

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 29, 2009, Lent V, dedicated to the Rev. Thomas Merton, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Zen Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hanh, and always to the glory of God!

“Jesus and Buddha”*

**Jeremiah 31: 31-34
and John 12: 20-33**

***(Part VI of VIII in the sermon series
“Jesus Before And AFTER Christianity”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince in a small kingdom in the Himalayan foothills of India more than 500 years before the birth of Christ. Despite the comforts of his princely life, Siddhartha renounced his kingdom to seek spiritual truth. He was disturbed by the suffering of sickness, old age and death and set out from the palace to find the cause of suffering and the path to freedom from suffering.

Amid the philosophies and ascetic practices of his day, he found his own path to deep insight, clear vision and inner awakening. He became known as the Buddha, the one who is awake. After his awakening or enlightenment, the Buddha taught for 50 years in the

towns and cities of north India. His teachings, collectively referred to as the Dharma, have nourished human beings around the world and over the centuries.

What is startling to many who encounter Buddhism is that it is a religion without God. Rather, Buddhism is a religion of wisdom, enlightenment and compassion. Siddhartha called people to awaken and to see what was inside them and all around them. The teachings of the Buddha begin with evident truths:

“That life is suffering, sorrowful, out of joint; that suffering has a cause, which is our tendency to desire, to grasp, to want to hold on to a process that is constantly changing and impertinent, that there is freedom in suffering, and that there is a path of ethics and practice that leads to freedom from suffering.

“These Noble Truths are not held as a Buddha dogma or a Buddhist creed, but as a set of observations about life that one is invited to see for oneself. They are not seen as peculiarly Buddhist truths but as universal truths about human life.” (Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*, Harper, San Francisco, 2001, p. 155).

Lama Surya Das, an American Buddhist who calls himself a “Dharma-farmer,” summarizes the Buddha’s approach to teaching this way: “Don’t believe this just because the Buddha said it. Don’t believe it because the scriptures said it. Don’t believe it just because the elders say it . . . Check it out for yourselves. Find out if it is true, if it is conducive to the good, the wholesome and the rest, then adopt it. Otherwise leave it and go.” (Ibid)

Starting with the painful truth of suffering is not necessarily the best advertisement for Buddhism in America where wealth, entertainment, sports and consumerism seem to promise happiness. But the Buddha was looking to truth. The *Dukkha* is a particular pain, like the pain of a bone out of joint, or the creaking of a wheel off its axis. It is the pain of disharmony. It is not the suffering of old age, or sickness and death. It is the suffering that comes from losing what

we love or having to stick with things that we don't like. This pain is intrinsic to the human condition – whether we are rich or poor.

The Buddha explains that life's pains are inevitable, but suffering is not inevitable. No one escapes suffering in life. It is part of the human condition. But how we handle it matters. Do we name it? Do we rehearse it for ourselves and others? Do we cling to it or hang onto it?

The Buddha's third truth was: There is a way out of suffering. Everyone can become free of suffering. To move through the suffering is possible. In the fourth truth, the Buddha offers the Eightfold Noble Path – beginning with right speech, right action, right livelihood.

Vietnamese Buddhist Master, Thich Nhat Hanh tells the story of a man who riding a horse at top speed and seems to be going to a place very important. He comes upon a man who is walking who shouts, "Where are you going?" The first man replies, "I don't know, ask the horse!"

Hanh continues:

"This is our story. We are riding a horse, we don't know where we are going, and we can't stop. The horse is our habit energy pulling us along, and we are powerless. We are always running and it has become a habit. We struggle all the time, even during our sleep. We are at war within ourselves, and we can easily start a war with others.

"We have to learn the art of stopping – stopping our thinking, our habit energies, our forgetfulness, the strong emotions that rule us. When an emotion rushes through us like a storm, we have no peace. . . . How can we stop our fear, despair, anger, and craving? We can stop by mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful smiling and deep looking in order to understand. When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy." (Quoted in Eck's *A New Religious America*, pp. 157-158).

“What does the Buddha have to do with Jesus?,” you ask. In the spirit of the Buddha, I could say, “Everything and Nothing.” But, Jesus said, “Do not let yourself be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” He also said, “Do not worry about what you will eat, or where you go, my Father will care for you.” As you know, Jesus was deeply concerned with suffering. His compassion led him to find ways to relieve suffering and point people to higher truths on a higher plain of consciousness and a deeper place of peacefulness.

In his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh deepens his walk with Buddha and Jesus. He is not so much concerned with the historical Buddha and Jesus. He points to aliveness of each in this world. Each is living and breathing in so many people in so many places. He is interested in awakening to the Holy Spirit of God alive in our times and each one of us. He is concerned that we are mindful Christians, fully aware of where we walk, how we walk, with whom we walk.

He tells the story of St. Francis of Assisi in the midwinter calling out to an almond tree, “Speak to me, O God!” The almond tree breaks into bloom. It comes alive. He writes, “There is no other way of witnessing to God but aliveness!” So it is with Christ. He is alive and well within us when we open ourselves up to his teachings and his way of love.

In Holy Communion, Jesus Christ is living and fully comes alive to us! In the community which gathers together to break and eat the bread and drink the cup, Christ is alive to us. We have communion each week at our 9 a.m. service. Anyone who has received the bread and cup from anyone of our children and cannot feel and taste and see the aliveness of Christ isn’t paying attention!

As an aside, I have always had a hard time when people complain about communion. “We didn’t serve it right,” or “The bread was hard,” or “Why wasn’t the cup completely full?” On and on. I struggle to hear these words because in communion the spirit of God comes alive. Life

itself is resurrected. The words may not be perfect or the singing perfect, but the moment is always perfected by God's spirit in the community!

Thich Nhat Hahn writes on communion:

"We eat and drink all the time, but we usually ingest our own ideas, projects, worries, and anxiety . . . If we allow ourselves to touch our bread deeply, we become reborn, because our bread is life itself. Eating it deeply, we touch the sun, the clouds, the earth, and everything in the *cosmos*. We touch life and we touch the kingdom of God." (*Living Christ, Living Buddha*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2007, pp.30-31).

He goes on to say of Jesus:

"Love, understanding, courage, acceptance are expressions of the life of Jesus. God made himself known to us through Jesus Christ. With the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God within, Jesus touched the people of his time . . . Jesus lived exactly as he taught so studying the life of Jesus is his most basic teaching." (Ibid, pp. 35-36)

In Baptism, our Buddhist theologian points out that Christians have a unique and beautiful connection with God that goes far beyond simple human understanding. He writes: "I see the rite of Baptism as a way of recognizing that every human being, when opened to the Holy Spirit, is capable of manifesting . . . qualities of being a son or daughter of God . . . (In baptism we come to realize) we can touch Jesus and the Kingdom of God is within us." (Ibid, p. 44).

He shares this story at the end of the Buddha's life (he lived into his 80s). His disciples were very upset that he would no longer be with them. He told them, "My physical body will no longer be here, but my teaching body . . . will always be with you. Take refuge in the Dharma, the teachings, to make an island for yourselves." (Ibid, p. 50)

Near the end of his life, Jesus said to his disciples: "So you have

sorrow now, but I will see you again and our hearts will rejoice and no one can take our joy from us!” I love the idea that for the Buddha as well as for Jesus, there was a feeling that if you received, lived and shared the essence of their messages and their way, all would be well.

It was the Dharma in the Buddha’s case or the Word of God in Jesus’ case that brought the promise of continuation and eternal presence. It is this essence that gives us each day the Living Buddha and the Living Christ. That essence can never be taken from us.

Our joy will come when we live Christ. I end with this story on living the Christ and seeing the Christ in everyone and in everything. To see his love, his understanding, his mindfulness, his grace, his justice – this is to live as one with Christ. There is a wonderful story with which I will end. For those who have heard it before, pretend this is your first time. Open yourselves to a new understanding of an old tale.

There was a Christian monastery in which all the monks were aging and dying. The buildings were run down. The fields were mostly bare. No villagers came to worship at the chapel. All seemed destined to end within the next few years. The doors would certainly be closing soon.

One day, the abbot was visited by a dear friend, a Buddhist monk. They enjoyed the day together as they laughed and shared stories over a lifetime of knowing one another. The next morning, the Buddhist monk arose to leave the four monks and their mostly empty monastery. He said to his friend the abbot, “During the night I had a dream and I dreamt of your monastery and you remaining monks. I heard a voice say to me, ‘The Christ is One of You.’” He looked at his aging friend and said, “It is clear to me, the Christ is One of You.”

With that he left. The abbot thought, which one of us is the Christ? Brother Martin is always sleeping through morning prayers. Certainly it is not Martin. Brother Simeon is terrible cook and makes us ill with his concoctions. Certainly it is not Simeon. Brother David

is ill-tempered and surly. Certainly it is not David. And I, certainly, I am not the Christ.

That day at lunch, the abbot shared his friend's dream with the others, concluding, "The Christ is one of us." They shared his judgments of the other monks, although each one saw the others' failings in slightly different shadows of truth. But, just in case, they began to treat one another like each of the others was the Christ. With joy they greeted one another. With love they embraced one another. With grace they forgave one another. With delight, they saw the fullness of God in one another.

Soon, they found energy for serving. Soon, they discovered their joyful voices of singing. Soon, their fields began to yield fruitful harvests. Little by little, their monastery came back to life. People from across the countryside came to worship. The word spread and people knew that "one of the brothers was the Christ!" The question always remained, "Which brother is it?" When all of the brothers had departed this life, it was said that the spirit of the Living Christ remained in the monastery. It was no longer a dream. The Christ was alive and dwelling within his people.

Living Buddha. Living Christ. As I look out across this sanctuary today, I have had a dream as well. **The Christ is one of you!**

Look around you. **Which one of you is the Christ? Live as if Christ is every one of you!** Amen.

* Some material taken from Diana Eck's *A New Religious America*