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TO: [REDACTED]

SUBJECT: mp.25

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What is a good little UU (Unitarian-Universalist) boy singing in a Pentecostal "sweet Jesus" choir?

MP.25

12-29-11

Some comments before I start. The past 2 months have been hard. My anniversary of coming to Bastrop past at the beginning of last month, thanksgiving, Hanukah, and Christmas have taken an emotional toll. Since coming out of my emotional coma, the depths of my depression has been tough getting use too. I guess I should be lucky that I can still get up and go to work at get back to the room. I have been able to read light fiction, but anything more serious as well as regular exercise or writing has been too much of a barrier to overcome. I am writing so that means I am coming up from the deep. Writing takes some level of optimism on my part, otherwise it seems like too difficult a task.

Enough of that...

What is a good little UU boy singing in a Pentecostal "Sweet Jesus" choir?

First of all some qualifications for the title. "Good", well I am not so good any more...I am in prison. "Little boy" no longer very little, I have past the half century mark, eligible for AARP. I am a UU and the choir is definitely Pentecostal (much to the dislike of more staid members of the congregation). The ushers hand out mints at the door on Sunday and several of suggested that they hand out ear plugs as well.

That is what this time of year always reminds me. All the choir concerts from high school, college, and even after college. I have always been involved with multiple choirs (from church, school, and community groups). So Christmas time is a time for performance for all of these. These performances are highlights from my past. So much so that Christmas means Christmas music as much as anything else. Why should prison be any different? It is not for me.

I joined the English Protestant choir and it really is a wonderful outlet of healing for me. I have not sung in Evangelical choir since college, so it took some getting use too. All the talk of blood sacrifice and dependence taken literally makes a religious liberal squirm. But the year or so I have sung in the choir (along with a heavy dose of Jesus Seminar veterans (Spong et al) I have begun to translate even the most offensive imagery into metaphors for human transformation. In addition to the theology there is an element of style to handle. But my years of Baptist church gospel cultivation has prepared the ground for contemporary praise music. The music is only slight variations of classical and contemporary R and B and Soul music. The style was the easiest for me to assimilate.

Much harder was the theology of original sin and the need for blood sacrifice to cleanse us for God's presence. I am a religious (liberal) humanist so this cuts on both on the level of supernaturalism but also on the grounds of evilness of my humanity. It is easy to discount both as fundamentalist literalism when you do not actually are in a Pentecostal service. You cannot dismiss them so easily when you are actually singing in a choir that is leading the service. So I have been exploring through the writings of UU's Religious Humanist Journal and other religious liberals a way of interpreting these images in the context of human transformation.

What the Jesus seminar writers all point to is a Jesus that calls us to walk in a new (more fully human) way in the world. This is about being a transformed person here now...not waiting for some future time in the sky by and by. The imagery of God, Cross, Christ can be reinterpreted as symbols to facilitate that very human transition from a Ego obsessed self to a powerful other inclusive human being bringing love, compassion and healing to a world filled with pain, suffering and separation.

Once I developed the conceptual tools to translate fundamentalist concepts into religious humanist metaphors, I could let go emotionally and experience true joy in singing. Choir became not purely a social event, but a religious and humanist one too. I could see my fellow congregants and humans seeking to navigate a harsh and violent world. But also as religious people who are reaching outside their isolated ego imprisoned selves to experience that which is greater. We all need that ~~since~~ of what is greater then. Amen.

mindful prisoner

Sense