

## Lenten Sermon Series 1: The Jefferson Bible and Why He Wrote It

All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan

February 21, 2010

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### INVOCATION

We give thanks for this day, and its beauty and promise.

We give thanks for the light returning from darkness.

We give thanks for the blessings of family, friends, and the company of companions.

We give thanks for hands that hold ours when we are hurting, that hold up our bodies when we are weary, and soothe our spirits when we seek solace.

We give thanks for a day we did not create, and the hope that lies in every moment of trial and triumph.

We give thanks for having been given trust and love, to give trust and love back to the world, and from the gift of this day, build a greater life for all souls.

### CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this Chalice to remember a truth,

Consecrated through the ages by the service and sacrifice

Of individuals and communities:

There abides a unity and freedom of the Spirit,

Expressed through a love for all souls.

### *Readings*

*The Great End in Religious Instruction*, William Ellery Channing

The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth; not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs; not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions, but to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may be offered to their decision; not to burden the memory, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought; not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules, but to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment. In a word, the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish the spiritual life.

*Letter to Charles Thomson, January 9, 1816*, written by Thomas Jefferson

I have made a wee little book which I call the Philosophy of Jesus; it is paradigma of his doctrines, made by cutting the texts out of the book, and arranging them on the pages of a blank book, in a certain order of time or subject. A more beautiful or precious morsel of

ethics I have never seen; it is a document in proof that *I* am a *real Christian*, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus.

### *Sermon*

In your spiritual life which is primary? What you believe, what you say, or what you do? Belief, what you hold as being truth, is important. Hope, what you say is possible, is important. And Love, how you actually live your life, is important. But, which is primary? Faith, hope, or love?

Late last year I asked the church's Adult Education Board, responsible to the congregation for part of the adult education component of the church's spiritual growth, to give me a list of books that they thought all of us should read as part of our spiritual discipline during the Lenten season. The first one is this morning's book, *The Jefferson Bible*. You can pick up a flyer in the foyer after the service for a calendar of upcoming books. They all can be read on one week's time. And after each Sunday, in the meeting room down the central hallway, there will be a discussion of the book of the week led by someone from the Adult Education Board. For some, Lent is a time to give up things, but we are being challenged by our companions with taking up something, learning and education, and making that an intentional part of our spiritual discipline and growth.

And the Jefferson Bible is a good place to start. In the early 1800's, after his Presidency and when he had retired from most all of his public duties, Unitarian Thomas Jefferson turned his attention to study, seeking to understand more deeply the meaning of human life through education. All his life he pursued science, philosophy, and a study of politics and government, and as he turned his focus to spiritual pursuits he created his own curriculum of religion, and largely because "world religions" weren't a part of Western consciousness then, he focused on Christianity with a particular emphasis on the meaning of Jesus' life. He anticipated what would consume the study of scholars from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to our own day: What was the religion *of* Jesus? From his own demanding study, and his correspondence with fellow Unitarians John Adams, Joseph Priestley, and Benjamin Rush, Jefferson decided to compose his own version of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life. He cut and pasted parts of the New Testament into a book he called, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. He set side-by-side corresponding translations of the verses he choose - in English, French, Latin, and Greek - and composed his "wee little book."

But it is the parts that he left out that are as telling as the parts he put in. Jefferson, Unitarian as he was and a thinker of the Enlightenment out of which modern science arose, discarded all of the miracle stories, those depictions of Jesus' life that are, to modern scientific eyes, fantasy, fable, and legend. In the Jefferson Bible there is no account of Jesus walking on water. He doesn't command storms to cease or drive spirits into swine. There are no fantastic stories of Jesus' birth with angels heard on high, no stories of the youthful Jesus performing miracles, and no bodily resurrection, no suggestion that his molecules reassembled themselves following his death. The Christian Church declares that performing these miracles prove Jesus was more than just a man.

Many in the Christian Church of Jefferson's time declared him an atheist because he did not believe Jesus was a magician of the highest order! He would be declared no less in many Christian quarters today. To Jefferson, what was sublime about Jesus, what was beautiful beyond compare, weren't the fabulous feats the Church came to believe in and the afterlife hoped for, but the way he lived his life. Jesus' deeds, and not the creeds that later composed by the Church declaring Jesus God. To Jefferson, a religious man, the life and morals of Jesus of Nazareth, were summed up by Jesus' one commandment: "Love God and yours neighbor as yourself." Deeds, not creeds. The Love he gave away is greater than the faith or hope he possessed, even if we could determine with some assurance as to what that faith and hope were..

One 19<sup>th</sup> religious historian summed up the entirety of Christianity, and Judaism and Islam as well, in saying religion in the West can be divided up into those who insist what you believe and hope in is of supreme importance, and those who claim it is how you live that proves your life's spiritual value. Christianity itself can be divided into those who seek to make a religion *about* Jesus, those who measure the worth of any spiritual life by what is believed *about* Jesus or hoped *about* the afterlife his miracles assure; and those who pursue to understand and follow the religion *of* Jesus, translating the morals and ethics and understandings *of* his life into real life: "Love God and your neighbor as yourself."

You can see the vestiges of Unitarian Jefferson in our churches today with our emphasis on each individual developing his or her own beliefs, like writing your own Scripture, though our sources would include world religions which Jefferson's time would not. I have had so many conversations with ministers in Bible-based traditions, and their complaint that all I do, like Jefferson, is pick and choose the verses I like, making my religion the servant of my interests rather than truth itself. And that critique is, I think, valid to a certain extent, in that anyone who chooses what to believe in and hope for, can make their own preferences and needs into a god and become as intractable in their life philosophy as anyone. I've met Unitarians like that, who worship their own opinions, care not the hurt they inflict upon others, and make an orthodoxy out of their own beliefs.

But all persons are susceptible to that, worshipping rightness of belief, regardless of the particular belief. Even those who claim they believe in the Bible literally, pick and choose the Scriptural verses to believe in literally and live their life by. The Bible sees holding slaves as moral because all parts of it were written in slave cultures and during the time in human history when slavery was practiced and individual human rights were unrecognized. The Bible holds that the world is flat and that the earth is the center of the universe because it is not until millennia after its last books were created that modern science proved otherwise. So anyone who holds any beliefs derived from the Bible picks and chooses what verses uphold his belief, and what interpretations justify hers. Jefferson was just doing explicitly what all do implicitly; choosing what portions of life to put your faith in, what to hope for, and what portions to discard as unreliable and unworthy of ultimate allegiance.

To Jefferson miracles were discarded because they were an offense to reason and to the way science has studied and uncovered Nature's operations. Put your trust in reason. To Jefferson resurrection was a fable, a narrative whose meaning cannot be derived from declarations that God suspended science for the sake of His only begotten Son. Put your faith in studying Nature not believing that it can be superseded or need be suspended. To Jefferson the critical issue of Christianity was not what one believed about Jesus or hoped for by his resurrection, because the religion *about* Jesus came to worship Jesus at the expense of freedom. "*Almighty God hath made the mind free,*" wrote Jefferson. "*The God who gave us life gave us liberty.*" And his favorite, displayed most prominently in the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC: "*I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.*" To Jefferson, the crucial issue was to understand through the free use of reason, free inquiry, how Jesus lived to emulate that life. Love your neighbor as yourself.

When our 9<sup>th</sup> graders finish their year of exploring and studying in-depth our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition they will conduct a worship service in May, reading from Jefferson and being presented a Jefferson Bible. This is not happenstance, but a deeply symbolic gift. It is, finally, about the aim of all education, especially education that is religious in purpose. It symbolizes that here, education and spirituality for both children and adults, is "*to quicken and strengthen the power of [our] thought; not to impose religion in the form of arbitrary rules, but to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment.*" But this aim starts with education, and a particular kind of education taught with a particular perspective. Religious education needs to be about religion, both its study AND its practice. And understanding how we, as Unitarian Universalists, have understood religion, an understanding shaped by a whole historical tradition which passes on certain ultimate values and principles. And, understanding how we, as Unitarian Universalists gathered in a particular congregation, with particular forms and customs, practices this faith. Each person must seek to write their own Scriptures by choosing what will be inscribed on their hearts, and then shape their living towards those principles through worship and religious education. We are the tradition of deeds, not creeds, that while it matters what we believe, it matters more what we do and how we live. But it requires study; not ignoring or denying the Bible. It requires learning how the portions that support and strengthen loving deeds are better than any creeds. Our children and adults need to learn how to engage Christianity as Jefferson did and others of our forbears did, and then other world religions, Greek philosophy and modern science as extensions of our worldview. The Jefferson Bible is what our religious education experience needs hold as its center and *raison de etre*, and after 9<sup>th</sup> grade, to continue educating high school youth until they can display a reasoned and studied view of their beliefs when they deliver their first public declaration of faith in their high school senior sermons. Free religion aims to educate children until, like Jefferson, they can come to possess what is their beliefs, their "Life Scripture" as they enter adulthood. Children need to be taught how to use the mind and reason to keep humanity free; to read the Jefferson Bible as an instance, a paradigm, of the flowering of the liberated and cultivate spirit!

Yet, that is not all, either. There is a striving to the life of knowledge that has one more crucial element: The knowledge that our lives are incomplete, that *we can at best*

*approximate the principles we seek to live our lives by.* Jefferson's life reveals this too, though unintentionally and surely unrecognized by him. The love of God, echoed in the love we show our neighbor, includes the recognition that to be fully human is to love beyond our self-interest, beyond the beliefs we have come to as individuals, beyond the principles we say we live our life by. Because we always only approximate in our living the principles we hold in our believing. As finite creatures we do not fully walk the talk we espouse.

And here Jefferson's life is a model beyond the composing of his own Bible. The spiritual life is about discarding fable and legend, as Jefferson discarded fantastical stories of Jesus' body rising. But the spiritual life is about considering what Jesus' life meant as it was coming to its end.

Jefferson maintained the part of the Easter story where Jesus, having been tortured, crazy with suffering and exhaustion, having been the target of the hatred of the people and the betrayal by his friends and followers, asks God, "*Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.*" Jesus showed how to live by forgiveness. Love abides always when we shape our lives by the deepest expression of affection, forgiveness.

And this is as affection should be. Even beyond the principles and faiths we choose, our beliefs and creeds, and the declarations we make about what principles our lives are about, our hopes. Love, in the form of forgiveness, is valued above all. Jefferson penned the words, "all men are created equal" and "they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." But he could not live up to them. Those beautiful words containing a noble a principle recognizing what we call now the inherent worth and dignity of human being, the recognition that each individual possesses a value beyond what any belief or hope can ascribe; this recognition, that humanity is born into a Divine Affection, was as vaguely apprehended in the life of Jefferson as it is in our own day. For while this beautiful thought emerged in the free mind he so creatively cultivated, he held some men in chains and did not advocate an equality for women. We do not live in the perfections we imagine. To be fully human is to love beyond our self-interest, beyond beliefs we have come to as individuals, beyond the principles we say we live our life by. Yet, the fact of our humanity can be the ground of humility and the soil of forgiveness, and a faith and hope beyond all fear.

No one of us, not you or me or Thomas Jefferson, ever fully live up to the grand design of the principles we hold in our heart or the dreams we espouse from our mouths. No matter how true our principles, how devoted we are to them, how loudly we espouse them, like Jefferson we may hold the highest principles but we vaguely apprehend them in our living. And thus it can be said and held as true, that all are saved, not by belief or by hope, but by love in the acts of affection, generosity, and forgiveness we extend to others out of a recognition of our own finitude and limitations. The living and the dead deserve forgiveness no less than we do, and thereby are our lives shaped toward something larger than we are: God's Love. Study, not ignorance; reason, not superstition; and deeds, not creeds, in a life shaped towards a love for all souls.

AMEN.