

# The Language of Contempt

Given 2/6/22 by Robin Mitchell

As Livia said, I have given a lot of sermons here over the years, and she said that like it's a good thing, which it mostly is. Some of them I'm still proud of; others I think "That was a good statement of where I was at the time, even if I've grown since then"; a few of them I think "Well, they needed someone to fill the pulpit that Sunday, and by God I filled it!"

But there's one sermon that hasn't aged so well, that I cringe a little now every time I think of it out there on my website for anyone to read. It's a sermon I gave about ten years ago called "Because God Loves Stories", and it's about reading the Bible as a collection of stories about God. Overall, I'm still pretty happy with its thesis – that the best way to see the Bible is as a series of stories that track the Hebrew people's evolving ideas about the highest ideals and the greatest good they could imagine. But I was also trying to make the point that telling stories about something clarifies and improves your understanding of it, and so I got locked into the idea that the earlier stories were more morally primitive than the later ones. That may actually be a valid point, but I leaned into it way too hard, mentioning stories like Noah's flood or God drowning the Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea, and concluding that "the God of Genesis and Exodus looks like a psychopath to our modern eyes."

Now I've been feeling vaguely bad about that line for a long time, as I have studied more with the Methodists and learned gentler ways of reading these stories. In fact, I hope to do another sermon on exactly that topic one of these days, if I'm ever invited back to the pulpit after this one... But my unease got bumped up a level when I was reading Barbara Brown Taylor's book *Holy Envy* that I talked about in my last sermon. In it she told a story about a time when she was still serving as a Christian minister and publishing her sermons. At that time she had the default Christian attitude about first-century Judaism, that they were worshipping the right god but had become too obsessed with the letter of their religious law, and so she was using scornful phrases like "the burden of the law" or "the wisdom of the Pharisees" to describe the Judaism of Jesus's time.

But one day she got a letter from a Jewish reader that said "I see you're still using the language of contempt" and it struck her to the heart. She realized that that was exactly what she had been doing, without really meaning to, and she began to make a conscious effort to change the way she thought and talked about Judaism. It wasn't "less than", it hadn't necessarily needed reform, and if it did it was capable of doing it by itself without Big Brother Christianity needing to step in.

And when I read that it struck me to the heart as well, because I realized that was exactly what I had done – I had used the language of contempt to describe stories from another religion. And this was really hard for me to take in, because my whole shtick here is that I'm the ecumenical one, the person who practices Buddhism and Christianity and UU-ism and loves all the other religions she doesn't have time to actually practice. And yet here I had used the language of contempt, not just in casual speech but in a prepared sermon that I had thought about and edited and revised over and over again.

So I sat down to think about how I'd gotten there. And the first thing I realized is that this is what happens when I start doing "motivated reasoning," when I've already decided what story I'm trying to tell and so I want everything to fit it. I wanted to show that the Jewish people's stories about God

improved over time, that telling their stories out loud made them look at them and see where they didn't live up to their highest ideals, and so I needed the early stories to be particularly bad and so that's how I told them. So that's lesson number one – the more I want to tell a story, the more I need to look critically at my supporting evidence. It's so easy to be blinded by our desire to prove a point, especially in the heat of an argument, but it's the quest for truth that's supposed to be our sacrament, not the quest for winning arguments. I need to keep our Fellowship covenant in my heart all the time, not just when I ritually recite it on Sunday mornings.

But beyond that general rule, I was looking for something specific about respecting people who aren't my clan. And I came back to Barbara Brown Taylor, to the three rules she listed in her book that I quoted in my last sermon:

1. When trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.
2. Don't compare your best to their worst.
3. Leave room for holy envy.

My last sermon was all about that last rule, but I think they're all helpful when trying to look with respect at people who are different from us, whether religiously or politically or whatever. And I think they each have both a narrow and a wider application, and taking the wider view can really stretch us towards respecting people we differ with.

So the narrow version of the first rule is pretty obvious – don't get your ideas about Christianity from militant atheists like Richard Dawkins, or your ideas about Islam from islamophobes like Tucker Carlson or Michael Flynn. It sometimes takes some discipline, when the person is being witty or cutting and you love hearing what they say, but resist the temptation. That alleged Dorothy Parker quote about "If you can't say something good about someone, sit right here by me!" is fun, but doesn't really match any of our Seven Principles.

And in a wider sense, be wary of getting your information from well-meaning outsiders. The ideas Barbara Brown Taylor and I got about Judaism came from well-meaning Christians who never would have called themselves enemies. If you want to know about the Bible, read liberal Jewish or Christian authors who speak out of a deep love of their traditions instead of well-meaning UUs who don't have that connection. And the same is true for other religions, or other political persuasions – if you want to get a handle on conservative political thought, read some sane conservative writers instead of letting Jon Stewart or Rachel Maddow tell you how stupid they all are.

The second rule – "Don't compare your best to their worst" – is where I think the real work of respect can happen. On the surface it means not comparing the UUs in the civil-rights marches of the 60's to the people of other religions flying airliners into office buildings or burning women's clinics, which again, sometimes takes some discipline but isn't hard to understand. But at a deeper level, it means working to see that other people, who see the world differently than you do, strive for high ideals just as much as you do.

And not making that effort is where I went fatally wrong in my sermon. To say that the God of Genesis and Exodus looks like a psychopath is to say that the people who worship that God today are worshipping a psychopathic ideal. I couldn't possibly have gotten to that sentence if I had started by

seeing that Jews today are at least as spiritually mature and morally aware as I am, and if they're worshipping the God of Genesis then maybe there are better, wiser ways of reading those stories.

And it isn't just me - I can't tell you how many times I've come here and heard people say, either from the pulpit or in the coffee hour, that we come here to courageously seek the truth but people from those other religions just want to be told comforting lies. Or that we are always questioning our beliefs, but the first rule of those dogmatic religions is "shut up and don't ask questions." This is the language of profound contempt, and using it weakens everything we claim to stand for. It certainly isn't true - I came to Christianity and Buddhism as an adult when I started reading their stories and saw how deeply challenging they were; trying to craft a life that lived up to them seemed like a nobler calling than anything I had seen up till then. The only thing comforting about their ideals is the idea that we wouldn't be called to them if we weren't capable of achieving them; that deep within us is something greater than we can imagine, but that's a kind of wild, unsettling comfort that deserves to be admired, not condescended to. And the actual Christian and Buddhist communities I belong to are all about asking questions - it's one of our favorite things to do! - and it's encouraged and modeled from the leaders on down.

Or the number of times I've heard, from the pulpit and the pews and sometimes from my own mouth, that it's a shame that working-class voters get tricked into voting Republican against their own economic interests. Now I've been doing my own taxes for decades now, and when I look at the inheritance and capital-gains taxes I've paid I'm pretty sure that voting Republican would have been in my immediate interest for most of those years. And looking at our demographics makes me certain I'm not the only one here. So are we all just too stupid to see where our economic interests lie? Of course not; we can see them, but we have progressive values that are more important and that's what guides our votes. But somehow we can't see that other people might be the same; that they might care about their vision of a just and good society as much as we care about ours.

So this business of not comparing our best selves to our imagination of other people's worst selves is a profound discipline; I think it gets close to the heart of our religious purpose. Karen Armstrong said that the one thing all the great religions have in common is overcoming the idea that we and our egos are at the center of the universe, and taking other people seriously, trying to respect them as much as we respect ourselves, is part of that discipline. When someone asked Jesus for the most important commandments, he said they were to love God with all your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. And respecting your neighbor the same way you respect yourself means seeing that she too might be giving her heart, soul, mind and strength to her ideals just as you are.

Of course, taking people seriously doesn't mean agreeing with them; seeing that they might have genuine values different from ours doesn't mean they're good values. If we see someone voting for a white supremacist, thinking that they may actually be voting their values isn't really a compliment. There is real darkness in the world, in other people's souls as well as in ours, and holding people accountable for their values is a necessary sign of respect for them as moral actors, good or bad.

And that third rule - leave room for holy envy. My last sermon was all about applying it to religion, about the beautiful things you can see in other faiths when you look at their best instead of their worst. Like the other two rules, it isn't easy; it takes a lot of honesty and openness to look at another religion

and see things you wish yours had, to acknowledge a flash of foreign grace or beauty with a wistful smile.

That part does come at least somewhat naturally to me, but it's a lot harder for me to see good and admirable things across the political aisle these days. But I can start with things that are easier to acknowledge, that don't raise my defenses – I think of people like Liz Cheney or Mitt Romney standing up for the Republican party they believe in against a rising tide of authoritarianism and contempt for our institutions. Or C. Everett Koop, President Reagan's Surgeon General, who infuriated the administration by going against his own conservative religious beliefs and telling the medical truth about AIDS and abortion. I envy their courage, and I wonder if I could take stands that cut me off from my liberal, progressive friends if I felt I needed to.

And when I find myself reading conservative philosophers or historians or commentators, I try to keep my eye open for that flash of holy envy when they talk about things that I sometimes wonder if I'm missing. Respect for tradition, personal responsibility, pride in my country – are these things that I really wish I could embrace, that I could bring to my quest for a just and equitable society?

So these three rules are a lot harder than they sound at first. But I'm trying to follow them in my life now because I really don't want to fall into the language of contempt, or even of condescension, again. I certainly don't want to find myself up here again apologizing for another sermon; that was a wakeup call! But more immediately, I do it so I can sing the words of our gathering hymn with a clear voice:

This is my home, the country where my heart is,  
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;  
But other hearts in other lands are beating  
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

To really see people of other religious or political lands that way, to really believe that their hopes and dreams are as true and high as mine – that takes the language of love and respect. That's the language we need to live out our First Principle – recognizing and celebrating the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And it's a more loving language than I have sometimes been using.

So hold me accountable for the language I use. Hold yourselves accountable; hold each other accountable. Let us all try to speak with the language of love and respect, and to maybe be silent and listen in the moments when we find ourselves incapable of it. It will bring more peace and relief than we can perhaps imagine to a world deafened from all sides by the ever-present language of contempt. Let us be the good word the world so needs.

Amen, namaste, and may that be so.