

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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Walking the Road to Ijtihad¹
Judges 6.36-40; Luke 17.20-21
Russ Dean, November 20, 2005

Whatever it was that led nineteen men to board four separate airliners on September 11, 2001 bound for a common destiny, infamy, eternity... whatever calling those men heard, whatever purpose they sought to fulfill, whatever road they had journeyed in pursuit of their paradise, whatever way... it was not ijthad. Call it cowardly revenge as many have. Call it suicidal desperation such as too many more in their wake have known. Call it jihad – holy war – as their leaders still do. Call it a radical following if you will, the ultimate in a fanatical devotion to Muhammed (peace be upon him²) or the Koran, but the radical way, which led to the destructive evil of 9/11, pales in comparison to the truly radical nature of the Road to Ijtihad.

Such a way, when I learned of this radical alternative to Islamic Fundamentalism, sounded in my soul like the true call of all true faith. Where religion³ (whether Islamic or

¹ All that I know of the word, “ijthad” comes from one editorial which was printed in the Charlotte Observer on Monday, November 14, 2006. Irshad Manji, who writes for the Los Angeles Times, opines that a re-introduction of the discipline of ijthad would serve to moderate Islam, freeing it from the hands of the extremists who have hijacked the faith for political purposes: “The gates of ijthad were shut not for spiritual or theological reasons but for entirely political ones. This means there is no blasphemy in seeking to resuscitate Islam’s tradition of independent thinking” (emphasis added). For the purposes of this sermon I employed a working definition of ijthad, as a tradition of “independent thinking,” open to Muslims who are, like many Christians, increasingly embarrassed and troubled by the theology of fundamentalism which dominates the public expressions and perceptions of their faith. One of our congregants, with a background in Islamic studies, told me following worship that though she agreed with my sermon, she needed to talk with me about my use of the word ijthad. If I have misunderstood or misused the word in a technical sense, I offer my apologies.

² Muslims always offer these words, immediately following the speaking of the name of one of their great prophets. “... Mohammad, peace be upon him...” “...Jesus, peace be upon him...” etc...

³ I always assume a juxtaposition of “religion” and “faith,” and believe that Jesus, among the great teachers of the world’s religions, taught his disciples the value of “faith,” while running into considerable trouble from desecrating the “religion” which he practiced. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, spoke of being a “religionless Christian” (see his, *Letters and Papers from Prison*).

Christian or any other) calls its adherents to the teaching of dogma – that is, to certain tenets of belief to which one must ascribe to be deemed orthodox – the faith of ijthihad calls for free thinking. Where religion calls its adherents to conserve the truth as understood by prior generations, traditions handed down, and rituals designed to give meaning to those truths and traditions, the faith of ijthihad calls for a liberation from what can amount to a bondage to this past. (Faith calls us to reflect on and appreciate our religious heritage, acknowledging our indebtedness to that tradition, while being free, yet, to step beyond that tradition.) Where religion calls its adherents to conformity, uniform belief and consent (which, not coincidentally, also means controllability), the faith of ijthihad calls for openness and acceptance, appreciation for differing ideas, the constructive exercise of dialogue (which means “talking across”). Religion is most often characterized by monologue and acquiescence. (That is, one person talking, and everyone else just nodding their heads.)

How would our world be different, today, had nineteen men been taught the radical way of Islamic ijthihad – a Muslim faith of free-thinking and even dissent from tradition – instead of a Muslim religion of blind acceptance and radical devotion? The Old Testament prophet in me won’t let me simply wag the finger at these so called “enemies,” however, without turning it around as they always did⁴, and asking also, How would our world be different, today... had the President of the United States of America, the Democratic and Republican leaders of Congress, the mouthpieces of the powerful

⁴ Perhaps the best example of this is the book of Amos, where the fiery prophet draws in the Israelites: “*Thus says the Lord: for three transgress of Damsacus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment*” (1.3). Amos then goes on to name all of Israel’s enemies, all the practitioners of paganism and idolatry, Gaza (1.6), Tyre (1.9), Edom (1.11), Ammon (1.13), Moab (2.1). You can almost hear the pious Israelites saying “go get ‘em, preacher,” when Amos then turns the tables: “*Thus says the Lord: for three transgressions of Judah... of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment*” (2.4, 6). In exposing the sin of the “enemy,” the transgression of the “faithful” becomes even more egregious.

Southern Baptist Convention, indeed the general consensus of the population of the world's most powerful nation itself also been schooled in such a radical faith?⁵

Where would we be as a world community if adherents of the fast-growing Islamic faith were to actually accept the teachings of their own scholars – that students could actually “abandon ‘expert’ opinions about the Quran if their own conversations with the... book produced more compelling evidence for their peaceful ideas”?⁶ Where would we be?

On the other hand, can you imagine the Billy Grahams of the Christian world, the Bob Joneses and the Jerry Falwells and the Pat Robertsons, who have such influence over millions of Christian believers, not to mention our politicians and our political process, can you imagine these powerful men actually teaching that we, too, could “abandon” expert opinions about the Bible, if our personal dialogue with scripture put us at odds with this authority?⁷ Such thinking is heretical, non-conformist, dangerous.

It is such thinking, ijtihad, that characterizes the very way Jesus lived.

With the world around him crying out for validation, for some external indication or vindication of the truth of their religious propositions, Jesus told an inquiring crowd, soberly, radically... you will have no outward sign. There is no external authority. The

⁵ Here I play my full hand – I believe that the most visible expressions of Christian faith are also of those schooled in extremism, in orthodox notions of absolutism and exclusivism, based on supposed literal interpretations of scripture, which are used to justify great injustice and violence. Christians, too, need to be awoken to the call for ijtihad!

⁶ From Irshad Manji's article: In Muslim Spain, scholars taught their students to abandon ‘expert’ opinions about the Quran if their own conversations with the ambiguous book produced more compelling evidence for their peaceful ideas.” The key to understanding ijtihad, it seems to me is the last phrase in this quotation, to which my sermon returns, the Quran is to be understood as promoting peaceful ideas.

⁷ Today's sermon is the last in a series entitled, “Changing Structures of Authority,” in which we have discussed various “authorities” to which people turn for guidance. Our working assumption is that these structures are changing rapidly around us, and such change is the cause of great anxiety in our current culture. In such a day people often cling even more stringently to their “authorities,” which explains the growth and popularity of the extremist/fundamentalist forms of all religions today.

truth, as our own national declaration⁸ claims, is “self evident.” As Jesus said it, “*The kingdom of God (the truth) is within.*”

Now, my sources tell me that perhaps I’m being a little unfair, exegetically, so let me give you one technical word about this text. In Jesus’ world it seems that some people were pre-occupied with the “coming of the kingdom,” which is, in our vernacular, the end of the world. Imagine that! (The irrational popularity of the “Left Behind” book series tells us this obsession with the “signs of the times” is still with us.) They asked Jesus, “How will we *see* it coming?” (This word is one used of astronomy, the sighting of stars in the heavens.) But Jesus tells them there will be no signs, for the kingdom is already here. To be as literal as possible, he says it is “in you all.”⁹ The “you” is plural, so suggesting that the kingdom can be grasped, personally, internally by one person is not technically fair to what Jesus said.

But I believe that in spirit, I am being fair to Jesus, who by example showed that external authorities (claims that the kingdom is here or there, this or that) are never to be deemed our final authority. What authority did Jesus claim as ultimate? The government? Hardly. His culture? Never. Heritage or tradition or even his own religion? No – it was breaking with these “authorities” that got him killed.

The only absolute authority for Jesus Christ was the voice within, the God within who called him, against the establishment view of every other authority in his world.

⁸ The Declaration of Independence claims, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

⁹ Though arguing the point here that the most accurate translation is “among” and not “within,” in his commentary on Luke, Alan Culpepper does indicate that “the *koine* Greek term *entos*, translated “among” you in the NRSV, occurs elsewhere in the NT only in Matthew 23.26, where it designates the inside of a cup. Its meaning in its present context is debated.” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, “Luke,” p.329.

The kingdom of God is within. I believe it.

What is it that we so desperately want? Even we Americans who know the greatest freedom and security the world has ever known? What we really want, I think, is this: despite all our protests to the contrary, people want to be told how to think. People the world over want to be told how to think, because in our great, collective immaturity, growing up and thinking for ourselves is just too difficult.¹⁰ Growing up and judging the so-called authorities of our world, for ourselves, is just too frightening. And, trusting ourselves and our neighbors with such responsibility is just too dangerous.

So, we look for outward signs. Like desperate Gideon, we barter, even with God – just give me a sign. Give me an authoritative witness. We don't trust our instincts; we don't trust our own basic goodness; we don't trust ourselves to think for ourselves, so we clamor for some external authority. Tell me what to do! Tell me what is true!

If people are crying out for some external word of validation, some formal authority to give them security, to justify their truths – these authorities will be found. But these authorities might also simply justify our prejudices, our own untruths. We need only witness the destruction of 9/11 terror to know this. So there must be some final criterion of truth, and I believe it is this. Whether Christian truth, Islamic truth, political

¹⁰ I love the strange quotation from Bonhoeffer on growing up: “Our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as those who manage our lives without God. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us. The God who lets us live in the word without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continuously. Before God and with God we live without God. ...God is weak and powerless in the world and that is precisely the way, the only way in which he is with us to help us” (emphases added). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a letter to Eberhard Bethge dated July 16, 1944, from his book *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 219.

truth, the criterion of all human truth is – does it make for peace? Spiritual peace. Global peace. Personal peace. National peace. Internal peace. International peace.

And how would we validate such a claim (that peace is the criterion for truth)? Let me answer by asking you another question. Is there really any external authority we need to know this truth? What objective validation do we possibly need for this, the deepest need, the deepest truth of all human experience?

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us... We are children of God... born to manifest the glory of God within us... And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”¹¹

The people of the world need to hear these words of power and good news, for even as we, in insecurities, continue to cry out for external validation, for authorities, I believe the world is really crying out for a different kind of voice. It is a lonely voice, the voice of the person who can hear, as Jesus did, the voice within, the voice of God, authenticating our experience, our deepest reality – the peace that makes for truth, the truth that makes for peace even when that voice contradicts the external authorities of our world.

*The kingdom of God is within.*¹² I believe it.

¹¹ The quotation has come to me as attributed to Nelson Mandella, though I do not have a proper citation.

¹² The opening meditation in our bulletin was this quotation from H.Richard Niebuhr’s book, *Christ and Culture*: “...whatever may be true about the Scriptures or about eighteen centuries of Christian history, or whatever may be objectively true for the philosopher... all this is of no relevance to the individual who is passionately concerned with what is true for him. Such subjective truth – truth for me – is found only in faith and in decision. The decision lies in the subject... The thing of being a Christian is not determined by the *what* of Christianity, but by the *how* if the Christian.”

The Road to Ijtihad is a dangerous path. The truth is, the Church, as an institution, has never really fully supported the free-thinking, self-authenticating, radical faith of Jesus. And never have we known his peace.

If peace is our goal, then, the authority of ijtiḥad – the self-affirmation of truth is the only road that will lead us home.

May it be so!

PASTORAL PRAYER

I used to walk down every road
Holding out a golden key
And I would search the heart of everyone
I was hoping was right for me
And I was searching for a treasure
To fill me deep inside
I was searching for a life-time friend
To walk right by my side

One day I grew so weary
I could not take another step
I sat upon the roadside
And hung my head and wept
And then suddenly I heard a voice
Come from deep within
And as I listened to the sound I found
I was lifted by the wind

It said you've always had a treasure
Living deep inside your soul
And you've always had a life-time friend
And now it's time you know
That the love was only waiting
For your signal to begin
But the golden key you were holding out
You were always holding in

I used to walk down every single road...¹³

¹³ David Wilcox, "Golden Key," from his album, "Nightshift Watchman."

What then is new about the new covenant? That God initiates the covenant, that God forgives sins, and that Israel will “know” [God] intimately had been features of older covenants. What is without precedent is the law written on the heart, the covenant at the core of one’s being. The newness is a special gift, the capacity to be faithful and obedient. In the Old Testament, the heart is the seat of the will...; consequently, the special gift here is a will with the capacity to be faithful. God thus promises to change the people from the inside out, to give them a center. This covenant will overcome the conflict between knowing and wanting one thing and doing another. In the new covenant the people will act as if they are owned by God without even reflecting upon it.

Fred Craddock