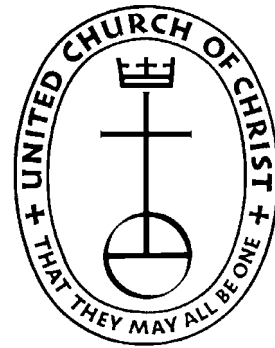


The Purple Hibiscus and the Litmus Test

A Sermon By —
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February 14, 2010



This sermon uses a novel by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie to contrast a bleak, rule-bound and joyless version of Christianity with the joyful Christianity in which we sing and dance and celebrate God's love, the beauty of life and the oneness of the human family.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
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Reading: Samuel 6:14-17, 20-21; Luke 7:31-35

First Congregational Church
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The Purple Hibiscus and the Litmus Test

In approximately 1,000 BCE, David, the famous Hebrew king, became only the second ruler of a unified Hebrew people. To bring together previously independent tribes, he established a new capital city, Jerusalem, and took to that city the Ark of the Covenant, a symbolic structure in which Yahweh, Israel's God, was said to dwell.

David himself led those carrying the ark. The text reads:

David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before Yahweh with all his might, while he and the whole house of Israel brought up the Ark of Yahweh with shouts and the sound of trumpets.

Joyful trumpets, like we have heard this morning. David put aside his long proper robe and wore only the ephod, a short piece of clothing covering his loins, chest and shoulders. He wanted to move freely, to dance without restraint.

But Michal, David's wife and daughter of Saul, Israel's first king, strongly reacted to the dancing. The text continues:

As the Ark entered the City of David, Saul's daughter Michal looked down through the window and saw David leaping and dancing before Yahweh, and his display disgusted her.

When David returned home to greet his household, Michal met him and said, "Well, didn't the ruler of Israel put on show of dignity today – exposing himself in front of his servants' handmaids, as any vulgar clown might expose himself."

David replied, "But it was done in the presence of Yahweh, who chose me instead of your father and your family by appointing me ruler over Israel. Yes, I will dance for joy before Yahweh."

A powerful story from ancient Israel about dancing with joy in the presence of God. Iconoclastic theologian Matthew Fox says a truly sacramental act would be for folks to show up at night and sneak into Christian churches armed only with screwdrivers in order to unscrew the pews so people would have room to dance with joy.

Let me now move from the Hebrew Bible to the Christian Scriptures, to the Gospel of Luke, where we read the following words attributed to Jesus:

To what can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to one another, "We piped you a tune but you wouldn't dance, we sang you a dirge but you wouldn't weep." What I mean is that John the Baptizer came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you said, "He is demon-possessed!" The Chosen One came and both ate and drank, and you say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"

Commenting on this passage, scholars of the Jesus Seminar said, "John the Baptist is likened to children who sing dirges in response to which their playmates are supposed to mourn. Jesus, on the other hand, is compared to children playing the flute, to which the appropriate response is dancing. This analogy is then made explicit in setting John the ascetic, who neither ate nor drank, over against Jesus the party animal who was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard."

Clearly, Jesus and those who followed him were open to the joy that comes in celebrating God's love; they weren't afraid of dancing and merry-making.

Now contrast those two biblical passages – David dancing before the Ark and Jesus like a child playing the flute to which the appropriate response is dance – compare those passages to a famous sermon by Increase Mather, a Puritan preacher from the Congregational tradition, entitled, "An Arrow against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing, Drawn out of the Quiver of the Scriptures."

He said men dancing with women, be they elder or younger persons, "we affirm to be utterly unlawful and it cannot be tolerated in New England without great sin." Page after page, the sermon outlined the horrors of dancing.

The Christianity of Increase Mather – somber, judgmental, rule-laden, life-denying – seems so alien to the religious expressions of ancient Israel and of the Jesus' movement.

Now let me ask those of you willing to do so, to show by raising your hands – How many of you were raised in a religious tradition where freedom, love, joy, celebration and acceptance of all were at the heart of your faith? How many of you have experienced a faith built on dogma, obedience, fear and the suppression of joyful celebration?

Last month, I preached a sermon about "the danger of a single story" based on a

lecture by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie. Today I want to consider Adichie's prize-winning novel, *Purple Hibiscus*. You must read the book to understand the title.

This novel was powerful, mesmerizing and beautifully written. One critic said, "Adichie is a woman with things to say and the confidence and exquisite mastery of language with which to say them."

But the book was also difficult to read. Set in post-colonial Nigeria, a country marked by political instability and economic struggle, the central character and narrator is 15-year-old Kambili Achike, a member of a wealthy family dominated by Kambili's obsessively devout Roman Catholic father, Eugene. He is both a religious zealot and a violent figure in the household. In the name of religious faithfulness he subjects his wife Beatrice, Kambili and her brother Jaja to physical beatings and psychological cruelty.

Eugene Achike is a zealous Roman Catholic, but he could equally have been an ultra-orthodox Jew, an extremist Muslim or a rigid, fundamentalist Protestant.

There are various themes and aspects of life considered in the novel, but today I just want to look at the contrast between the way religion functioned in Kambili's home and the way it functioned in the home of her aunt.

Kambili's father completely controlled his children's lives. Every moment of every day was determined by a schedule the father prepared. It was all work, study and prayer. God required the children to be the best at everything, or so their father thought. At one point he said to Kambili: "Why do you think I work so hard to give you and Jaja the best? You have to do something with all these privileges. Because God has given you much, God expects much from you. God expects perfection."

Thus, when Kambili was second in her class, not first, she was severely punished. Her father's religion centered on a demanding, omnipotent, judging and often wrathful God. Sadly, that was the religion often imported to African nations by western missionaries.

But the Jesus of history lived among people his society saw as failures. He affirmed and comforted them. He didn't expect perfection but instead spoke of God's love for everyone.

Kambili yearned for her father's love and craved his praise. When she came in first in her class, he was proud of her. Kambili said: "That night I fell asleep hugging close the image of Papa's face lit up, the sound of Papa's voice telling me how proud of me he was, how I had fulfilled God's purpose for me." If Kambili was perfect and obedient to all the rules – then Papa would be proud of her because he believed God would

be proud of her. What distorted and horrendous theology!

In an African society that reveres its elders, Kambili's father would not speak to his own father who refused to reject the old religious ways. In Eugene's eyes, his father was a heathen condemned to eternity in a fiery hell.

Once a year the children could visit their grandfather, but only for fifteen minutes. They went to his house because Eugene would not let a pagan enter their home. The children could not accept food or drink in a pagan house. Kambili and Jaja overstayed their fifteen minutes by just a few minutes and in a horrible scene, their father brutally punished them for their disobedience.

Kambili never smiled, never! Incredibly shy, her classmates felt she was aloof, but in fact she never smiled because her father's Christianity allowed for no joy. She lived in terror, afraid to laugh because that might offend God.

When Nigeria began to disintegrate after a military coup, Kambili's father reluctantly allowed the children to leave the capital to stay with his sister and her children. Kambili and Jaja didn't know to cope with a house filled with laughter, a house without schedules, a house without violent punishment for failing to follow God in the proper way.

Aunty Ifeoma was a feminist university lecturer, much to her brother's chagrin. She was a Roman Catholic, like Eugene, but a very different kind of Catholic. Kambili said: "Laughter always rang out in Aunty Ifeoma's house, and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around the walls, all the rooms. Morning and night prayers were always peppered with Igbo praise songs that called for hand clapping."

At home, Kambili prayed in Latin or English, never in the tongue of her people – and never with hand-clapping or joy.

Kambili's ailing grandfather came to live with them when they were at their aunt's. They didn't tell their father about this and for that they paid dearly. One morning, Kambili arose early and watched her grandfather pray at sunrise to the God of their ancestors. His prayer sounded just like a Christian prayer and as he ended, Kambili said, "He was still smiling as I quietly turned and went back to the bedroom." She said, "I never smiled after we said the rosary back home. None of us did."

Kambili developed a crush on a young priest she met at her aunt's home. He was different from the priests her father admired; he was full of joy and laughter. She watched him help some young boys prepare for a high-jump competition. When they weren't looking he kept raising the bar a little higher. Finally the boys caught on. "He

laughed and said he believed they could jump higher than they thought they could. And that they had just proved him right.”

Kambili said: “I realized it was what Aunty Ifeoma did to my cousins, setting higher and higher jumps for them in the way she talked to them, in what she expected of them. She believed they would scale the rod. And they did. It was different for Jaja and me. We did not scale the rod because we believed we could, we did it because we were terrified that we couldn’t.”

How sad! So much of Christianity has portrayed people as horrible sinners, hopeless failures in the presence of a wrathful, judging God. I remember when religious right school board members in Vista, California opposed self-esteem programs for teenagers because the young people might forget how sinful and depraved they really were.

Let me share one final passage from the book. The young priest moved away but wrote to Kambili and she said: “His letters dwell on me. I carry them around because they remind me of my worthiness.” Isn’t that what Jesus offered those around him? Even if they were expendable peasants in an oppressive society that said they had no worth, Jesus said God knew them, loved them and affirmed their worthiness.

Last month, I was at the Earl Lectures in Berkeley where Matthew Fox, a former Dominican priest cast out of Catholicism by the current Pope, criticized much of modern theological education. A young woman said she was intending to study for the ministry and asked him how she should pick a theological school; she asked for some sort of litmus test.

He pondered the question for a while and then answered, “Find a place that brings you joy.” He said that would be the litmus test she should use.

We forget those words from the angel that Luke put into his version of the nativity story: “You have nothing to fear. I come to proclaim good news to you – news of great joy to be shared by all people.”

That’s what we as a church should be about – sharing the news of great joy. That doesn’t mean we avoid the tough questions and tough places of life; it doesn’t mean we shy away from talking about torture and human slavery; it doesn’t mean we avoid times of lamentation over what we humans sometimes do to one another.

But it does mean that we know God is a God of unconditional universal love – a God of affirmation, of acceptance, of joy.

And if joy is Matthew Fox’s litmus test for choosing a theological school, maybe

it isn't such a bad litmus test for choosing a faith community. Does coming to this church make you happy? Do you leave here filled with joy? Do you sense here God's universal, unconditional love? Do you feel an acceptance from others here that tells you that you are a person of worth? Do you find in the liturgy, in the music, in the sermons that which makes you joyful, that which connects you to God's love?

If your answer is yes to some of those questions, then this is probably the right faith community for you – this is where you will experience God's love because you truly feel that others here love you. And if you don't feel that here, maybe your journey in search of a faith community will take you elsewhere.

Adichie's novel showed two radically different understandings of Christianity. Kambili experienced in her father's house a Christianity that called for blind, rigid, unquestioning obedience to a set of dogmas in order to avoid punishment by an all-powerful and frightening God. She experienced in her aunt's house a Christianity that called out the best in people by affirming them for who they were and who they could be, a Christianity that was hopeful, a Christianity that accepted wisdom and truth even in the traditions of Nigerian traditional religion, a Christianity that brought forth smiles and laughter – laughter that filled the room and bounced off the walls.

On Quinquagesima, let us join Auntie Ifeoma and sing and dance and celebrate God's love and celebrate the beauty of life and celebrate the oneness of the human family. Amen.