

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY**

**Second Sunday After Christmas - January 4, 2004**

**Anne G. Cohen**

**Ephesians 5:21-33**

**John 1:1-19**

**For Our Reflection:**

All words are pegs to hang ideas on.

- Henry Ward Beecher, American cleric, writer (1813-1887)

To love means to decide independently to live with an equal partner, and to subordinate oneself to the formation of a new subject, a "we."

- Fritz Kunkel, Let's Be Normal (1929)

Mysticism is the art of union with Reality.

- Evelyn Underhill, Practical Mysticism (1914)

**Words, Wives, Exploding Deities and Other Mysteries**

The word "word" comes from the Latin "ver" - meaning "to speak."

Modern meanings include:

- . A speech sound or series of sounds serving to communicate meaning(s)
- . A letter or group of letters representing a unit of language (written)
- . A remark / a promise / news or information
- . A password / an order or command / an affirmation
- . Lyrics to a song / an argument

If we add the word "the" to "word," we have the phrase "The Word" - which has its own meanings:

- . The Bible or scripture

It is related to the Old English word "Gospel"

- . Good Story / God Story / Christian Doctrine

It is also related to the Greek work "Logos" - which, in Greek philosophy, means:

- . The Divine controlling or ordering principle of the Universe - manifested by speech.

In Judaism, specifically Genesis, The Word is God's act of Creation.

And it is God's speech that is, in later books, personified by Wisdom or Sophia (Gk) - God's partner in creating and ordering the Universe.

In Christian theology derived from the Gospel of John - written after 80 c.e., the Hellenistic term Logos carries within it both the Greek and

the Jewish meanings. Logos is Ultimate Reality, the creative and sustaining spirit of God - as revealed in Jesus - hence the male term "Logos" rather than the female "Sophia."

Parallels to John's theology and thought about the divinity of Jesus and the cosmic plan unfolding through him - are found in the Gnostic texts, Dead Sea scrolls and other Jewish writings - written before Jewish Christians were expelled from synagogues in order to restore orthodoxy to Judaism - in the wake of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 c.e.

This heady stuff did not come out of a vacuum and cannot be understood in a vacuum. One little word translated into English and read by a person with a modern world view and many personal assumptions can and does skew the meaning of a text. For instance, John 1:5 reads - in English:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The Greek word translated as "overcome" can be and is also translated as "understand" - "the darkness did not understand it." It can also be translated as "overtake" - as in John 12:35:

Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you.

One word - at least three meanings.

The scriptures are not insubstantial noise in empty space. The words convey meaning(s) and the meaning or meanings must be understood, overcome, overtaken in their context - their time, place, cultures, relationship to other writings of their time.

This is why we have four (or more) Gospels that intertwine, support and contradict each other - each one very different in style, context and intent. They are to be understood in relationship to each other - thereby increasing their meaning(s) and our comprehension of the phenomenon of First Century Jewish Christianity. We can hope that this - among other things - like experience and revelation - adds to our insight into the nature of the human relationship to the Divine.

In the Christian Bible we also have a collection of letters or, from the Greek, Epistles. Seven have been authenticated as having been written by the same man - to churches in specific cities like Rome, Corinth and Galatia.

The man who wrote the letters we know as Saint Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus - a city west of Syria on the Mediterranean. Saul was a Jewish young man who witnessed and approved of the stoning of a Christian

disciple named Stephen - a heretic according to Jewish orthodoxy. Saul became the sword of God himself, killing and arresting numerous non-orthodox Jews participating in Churches.

Saul then experienced a mystical encounter with God - having all the earmarks of mystical encounters of the Hebrew Scriptures. He saw a flash of light, fell to the ground and heard a voice. He was blind for three days, reluctantly healed and baptized by Ananais, a disciple who knew Saul's reputation, and became a zealous Christian disciple and spreader of the Gospel - or, from the Greek, Evangelist.

As Paul matured and continued to communicate to various churches through letters, his theology took on characteristics that scholars recognize as his. His theology is touched by his mystical experience, but fairly utilitarian in application to the problems of the Church. It includes the need to prepare for Salvation, to fight the hostile power of Sin in the world, seek Justification by Faith, and accept that there is one Gospel for all people, although it came to Israel first. His ideas emphasize the temporal - the transitory nature of the world and the imminence of Christ's return.

The Epistle to the Ephesians, however, emphasizes space instead of time - perhaps dealing with the delay of Christ's return. It asserts that we are already saved through the Resurrection and it is up to the individual to fight their own sinful nature in order to be lifted into the presence of God. Women have been demoted since Christ's and Paul's time and most Christians have reaccommodated themselves to traditional hierarchies in the home.

Paul was not the author of this letter - but familiarity with Paul is evident. It was written late in the first century as a circular letter to many churches - not just the one in Ephesus. It was written to second generation Christians who did not experience Jesus first hand and are losing faith in the so-called second coming. They want to know how to apply this stuff to their daily lives - if Christian theology has anything to say to their current social structure, the persecutions of Christians, the differences between Jewish and Greek Churches.

The letter begins with a cosmic view of God's plan - and then takes the reader to an understanding of how Jesus, the Church, the believer and their household fit into that plan. The cosmic view must be comprehended before the rest of the letter makes sense. It is a mystical idea found in Gnostic texts and later on in Jewish mysticism. You could call it a Mystical, spiritual Big Bang Theory. Ephesians 1:8-10

With all wisdom and insight [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

As the theory goes, at the Dawn of Time the Divine Being was in the act of Creating. Logos/Sophia was putting order to the preexistent chaos and the Universe was undergoing a transformation. The Divine Being had an enormous amount of Love for Creation - so enormous that the Divine Being could not contain it - much like bursting with love. God exploded. And in that event shards of the Divine were embedded like shrapnel in every thing and every creature.

The philosophical term was "inhered." The stuff of life - Divinity itself - had inhered within the subject or self or soul of everything. And the process that the entire universe is involved in - to this day - is to bring all of those shards and pieces of the Divine Being back together, back into the One, making god whole again.

In every meal shared with others, part of the Divine is released and reunited. The lighting of candles, an act of kindness, the saving of a life - each of these releases the light and life of the Divine and heals the Universe.

With all wisdom and insight [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will... a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

It is this mystical IDEA that informs the meaning of our text today, Ephesians 5:21-33:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.  
Be subject to one another.....

This text does NOT call for subjugation of one another - the placing of another person under our own power. It calls us to be "subject" to one another, make ourselves vulnerable to the influence of the other, to relate to one another from our "subjectivity." If, in each one of us there is a shard of the Divine inhered to our souls, then in each one of us is something that is identical to everyone else. What we have in common is the "God within." And only by relating to one another subjectively - out of our most humble, inner being - do we become One - do we become related in the Divine - which, in our diversity, we call by many names, but here we tend to call God or Christ or Holy Spirit.

How do we relate to one another in this mystical way in our daily

lives? According to the customs of the first century, there were hierarchies of relationship. This letter asserts that within those hierarchies, mutuality could be found, expected and created by those related through the Divine - the Christ.

. Wives were to be subject to their husbands, just as they were to Christ.

. Husbands must love their wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.

The wife is to voluntarily come to her imperfect, human mate in subjective humility. The husband is to voluntarily live up to the standards of Christ's self-sacrificial love for the Church - Church AND wife being imperfect and human creatures. If it is done right, in mutual love, honor and respect, this is possible.

The author, recognizing the difficulty in grasping this mystical idea of Divine unity between persons, refers to marital custom in Jewish tradition. Ephesians 5:31 refers back to Genesis 2:24 - hear the familiarity of the words in Ephesians:

31 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.

32 This is a great mystery and I am applying it to Christ and the Church.

33 Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

This is a great mystery - how two become one. It is the Divine struggling to reunite itself. It is the struggle of our souls to find one another. And the search for our Soul Mates - whatever our gender or orientation - the search must be given precedence in our daily activity. In giving precedence to that spiritual work, our lives are transformed.

The author gives us several more parallels to help clarify this relationship of mutual subjectivity that we are to seek.

Children, obey your parents.

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters.

Masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same master in heaven and with [God] there is no particularity.

As these hierarchies of relationship are laid out in this letter, the relationships are unjust at their core. In that culture and time people were given power over one another because of their sex or age or

economic status. Wives were often given to their husbands. Children have never had a choice about their parents. Slaves were bought and sold against their will.

But this Christian mystic explained to the churches that there were options that could transform even these relationships. If wives and children and slaves chose to live out of their inner-most being, they were then free within their souls. By living out of the Divine, the Christ within, they were freer than those who dominated them.

But if husbands and parents and masters did the same - if they also became subject to the God within themselves and within others - then the entire household system was transformed. In those relationships, pieces of the Divine were released and reunited - healing God and the Universe.

I believe that if this were the kind of spirituality practiced in the world today - by Christians, Muslims and Jews - we would not BE in the political, environmental, moral and economic chaos that we are in right now. I believe that there are forms of Buddhism that DO practice this subjectivity. We have much to learn from this in order to heal the Universe, heal God, heal the planet, our society and our selves. Only then will we achieve Salvation in the sense of Wholeness and Balance.

A beginning is to remember to use "I statements." And when we use "I statements" we might remember that we are speaking about and from our deepest, Divine selves - to that identical "I" in the other person.

A beginning is to remember that the Divine is in all things and all creatures. We might give thanks and honor the Divine in each occasion and encounter.

A beginning is to remember that every words conveys meaning(s) and those meanings must be comprehended in the context of time, place, culture and world view. We must consider the source, be wary of translations (a game of telephone) and our own assumptions, and look for the shard of Divinity that has inhered within every exchange of words.

A beginning is to remember that we are human - and language is a human tool - and both are fundamentally flawed. Misunderstandings WILL HAPPEN. We might actively learn how to work through those misunderstandings with grace, repentance and forgiveness.

A beginning is to remember the difference between subjugation and being subject to, the difference between domination and collaboration, the difference between Salvation as superiority and entitlement - and Salvation as wholeness and healing.

A beginning is to remember that at the heart of every person and every thing - there is a Mystery.

Perhaps this will be the year that we will subject ourselves to the Mystery within ourselves, within everything - and transform the world - one Divine shard at a time.

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### **Bulletin**

#### **WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION**

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship (unison)

May the power of God this day enable me,  
the nakedness of God disarm me,  
the beauty of God silence me,  
the justice of God give me voice,  
the integrity of God hold me,  
the desire of God move me,  
the fear of God expose me to the truth,  
the breath of God give me abundant life.

+ New Year Hymn This Is a Day of New Beginnings Hymnal # 417

+ Opening Prayer (unison)

Loving Word of God,  
you have shown us the fullness of your glory in taking human flesh.  
Fill us in our bodily life, with your grace and truth;  
that our pleasure may be boundless,  
and our integrity complete, in your name. Amen.

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)

Creator God who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,  
on Earth as it is in Heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our debts  
As we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil,

For Thine is the kingdom and the power  
And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

God is present among us, in darkness and in light.

God is present within us, in spirit and in body.

God is present. It is enough.

Sung Response "Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice, give thanks and sing."  
Hymnal # 55 Refrain

**WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM**

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Epistles Ephesians 5:21-33

Reading from the Christian Gospels John 1:1-18

Sermon Words, Wives, Exploding Deities and Other Mysteries

**WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION**

Celebration of Holy Communion

+ Communion Round Be Known to Us in Breaking Bread Hymnal #342

Invitation

Sharing the Bread and the Cup

Prayer of Thanksgiving (unison)

We give thanks that through the sharing of this bread and cup we  
find ourselves at table with those of every age who feel the Universe  
filled with the Spirit of God, who love and serve justice, who have  
been touched by God's loving and compassionate hands.

Sustain us with these gifts that our hearts and spirits may be  
strengthened by Your presence. Amen.

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response In Solitude Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

By giving, we open ourselves to the possibilities of being a healing  
presence in the world. By giving, we open ourselves to the holy

task of releasing God's light in the lives of others. By giving, we create options and bring newness to old and tired expectations. May God bless our giving with new meaning. Amen.

+ Sending Hymn All Beautiful the March of Days Hymnal # 434

+ Commissioning (unison)

May the Love which overcomes all differences,  
which heals all wounds, which puts to flight all fears,  
which reconciles all who are separated,  
be in us and among us now and always.

+ Sung Response (we gather in some semblance of a circle)  
Song from Ghana

+ Postlude

**WORSHIP NOTES**

Call to Worship is from All Desires Known by Janet Morley p.72

Opening Prayer Ibid. p.6

Commissioning is by Frederick E. Gillis found in  
Singing the Living Tradition #694