

Service  
Easter Sunday, March 23, 2008  
Third Unitarian Church of Chicago

### **Opening Words**

The great thinker on mysticism Simone Weil once said, “Every time I think of the crucifixion of Christ, I commit the sin of envy.” Are *you* envious this morning of *that kind* of sacrifice? On Easter we are supposed to celebrate the victory of eternal love after it has been martyred on earth. But instead of love crucified, what if today we ask, “Is love crucifying? And--is unmerited suffering ever really redeemed?”

### **Opening Hymn #1053, *How Could Anyone***

#### **The Covenant**

Love is the spirit of this Church, and service is its law.  
This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace,  
to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

#### **Musical Response**

From all that dwell below the skies, let words of love and  
peace arise. Let songs of joy and praise be sung, through  
every land, by every tongue.

#### **“Time for All Ages” with Christina Leone**

#### **Singing the Children to the Classrooms**

Go now in peace, go now in peace,  
May the spirit of love surround you,  
Everywhere, everywhere, you may go.

### **Reading**

“I can no more disown him—that “him” being the Reverend Jeremiah Wright—“than I can disown my white grandmother,” he said, “a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.”

### **Spoken Meditation**

This excerpt, taken from Senator Obama’s speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia this past Tuesday, is yet another indication of why this election for the Presidency is particularly unique in our history: a commingling of competing, and even internally contradicting, perspectives on race, privilege, gender, and war have come to us with the campaigns of candidates McCain, Clinton, and Obama. This is not the place, or the time, nor is it appropriate for me or anyone else to rely on the presumed influence of the pulpit to endorse a candidate. And I won’t do it.

However, it is a watershed moment in our history when a viable candidate for the highest elected office in the land is able to speak frankly about racial stereotypes, about how pernicious they are, and about we use them to protect ourselves. We're used to candidates speaking in broad, non-specific platitudes. And this week, whether you agree with him, will vote for him, or not, one man did the opposite.

In the sermon later today I'll ask the question, "is love crucifying," and on Tuesday, Mr. Obama gave several examples of how he has been hurt, and deeply so, by people whom he loves and admires: his grandmother and his minister. Comedy writers said last week that Governor Spitzer practically wrote the material for late-night talk shows all by himself. And in a way, I am obliged to Senator Obama this morning, since he has given expression to much that I have felt, but cannot know as he does, since I have come to the West Side.

There are of course many who would say that in distancing himself from his pastor's comments critical of the government, and of white culture, the Senator hurt the Reverend Wright in return. With all the nuances aside, in the end they say he threw his preacher under a bus. How could Obama do that? they asked.

After all, didn't he join Trinity Church to build up his bona fides on the South Side? And if he was so uncomfortable after those incendiary sermons, given years ago, why didn't he convince Michelle to just take the girls and go somewhere else less provocative?

Maybe that's because the message might not have been all that different in the other churches they'd prefer. Prophetic messaging from black pulpits has been happening since the Civil Rights Era, if not before, and not only that, think of the symbolic meaning of Trinity UCC church—the biggest congregation, a mostly *black* one—of a mostly *white* denomination. Trinity has shown that you can still speak the truth about racism as you see it, *and* engage constructively and lovingly with whites, and I believe Jeremiah Wright has done exactly this.

But to be fair, the Senator also pointed out to the millions of whites who have not and will never spend time in the black community, that “for the [black] men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away, nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends, but it does find voice in the barbershop or the beauty shop or around the kitchen table.”

There are plenty of reasons why 11 a.m. Sunday is still the most segregated hour of the week; plenty of reasons why I get stares when I walk into a barbershop on the West Side when I'm looking for a buzz cut that would cost a barber all of five minutes, and cost me ten bucks. Both of these realities hurt me, and maybe you as well, but as much as they hurt, and as much as they may never change in my lifetime, I want to confront them. I think folk of any color, who sincerely wish for peace and justice, want to do the same.

What do I mean? I don't want to be oppressed by stereotypes held by blacks in Austin about whites, that's easy, but now that I've been here for five years, I can see why they exist. I look like the folks who buy their drugs here on their way back to Naperville, or the sergeant at the police station on Madison. Similarly, I don't want to be the oppressor of anyone in the neighborhood, either, and that's much harder, because I benefit in America by being white.

I am sorry that the Senator was pressured to distance himself from his minister's preaching, because it smacks of white fear. Does the name Louis Farrakhan, called out during the candidacies of Harold Washington and Jesse Jackson, Sr., sound familiar? Meanwhile, the ministers of President Bush the son and the father? No one knows what they've ever said, or even who they are.

And that's the point. They were selected because they are within a mainstream of conservative Christian thought.

Senator Obama looked to me like a man caught in the middle, as he has been all his life, torn by people he cares about in a discussion on race. Maybe the time is coming when people like his white grandmother in Kansas, and my aunt in Maine, can talk face to face with the folk on South Wabash who feel like Jeremiah Wright has felt. "How long? Not long." Because maybe the populace, in Idaho and Mississippi, is beginning to grasp that whites and blacks can talk about fear and resentments in our past, and that it need not result in a race war.

Or maybe Tuesday showed that time is already here. And maybe that's one reason for the existence of this congregation, in this divided city, on this corner where we strive, as imperfectly as any human enterprise, to work for reconciliation and understanding—the Lord's own work.

**Musical Meditation:** *Here's One*

### **Offering Thoughts**

It's lovely to see you on this Easter Sunday, early this year, when we haven't quite escaped the grasp of winter, and, as we sing our closing hymn after the sermon—*Lo, The Earth Awakes Again*—it will be like a prayer of hope; a statement of faith about things unseen. If you are a newcomer this morning, I invite you to introduce yourselves as you would like, and tell us how you found us.

One Easter Sunday at the church I served in Wisconsin, a family of newcomers walked in the front door. After they were greeted, the son saw some lilies in the entryway. He turned to his mother and said, “You told me this place was different from the Methodist church! Doesn't look like it!” I talked to him after the service. He said it a lot like the old place, but one interesting thing was that Unitarians hid the cross. Or was that, his older brother asked, what the collection was for—to get a new one?

We use the collection to support the ministries of this congregation, just the way most other religious bodies do it—to decry injustice, and to bring good works and a message of hope to our sisters and brothers in the world.

**Offertory:** *Were You There?*

**Sermon Hymn #265,** *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*

**Reading:**

This is an excerpt from Bart Ehrman's recent book, *God's Problem*, where he comments on the sacrifice, relating it to human suffering, of Jesus on the cross, and of its meaning as instructions for living Christians. Dr. Ehrman writes,

“And what do we see when we look to Jesus? We see one who spent his entire life, and went to his death, in self-giving love. This was not a love that expected anything in return. This was a love that was costly. It cost Jesus everything while he was living, and at the end it cost him his life. [He] paid the ultimate price for his love...this is what Jesus did, and in doing it, he showed us the true character of God. God is one who suffers with us. His power is made manifest in suffering. His character is shown when his followers give of themselves for others, even unto death.”

**Sermon:**

“Is Love Really Crucifying?”

This sermon is a meditation on a quote that ends a piece written by the Reverend David Rankin, which I've quoted before. It's entitled, “Popularity.” Dr. Rankin is attempting to define what an authentic church is, and is not, when he says,

“Our worship is not an entertainment.

Our congregation is not an audience.

Our music is not a concert performance.

Our preaching is not a trivial comfort.

Our theology is not a marketing strategy.

Our counseling is not a promise of prosperity.”

And so on. He concludes that “it is probably better to be disliked, offensive, and scandalous, for no vision is worthwhile without the risk of rebuke. Every truth is born out of painful criticism. Love, itself, is crucifying.”

I read it first at a board meeting. It elicited a thoughtful silence, and then, after the meeting, over e-mail, some comment, such as “Hey, that’s pretty good, and, “It’s better than other stuff you’ve written,” even though I didn’t write it—although it took me a week to admit that fact!

I used it again in a service, me, who seems so concerned about marketing strategies. If this is the role of the authentic church, taking on the prophetic role regardless of the cost, am I, you might ask, contradicting myself with this reading?

No, I respond, because we have to tell people what we do, those who are inclined to overlook us, to increase our capacity to do good works; to walk the talk.

Let us never confuse Mayfield with Madison Avenue in New York, but--a little publicity can only help us.

Everyone who thinks they know, but who's never been, to TUC—what would conceptions would they have of us if they saw the Al Green service on “You Tube,” other than to make Alex Matthews, Roz Byrne, Bebe Simon and the “Queen of Soul” Ms. Wilson famous for their dancing?

But three listeners who heard that quote were more concerned about the last line: “love, itself, is crucifying.” Since then, they and I have been in a dialogue about the way love wounds us, as much as building us up.

And so this sermon is *not* about the authentic church today—unless you think it is the role of the church to explain what suffering is, where it comes from, what it does to us, and what you do with it.

“Love, itself, is crucifying.” If this sermon was a survey, I could give examples from the cycle of life. Check them off, and add faces for: the ailing mother who picked out your dress and tights when you were a little girl, dressing for Easter Sunday, whom you turned to for advice and babysitting when your own children were sick, and who, after her stroke, resented being placed in a nursing home, and was bitter even unto her last days.

Or the little brother you protected from neighborhood bullies, whose nose you used to wipe as you walked to the bus, who now won't talk to you because you won't give him money, again, for another hair brained investment scheme.

On it goes, usually with you as the victim. Two schools of thought: that people don't change very much after age five, or--life turns them into someone other than who they once were. Either way, I bet just about everyone feels like they've been blamed for lots, for no good reason. Isn't just as true that we've done the same thing to the people we love *in reverse*?

Be patient and long suffering, the Good Book says. Proof of Jesus's divinity, in the familiar view, is that he preaches acceptance for wrongdoers: for the prodigal son, and for the wayward woman Mary Magdalene.

*Of course* love is crucifying. Any fourteen year-old with an unrequited crush would tell you that! I *still* get text messages from former students complaining about their peers—got two when planning this sermon--and romances ending badly is one reason for the existence of the American high school system—so that we get experience in it!

So love hurts? What else is new? Thinking theologically—which is what ministers get paid *almost* a living wage to do—the larger question is, what’s the point of *any* suffering? Is *any* of it, whether you’ve earned it or not, worth it?

Please don’t hold it against me if I’m stuck on the mood of Good Friday at the moment: with the Lord pulled off the cross, his mother a weeping witness to the execution, and that I’m *less concerned* about the good news of Easter, when Jesus the risen Christ appears, miraculously, to his followers, and all is supposedly made new again.

The Lord isn’t lacking for followers today. Even the indifferent, who remember they’re Christian on Easter and Christmas, from Willow Creek to China, believe their sins are being washed away at communion—but for two thousand years, the aggregate sum of sin never seems to go away.

And it doesn’t. We learned this week that the only reason, other than his being an enemy of Wall Street, that Governor Spitzer got in the FBI’s radar was the amount of money changing hands, his being a public figure and all.

I don’t believe that rationale for a second, but what I *do* believe is that prostitution is *so* widespread it would take forever to corral it. Just look at the arrest numbers on the CAPS Beat #1512 report every month!

Moral weakness is as real as ever, mine and yours. And these failings float on a sea of unending misery. With prostitution, it's the suffering of numberless women, trapped and sold across borders like slaves, for someone else's enjoyment. Their ranks filled from the waves of the world's poor, who struggle without adequate food, education, or hope for work, destined to die wretched deaths of disease. Or the hundreds of millions, just since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, who have been murdered, being blameless victims of war and genocide.

And after every such event, as Bart Ehrman reminds us, the tendency is to say no more pointless, man-made torment: after Auschwitz, *never again*; after Pol Pot, *never again!* The same after Bosnia, and in Central Africa: *we'll stop it there!* There is a metaphysical line in the minds of decent people, and every time there's a Darfur, it gets erased.

I want a world where the line on suffering like this *can* be drawn. If not, what's the ultimate point of our work on social justice? I have news for the church triumphant this Easter: most of the world's suffering redeems or helps no one!

The prevailing Christian view is that we celebrate victory over death on Easter; that we identify with God who became flesh and endured the weakness of flesh, just like ours. It's a moving image, and it resonates even with non-believers.

Mother Theresa, the saint of the Calcutta slums, said, "Without our suffering, our work would just be social work, very good and helpful, but it would not [be] part of the Redemption. And we must share it, for only by being one with them can we redeem them by bringing God into their lives and bringing them to God."

It's a beautiful, perhaps even transcendent idea of service. An original teaching of the church, you say? No--Bart Ehrman reminds us that the idea that Jesus, the suffering God and man, isn't seen in the books written by his earliest witnesses—in other words, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. You don't even see it in Jesus's *own* words!

The idea that God suffers as we do is a *theological* idea, a powerful, inspirational one, but at the end of the day, it's *made up* by the early fathers of the church.

It's *God* who's responsible for most of the suffering in the Bible: God Who uses it to discipline the wayward Israelites, or to prevent it to save his chosen people!

And so--what kind of God either caused, or failed to stop, Buchenwald? Was it because we, or millions of otherwise innocent Jews and others in Eastern Europe, many of them *already* poor, outcasts, and yet still faithful, just *didn't get* the message?

But let's not blame God. Look at us. I agree with the Reverend Wright about the sins of our government. As Paul Berman says today in the *New York Times*, "In regard to the despotic Saddam Hussein, our government has lent him support (Mr. Reagan), conducted a limited war against him (the first President Bush), inflicted sanctions and bombings (that's Mr. Clinton) and crudely overthrown him [by you know who]." Every one of those policies," he says, "has left the Iraqi people worse off than before."

And we *wonder* why extremist Islam grows stronger by the minute!

"Our preaching is not a trivial comfort." And the church is no escape from reality. **But just as there is suffering, there is the overcoming of it.**

There are people, some of them sitting right here, who do wonderful things without expecting *anything* in return: just through acts of kindness, make someone else feel life is bearable. Or, those among us who fight the good fight, and *actually have* made the world more just.

And so Good Friday ends. This is Easter. No time for dirges. Time for anthems.

A friend who teaches in Atlanta has had *one hell of a year*: a house lost in fire; a child lost to drug addiction; a lung lost to disease. Her parents, still rootless, washed out of New Orleans by Katrina. And yet she writes, “The world is absolutely mad, pointlessly cruel, and--*yet all I’ve seen this year* is kindness that makes me cry.”

That’s in part because she is helped, every week, by an elderly Jewish couple who brings her to the hospital and runs errands for her when she can’t get out of bed. The couple does this for countless others, and why? Because some kind soul did it for *their* son when he had cancer, and beat it.

Always there is suffering, **and the overcoming of it**. The horror of the Holocaust led in part to the creation of Israel, and so that ancient people can return to a homeland. Closer to home, the shootings at NIU have led to stronger relationships among neighbors in DeKalb, and have built strength at our sister church there. Someone there told me last week, “I didn’t think we had this in us.” What’s that, I said. “To really be a church that takes care of each other,” she said.

Someone said last week that America is an experiment in science fiction. We're constantly imagining what would make the world a more livable place—and when we can't make it happen, we dream of alternative realities. This is also, she said, the job of religion. *Why else* would you sing a hymn, or read the Bible, if not to see the world as it could be, or the world to come?

The world is insane. I hate it, and I love, and I can't imagine being anywhere else. So love is crucified, and among humans it is crucifying—what else is new? I want an idea of God, a God of more love, and less war, that really puts a *dent* in the realm of man-made suffering.

And I want a love, and religion, that expects something of me, makes me better than I am right now.

Easter means, “stuff happens,” and so does rebirth: that we can become something new, at a cost. Real love is crucifying, but also edifying; it is suffering won over, in love.

**Closing Hymn: #61, *Lo, the Earth Awakes Again***

**Closing Words**

“Change, then, mourning into praise/ And, for dirges, anthems raise.” Of course we can improve the fate of humanity! What else is tomorrow for?