

What are You Attached To?

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The 19th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23, Year B
October 11, 2009

In our Thursday Morning Study, we are doing a comparative religions course. Each week, we look at a different faith tradition and then compare it to Christianity. Eventually we will explore and discuss different or lesser known Christian traditions as well. So far, we have looked at Hinduism and then, this past week, at Buddhism.

Buddhism is different from our faith tradition many ways—and shares some things in common. Buddhists do not worship God or gods, but neither do they worship The Buddha, a man who lived in sixth century BCE who reached what is called enlightenment. He is revered and to be listened to, but he is not a god. The Buddha is the one who arrived at and taught what is called the Four Noble Truths: (1) life is characterized by suffering; (2) suffering is caused by our desires and attachments; (3) we can overcome our desires and attachments; (4) the way to overcome these is by following the noble eightfold path.

Attachments, per the Buddha, are the cause of our suffering because in craving permanence in this impermanent world, we attached ourselves to things that are not permanent—including the concept of a personal self or soul. And while I do not agree with the totality of the Buddhist concept of suffering and attachments, I think it is important to acknowledge that some attachments can cause us unnecessary pain indeed.

The man who came to Jesus in today's gospel seeking the way to eternal life knows about the pain of attachments. He is not an immoral or bad person; he has tried to live a faithful Jewish life, keeping the commandments, probably offering the appropriate sacrifices and tithes at the

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temple. And yet, at some level, he knows that there is something more, for he comes to Jesus, seeking that which perhaps he is lacking. He is looking for the secret, for the final piece of the puzzle. The problem is that when Jesus gives it to him, he doesn't like the picture it presents.

You see, Jesus tells the wealthy man that he lacks only one thing: freedom from his attachment to his possessions. He encourages the man to sell it all, give it away, and then come to follow him. For you cannot focus on following Jesus if you are always looking backward at what you left behind—and you cannot put God first if you have already put your wealth ahead of God in your priorities. So this advice from Jesus causes the man much grief and pain, not only because it would mean a complete lifestyle change but because it blew apart his world view—and perhaps even his sense of self.

In first century Jewish thinking, wealth was seen as an indicator of God's favor. Even the disciples fall into that mindset, for they are astonished when Jesus tells them that how hard it is for those with wealth to enter the kingdom of God. So to tell someone to give away all those wonderful goodies you assume God blessed you with because of your goodness is to convey, in a backdoor kind of way, that your wealth is not a sign of being particularly special or beloved of God. What the man may have heard underneath Jesus' direct request to be free, generous and trusting of God's providence is that his material 'blessings', such as they are, are in fact standing between him and eternal life—not a sign that he is on the right path. He may very well be too attached to his wealth, wealth that brings him comfort and perhaps power; but even more than that, he may be attached to the notion that his wealth is the basis for his self-worth, his very

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identity. The combination of those is tough things to swallow, and too big for the man to handle all at once. So he goes away, grieving.

Now the Buddha would say that this man's problem is that he has attachments, period, not just an attachment to his possessions. However, Jesus presents a different view; the problem is not having attachments, but that the man's first and primary attachment should be to God. For despite keeping the Torah law, the man's priority is not God, but himself. His grief at getting rid of his possessions is telling enough, but even beyond this, pay attention to the way the man's initial question to Jesus is phrased: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The focus is on his action, on something he can control in order to receive that which he wants. In other words, if I do x and y , God has to deliver z . Eternal life is something that is due because of who he is or what he has done—and not dependent on God's grace and mercy.

We tend to come up against the same problems as the man in our gospel story. First, we sometimes look at grace as something to be earned, perhaps subconsciously thinking that somewhere God is keeping that big old ledger in the sky of our good and bad deeds. This way of thinking places us not only closer to Hindu or Buddhist thought (where we accumulate good and bad karma to determine where we land in the next life), but places us further away from the Christian principle that grace, salvation, is something that is a gift to be received, not a commodity to be earned. Certainly, we are called to lives of love, compassion, forgiveness and justice—but that should come out of our Christian identity, our grateful relationship with our loving God, not because it will get us something in return. Such a thought process is tainted with

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fear, with a concern for control—and is far removed from the relationship of trust that God asks of us.

Second, we, like the man in the story, develop all sorts of unhealthy attachments in our lives too. Our possessions, especially in 21st century America, are key—and if you doubt me, just check yourself the next time you are asked to give of your resources to an organization, to a person in need, even the church. There often is that little bit of inner struggle—how much to give? If I give something, will I have enough left to cover the bills? What if give something and then something unexpected happens? What will I do then? Behind all those questions is our niggling doubt that God really has our backs, that we can rely on God's abundance. But even beyond our possession and resources, we can attach ourselves and our worth to things and/or people other than God in Christ—our jobs, our status or reputation, a hobby or sport, an addiction, even our spouses or families. Now, it is not wrong to form attachments to those important people in our lives—they are gifts from God, and cherished ones at that. But if our relationship with others eclipses that of our relationship with God, then our priorities are not in line. This can sound harsh to our ears, and in fact, it sounded harsh to the disciples' ears as well. But Jesus doesn't ask us to love our families and friends any less—but just to love God first.

And that is perhaps the most missed part in this whole passage—the love. For Jesus looked at the man who sought him out, and 'loved him'. Jesus loved him even though he knew what he was lacking, and that he was trapped by his attachment to his possessions and the mindset that went with them. For we do not have to be perfect for God to love us and forgive us—we merely

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have to be. We are loved before we draw our first breath, and are loved beyond the grave—even if we choose not to accept that or live that out. God, I believe, grieves our rejection of God’s grace, but God also loves enough to give us the freedom to make that choice; for true love can only be freely given and freely accepted.

And that is where the Buddha and I don’t see eye to eye. For not all of our attachments are a source of suffering, for not all are impermanent; God’s being and love and grace truly are permanent, and worthy of our attachment and the source of our joy. May we always keep ourselves attached to that source of our being, and live fully, even into eternal life.

Amen.