

Jesus, The Lover of Human Nature

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II. In Series of Sermons on the Religion of Jesus and its Relation to the Religions Ideals of Modern Life

In speaking last Sunday of the Religion of Jesus from the point of view of Jesus as a man, and its relation to the Religious Ideals of Modern Life, I tried to point out the fact [that] Jesus is in close sympathy with one of the great ideals of today, that to Jesus the voice of nature spoke, telling him of the power and manifestations of God in the world. I based this statement upon the evidences found in his reported sayings, wherein he uses the symbolism of nature in teaching the truths of life, because those truths had come to him as nature spoke to him. Again I found evidence of this keen sympathetic love for nature which Jesus had by the fact that in the mountains, in the fields, and by the Sea of Galilea he did the most of his teaching. Furthermore that in the great critical moments of his life he went apart to commune with God, not in the temple, not at the alter, but upon the mountainside and in the Garden of Gethsemane. All these I regarded as evidences of the fact [that] nature was a source of truth and a foundation for Jesus' Religious faith. In this respect he is peculiarly related to the spirit of modern life, which by its scientific and its poetic, not to say religious, interest in nature, believes profoundly that nature speaks to us.

But in this love and sympathy for nature which Jesus manifested, there is something of vitality and activity which we need in many quarters today to give body and worth to the love of nature. That power which is present in Jesus' message from nature to man is this, that every word from nature points towards man. Every truth which nature speaks has its application in the life of man. Every hour of communion with God in nature is for the purpose of gaining new strength, new power, new courage, new truth,

which one may carry into human life. The hand of nature points towards man. We are led to ask then, what is the attitude of the Religion of Jesus towards man? God speaks to him in nature, does he also speak to him in man? If God does speak to him in man, does that have any relation to the religious ideals of our own times?

We say reason to believe that the first of the three fundamental ideas of Emerson, that nature speaks to us, is especially characteristic of our life, that Emerson had really touched one of the life-giving springs, at which the man of today, thirsty and worn by toil, may come to quench his thirst. The second of the underlying ideas of Emerson's conception of life is this, that "Freedom speaks in us."¹

No one will deny that this idea that freedom speaks in us is characteristic of an American life. When we recall the history of our country, and its beginnings, this is the one great undercurrent that has born us on since first the Pilgrims, for freedom's sake, left the home of their birth and found their way to these bleak New England shores, up to this very day, when men are still chaffing under the restraints of old-time authority. For religious freedom the Pilgrims came. For political freedom we fought the great war of independence. For the freedom of another race, and the defense of a Government of the people, for the people and by the people, no less than three hundred thousand men gave up their lives in the civil war. That men might free themselves from the bondage of ignorance and the degrading ties of slavery to conditions, we have established our great educational institutions, and are pushing with all power of our might, the work of clearing away still more [of] the limitations of life which hold men enthralled within the operation of mere natural laws. That men might be freed from the superstitious domination of an authority in their religious life, they have become martyrs, they have denied the authority of the church, they have denied the authority of the Bible, they are denying the authority of the Christ of theology, and have relied upon their own

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) important American writer, leader of the transcendentalist movement. This does not appear to be a direct quote from Emerson. But Emerson did speak frequently of the importance of freedom.

individual experiences, supplemented and confirmed by the experience of the past. Beneath all the complexities of this great nation of ours, this idea that freedom speaks in us, is the solid foundation upon which we rest. As we face the stern duty of casting off the outworn institutions of the past, this is the one great question which must be faced and answered. Do you believe in human nature? Do you believe in human freedom? Do you believe that man is anything greater than the amoeba from which he has evolved? Do you think that anything has been accomplished in this great process of evolution?

I do.

You ask me how I can believe, or how we can believe in human freedom as they do, when you can present to me the astounding evidence of science that we live not in a world of freedom, but in a world of absolute and uncompromising law. The voice of nature speaks to us of law, of order, of power, pervading so far as our unceasing investigations can show us the inmost limits of the universe, that we know to be true. But the voice of man speaks to us of freedom, not freedom from the law, but freedom under the law, freedom to use, and control, and make subservient to his needs the forces and forms which conform to the laws under which he finds his freedom. Resting upon this faith that the voice of man speaks not only of law, and order, but of freedom under the laws of truth goodness and beauty, man has transformed the forests of the field into this place of dwelling, he has taken the rocks of the earth and made it into a temple for his God, he has taken the lightening from the clouds and brought it under his control to serve his needs, to minister to his ever-increasing wants. The wild and uncontrollable master which he finds in fire, he has now made his humble and obedient servant. Beneath every activity of human life, there comes this voice of man proclaiming his mighty power of freedom under the law to subjugate and direct the great forces of the universe.

But more than that even, almost every activity speaks of the power of moral freedom, that there are laws of right conduct, laws which should govern our daily life, that man has a power to choose between the lower and higher, that man is morally responsible for his conduct, and if he does

wrong he is amendable. Upon this fundamental faith all history rests. Upon this faith, every act of our life which distinguishes us from the animal, rests. Never before did a people place so much emphasis upon the moral responsibility of conduct as today. The faith that we are morally responsible for our conduct is only another way of saying that freedom speaks in us.

The stone speaks to us of power and law; the tree speaks to us of power and law, and growing life; the animal speaks to us of power, and law, and growing life, and activity, touched by the mysterious power of mind; but man speaks of all these, power, absolute law, and growing life and activity, touched by the greatness of a reasoning mind, and over and above them all it sounds the clarion cry for freedom under the law. This is the ultimate basis upon which the whole fabric of our free nation rests. As such it is one of the great ideals not only of our political, but also of our religious world today.

But why do we believe in freedom, in the supremacy, and the intrinsic worth of the individual today? Why is it that within the last one hundred and 50 years, we have advanced from Edwards'² conception of the total depravity of man, up through Channing's³ conception of the Dignity of man and Parker's⁴ conception of the nobility of man to Emerson's conception of the Divinity of man, in whom the voice of freedom speaks proclaiming the wonderful truth that the voice of man which speaks of freedom is the voice of God. Do we believe this because we have submitted to it as a truth revealed by a supernatural church, or a supernatural Bible, or a supernatural Christ? On the contrary we have come to believe it because we have denied the authority of all alleged supernatural revelations, and have turned to search out the secrets of man's nature, and listen to the voice of God as he speaks to us in the voice of man, and proclaims the mysterious truths of the human soul.

² Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) important 18th century New England Calvinist preacher.

³ William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) foremost Unitarian preacher in the United States in the early 19th century.

⁴ Theodore Parker (1810-1860) American transcendentalist and reforming minister of the Unitarian church.

We have come to accept this great truth of the freedom of human nature, of its inherent divinity, and its infinite possibilities, because just as we have turned away from the unrealities of speculative dogma, to the healthy investigations of nature and heard the voice of nature speak to us of law, power, growth, and majesty, so we have turned away from the unrealities of dogmatic theology and listened to the voice of man, and he has spoken to us of freedom, of moral responsibility, of duty, of love, he has spoken to us of deep inner longings, hopes and aspirations, which are immeasurably greater and more wonderful than any completed work. A Victor Hugo has studied the inner secrets of a Jean Valjean and behold he has discovered in the embittered and revengeful galley slave the soul of a Christ.⁵ A Dickens has reached the desolate chamber of an Old Scrouge, and found there the soul, which could respond to the magic touch of human kindness, and blossom into beauty.⁶ Hawthorne has searched the secrets of a Hester Prynne, and under his deep human sympathetic touch, has led us to see the outward symbol of infinity transformed into the picture of a long and gloomy way by which a soul may come to God, and nobility.⁷ We may understand the words of Jesus, "Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more."⁸ If there is one note which has been struck more than any other in the great literature of the last hundred and 50 years it is this, that human nature is not depraved, but uncompleted, that it is divine. How Robert Burns touches the heart today, and this is essentially the keynote of his writings.⁹ Robert Browning makes the sinful world respond to the sweet subtle delicate song of Pippa as she passes, proclaiming that "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world."¹⁰

⁵ Victor Hugo (1802-1885); reference to his 1862 novel *Les Miserables*.

⁶ Charles Dickens (1812-1870); reference is to his story, "A Christmas Carol," published in 1843.

⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864); reference is to his 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*.

⁸ John 8:11.

⁹ Robert Burns (1759-1796); important Scottish poet.

¹⁰ Robert Browning (1812-1889); important English poet and playwright. The quotation is from his 1841 poem "Pippa Passes."

Our own great poets of New England, how they have sung of the greatness, the depth, the infinite possibilities, of humanity, imperfect, but growing and expanding, and reaching out after richer truth, greater life, as the voice of God bids in the great and overpowering conviction that freedom speaks in us. We are fast becoming lovers of human nature, lovers, not because we can find here and there a saint or a Christ, but because we can find in the galley slave, a Jean Valjean, or in an Old Scrooge, a giver of cheer, and in a Hester Prynne a sweet, but injured, child of God, moving beneath its coat of scarlet, a heart as pure and noble and clean as ever turned towards God in prayer. We are becoming lovers of human nature because we can read such a book as *Up from Slavery*¹¹ or *The Making of an American*,¹² because we can see more and better and sweeter things in human life, and the human soul, than men have seen before. The growing, deepening, broadening love for humanity, for the soul of man, which is not only fundamental in our life today, but is coming to have a wider and more permanent place in life than it has ever had before, rests not upon ignorance of man, not upon willful closing of the eyes to his imperfections, not upon overlooking, or denying the most hideous and revolting evidences of the survivals of the animal nature in the man of freedom and moral duty, but rather it rests upon a deeper, a more searching, a more thorough knowledge of his inner nature. Through our knowledge, through our appreciation, we are coming to see not the total depravity, but the dawning divinity emerging from the fiery furnace of experience, as the gold emerges from the blast furnace, purified and freed from the dross. The growing faith in human nature and love for it, is the referring fruit of experience.

This I say, this deepening, broadening sympathetic love of the human soul, is the second great characteristic of the religious ideals of modern life. It is the truth proclaimed to us by the voice of man in whom speaks

¹¹ *Up from Slavery* is the 1901 autobiography by Booker T. Washington (1856-1915).

¹² *The Making of an American* is the 1901 autobiography of Jacob Riis (1849-1914).

Freedom. What relation does the Religion of Jesus bear to this truth?

We have already seen that much of Jesus' truth was the fruit of his keen and sympathetic appreciation of nature. It is said of him that he spoke as "one having authority and not as the scribes."¹³ Men have speculated and devised every possible reason in the world, but they have persistently refused to see the simple natural one. They have clothed him with the authority of some peculiar supernatural buy; they have even declared that it was very God himself, but they have failed to notice that the authority with which he spoke was the authority of experience. Jesus touched the heart of man, not because he spoke with any great supernatural authority, not because he spoke as priest, but because he spoke as man, because in every sentence that he uttered he was sending back into their hearts some truths that he had gleaned from their lives. He knew that the pure in heart would be blessed, and that they would see God, because he had seen it formed. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled."¹⁴ There is no esoteric authority for such a statement. It is the product of experience.

You see the wider range of his observations when you glance through his words and note in addition to his references to nature, how he touches upon the activities of life. There are the fishermen, the scribes, Pharisees, the publican and the sinner, the centurion, the rich young man, the sower, the harvesters, the wise virgins, the foolish virgins, the faithful {???, the prodigal son, the poor, the sick, the deaf, the blind, the woman of sin, the foreign prince, and countless other touches that tell us plainer than words can describe that the source of Jesus' truth, the validity of his authority was the experience which he had had in everyday life.

Of one thing all men agree that the essence of his gospel is to love God, and to love man, but if ye cannot love man

¹³ Matthew 7:29.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:6.

whom ye have seen, how can ye love God whom ye have not seen?¹⁵

¹⁵ See 1 John 4:20, "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen."