

Pentecost V

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What Would Buddha Do?

Gospel of Luke 9:51-62

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When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Gospel of Luke

9:51-62

My Buddhist friend Janet has a tee shirt that I love. It's two Zen Masters sitting in the lotus position next to each other, and one says to the other: "Are you not thinking what I'm not thinking?"

I totally get the attraction of Buddhist practice and identity in this abundantly cluttered and grasping world of ours. It is a discipline that champions silence and meditation over ranting and indoctrination. It lifts the ethic and enlightenment of pure experience, the value of the here and now, and the utter and unadulterated compassion for all sentient beings, large and small, creepy and crawly, beautiful and beastly – it embodies a wholesale respect for all of God's creation. And it is often where I look to help me understand how to live into my own Christian faith and ethic. It is a place where I can

wrestle with the difficulty of reconciling my Holy spirit and my fleshly one; a place where I can figure out how the teachings of my Christian tradition can be translated into the basics of my everyday life. When Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself, sometimes I think, what would Buddha do?

And so when I read the group of lectionary readings appointed for this morning, each of which has a pithy and powerful Christian message in its own right, collectively, it was the Buddhist concept of ethics that captured my interpretive imagination. For if I were going to select some bits of scripture with which to meditate on my own being and nothingness, with which to address my own craving and attachment, with which to embrace the seemingly paradoxical notions that there is indeed a profound order and that that order is nothing if not impermanent, upon which to mull the merits of mindfulness and selflessness on a single swallow, this morning's readings, all three of them, would be at the top of my list.

All three of these readings point us to the difficult task of being true to the Holy Spirit in the midst of the material world. In 2 Kings, the prophet Elijah asks the prophet Elisha: "tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you." And Elisha responds: "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." In Galatians, the Apostle Paul tells us in no unequivocal terms: "Live by the Spirit" Do not gratify the flesh, he says, "For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh." (Ah ha, so that's where my Southern Baptist friend Zelma gets this stuff! It is right there in the Bible, just like she says.) Anyway, In today's reading from Luke, Jesus says to his followers, as a sort of combination warning and clear prescription: "Follow me," BUT - big flashing neon light signaling the al-important rub - , "foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." This is not a good advertisement for following Jesus. The perks for this job are clearly going to stink! This is the poster passage for our call to non-attachment, to the realization and acceptance of the impermanence of everything we hold dear in this world, and for the Buddhist ethic that champions spontaneity over conscious action.

Now the spontaneity thing sounds a bit contrary to Christian teachings. We are taught to live by a set of rules, God's Commandments. And one of those Commandments, as we hear in this morning's reading from Galatians, is to love our neighbors as ourselves. And after 45 years of my concerted effort and wrestling with this bear of a commandment, I am still not sure how the words love and Commandment are meant to work together. A Commandment is static and universal, where the exigencies of love are always fluid with the context and the relationships and the particularities of the human beings involved. Commandments seem conscious, but love seems spontaneous.

I have just finished re-reading Philip Hallie's book "Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed." It is the story of the small village of Le Chambon in southern France during World War II. It is a classic story illuminating the Western ethical notion of "good" versus "evil;" a harrowing account of how the people of Le Chambon risked their own lives on daily basis, over a period of four years to save the lives of total strangers (Jews fleeing the Nazi genocide), which they did for no apparent reason beyond their commitment to the general Christian commandment: "thou shalt do no harm." And its sister corollary, "thou shalt permit no harm to be done." Their driving ethic: Preserving life is good, taking life is evil. But as we who live in a world that swirls with debate around abortion and stem cell research, immigration and death penalty laws, wars and wars and wars...there is no clear prescription for protecting the sanctity of life....for promoting the good and eradicating the evil.

But Buddhism considers the terms "good" and "evil" to be relative. They are not absolute. Their interpretation is subject to situational factors and self-interests, both of which are ever-changing and personal, rather than constant and universal. And therefore, any moral code, based on the ideas of "good" and "evil," would likewise be relative and individual, rather than absolute and all-embracing. Further, Buddhism's concept of universal truth is not embodied in a moral imperative promoting good over evil behavior, such as "thou shalt not kill", but is rather realized and authenticated in one's own experience of not killing. Its ethical imperative therefore, is neither based on notions of good and evil, nor on a code of behavior dictated by a *moral* imperative.

Rather, it is a state of being, authenticated by simple experience, as that experience unfolds.

The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

Although Hallie's book is filled with good folks who risk their lives and livelihoods on a daily basis to live into their understanding of the commandment "love your neighbor as yourself," Magda Trocme is the one character for whom that commandment is truly a description of *being* rather than an imperative for moral behavior. And this is where I think we Christians can take a lesson from our Buddhist brothers and sisters.

Hallie describes Magda Trocme's ethics as horizontal. She follows no imperative from above. She has no expressed ethical principals or values beyond her impulse to respond to the needs of people as they stand at her door. She does not consider her actions to be practicing what she preaches or following the Commandments of God. She simply says, "I do not hunt around to find people to help. But I never close my door...When people come to my door, I feel responsible." (H pg.155) And her response to each knock, despite the implicit danger to herself and her family, is always, "naturally, come in, and come in."

In what seems like a reprehensible violation of loyalty and good judgement, Magda Trocme feeds the policemen who come to arrest her own husband. But, she says, "it was dinnertime," and, "we were all hungry." She responds to human needs rather than passing divine judgments. When asked to explain why the people of Le Chambon are such "good" souls, she asks in return, "How can you call us 'good'? We were doing what had to be done. Who else could help? And what has all this to do with goodness?...it is the most natural thing in the world to help these people." And all I can hear is Jesus responding to the rich young man who, in the tenth chapter of Mark, calls Jesus good. And Jesus says: "Good? Why do you call me good? I am not good. Only God is good."

And so, as the Buddhists say, morality is not a function of the good or evil cause or effect of one's actions, but rather the purity of the source of those actions. Ethical behavior is spontaneously compassionate behavior. It is responsive. It is not attached to dogma or doctrine. It is, I believe, the heart of the Good News in this morning's readings.

We are to love our neighbors as....we breathe. We do not think about our breathing. We do not weigh the pros and cons of our respiration. We inhale. We exhale. And we do it without a thought. It is pure experience. Our very breath is the Spirit that is the center of this morning's readings from 2 Kings and Galations. Even though one text is written in Hebrew, and the other is written in Greek, the word for Spirit is the same word for breath. *Ruach* in the Hebrew, and *pneuma* in Greek. Paul's pronouncement in Galations that we are to "live by the spirit!" can equally well be translated as "live by breathing" - well, you have to turn a noun into a gerund, but....

Breath is the quintessential symbol and sacrament for the life we are called to lead as Christians. It embodies both perfect order and the spontaneity of pure being....and we do it without thought or personal motivation. That is not to say that we breathe without mindfulness, another pillar of the Buddhist practice. We are aware of our breath, we are grateful for our breath, we are alive in our breath. But we do not weigh weather or not we should breathe. We do not hoard, we do not squander, we do not use our breath as currency for anything other than life.

And so, we are to let go of everything that holds us, binds us, keeps us from the spontaneity that is necessary for absolute accessibility and sensitivity to that which is in the service of life and the love that provides it.

The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

Onward!

Amen.