phillipi; the Spirit brought Paul and Lydia to the river that day, in order to open Lydia's heart to receive the gospel. It was no coincidence that they met that day.

A quick word in this regard. Paul and Lydia met at a place of prayer on the Sabbath. And without a doubt, God has ordained our fellowship at this place of prayer on the Sabbath as a time of blessing each other. But I also want to quickly recall the Ethiopian Eunuch who happened to be reading Isaiah on the way back from Jerusalem. Philip spoke to him about Jesus and soon the eunuch was baptized, just like Lydia.

Every day our sovereign God places people in our path whom we are called to bless in some way or another. One day, we might have a Word about God or the Spirit. But we might also bless with a smile, a compliment, an ear or by lending someone a hand.

This is a daily opportunity, but it is by honoring the Sabbath and practicing prayer that we become aware of constant opportunities to bless others and are stirred to take advantage of them.

Lydia sensed a need for something more meaning and opportunity from God. She worshipped God and had succeeded in business, but she wanted to believe in more, receive more, give more than obedience to the Law and occasional good works. So as she watched the river go by and listened to Paul, she learned that the risen Jesus would save her and her family from sin and death and that His Spirit was constantly at work. The gospel provided the more she longed for so she stepped into the river with Paul.

I read yesterday another commonality with Buddhism and Taosim-- that "the Way [or Spirit] is like a river following its natural course. One cannot push the river." [Tao De Ching] God makes things right for us and with us. We cannot do it on our own. We step into the river of God's Spirit; the bath of God's love and let them have their cleansing, purifying way with us and take us to our final destination, with daily stops to bless those in the river or swimming over to the shore to bless the curious looking on or dipping their toes in.

Here is another mantra for you to consider. “Ego says: ‘Once everything falls into place, I will find peace.’ Spirit says: ‘Once you find Peace, everything falls into place.’” [Marianne Williamson]

So we can rely upon ourselves to try to make everything fall into place around us. But this is a futile pursuit because we are not the center of anything; not even of ourselves; God is. The alternative is to trust that God is at the center of all things and find the peace and patience and grace that leads to all things falling into place.

There is one obvious final component of the need for a sovereign God, rather than relying on our strength and goodness. Nothing but a God who ordains life will sustain us through death. This truth and this hope press us forward into the risks of love. If ever a week in recent history has pressed this truth upon Christians; as our brothers and sisters are being forced to flee their homes, slaughtered and forced to convert in Iraq. Closer to home and also tragic, a church member lost a 57-year old brother to cancer—the third loved one to succumb to this terrible disease recently.

I watched the movie *Wit* this week. Emma Thompson plays a professor of medieval English poetry who has had great command of her life. But ovarian cancer had gone undetected in her until stage four. As her life and health deteriorate, she confides in her sweet nurse her fear and how she does not feel so sure of herself anymore. “And you used to be so sure of yourself,” says the nurse. “Yes...yes...I used to be so sure!”

And then as she nears the end, she wakes up as her grandmotherly Oxford professor stops in for a visit. The professor crawls into her hospital bed with her and caresses her as she says again and again, “there, there dear...there there...” She asks if she would like her to recite a sonnet and she shakes her head “No! No!” So her mentor pulls out the book from Barnes and Noble that she had bought for her great grandchild—*The Runaway Bunny* and reads it to her, concluding, “A little allegory of the soul. No matter where it hides, God will find it.” And as Emma falls asleep, she does recite a poem from John Donne.

DEATH be not proud,
though some have called thee
mighty and dreadfull,
for, thou art not so.
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow,
die not, poore death, nor yet can thou kill me

From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee, 5
Much pleasure, then from thee,
much more must flow.
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.

Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poyson, warre, and sicknesse dwell, 10
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,
And better then thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more, death thou shalt die.

Either this is true and we have every good thing to rejoyce in and every evil to endure and battle; or it is false and there is no particularly compelling reason to rejoyce or battle or endure. The risen Jesus came to Paul to teach him it was true. Paul made it his life's work and battled greatly because of it. The resurrection was the heart of Paul's gospel and the motivation for his work.

Lydia heard this news and found the spiritual home she had longed for. And because she was now at home, she offered her home and her gifts to the wandering poor. May you come to deeply believe in the gift of eternal life and practice the ways of God's Kingdom. May you thus find your heart's true home and point the hearts of others home as well. To the God of all grace who calls us to eternal union with Christ Jesus, be all the power and the glory, now and forevermore. And God's people say...

