

Reclaiming the L-Word

“The L-Word.” I imagine some of you will recognize that phrase as the title of a TV show. “The L-Word” is a series on cable TV about a group of Lesbian friends living in L.A. The title is based on the premise that “Lesbian” is a word that you just don’t use in “polite society.”

But I am not preaching about Lesbians today. Nor am I preaching about laughter – that’s what Pastor Alan thought the L-Word might be, after reading today’s scripture from Genesis. Nor am I preaching about love; which is what somebody else guessed.

No, the “L-word” I want to talk about today is one that has become something of an outcast. Somehow it has become a bit awkward, even embarrassing, in polite society.

The L-word I’m talking about is **liberal**.

Liberal. It’s a grand old word, and it’s a label that many of us used to wear proudly. But not so much anymore. Liberal is a word that, once upon a time, had an impeccable reputation. For instance, many of us went to a liberal arts college, and got a liberal education.

The word “liberal” is from the same root as the word “liberty” - and there is no more highly-cherished American value than liberty! But liberal: not so much.

According to my trusty Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary (which now, actually, is an app on my iPhone!), “to be liberal” means: to be generous, open-handed, and broad-minded. Wow.

I mean, why would we ever stop using such a beautiful word? Why would anyone backpedal from being associated a word like liberal?

And yet, that’s exactly what’s been happening.

This is true even among Biblical scholars. Look at the passage today from 1st Timothy: People such as us are to set their hopes, “not on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous; thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that life which is life indeed.”

Thus, we are called to be “liberal and generous.” But note that this is the RSV translation, the old Revised Standard Version, which is the Bible I grew up with; maybe you did too.

In the newer version, the NRSV, the New Revised Standard Version, this passage from Timothy is almost, word for word, the same – except that they omit the word “liberal.” They just take it out!

Instead of being “liberal and generous,” now we are to be “generous and ready to share.” What a shame: to leave out that grand old word.

But at least, “ready to share” is a reasonable substitute for the word liberal; that is, it has the same general meaning. Which is a lot more than I can say for another word that is often used these days in place of liberal; namely, progressive.

Now, I am well aware that the clear preference these days is to call ourselves Progressive Christians instead of Liberal Christians. So I am bucking a trend here, I realize that. But part of what I want to say to you today is that these two terms are not equal. Not at all.

I am a liberal Christian, through and through. But I can't quite bring myself to say I'm a progressive.

Now, why is that? Well, you see, to me, progressivism is based on the "myth of progress" - which is the idea that whatever is new is better. For example, the "new" NRSV Bible, by definition, is better than the old RSV. (not necessarily so).

This myth of progress is one of the principal drivers of American capitalism. And please understand, I'm not against capitalism. And I'm not against progress - although at times I think we need to be skeptical of both.

However, in the end, my biggest problem with the word "progressive" is that it just doesn't capture the essence of my own faith journey the way "liberal" does. I believe in my heart that Jesus calls me to be liberal in the original meaning of the word: generous, open-hearted, and broad-minded.

And let's be clear that we're not talking about liberal politics here, but Liberal Theology. Liberal politics is an entirely different topic; which I would be more than happy to talk about sometime - although not from the pulpit. Let me just say that I have a number of friends in the UCC who are Republicans with conservative political views but a very liberal theology.

So, what does it mean to be a Liberal Christian? Well, we know what we're not: we're not THOSE kind of Christians, not the anti-choice, gay-bashing, fear-driven, Bible-thumping, judgmental kind of Christians that you hear about all the time. No. That's not us.

We are quick to say who we're not. But who are we? What do we believe? And what are our most-cherished values?

Now, I have heard it said that "You don't have to believe in anything to belong to this church." And I am here to tell you that that is simply not true. Not at all. First Congregational Church of Sonoma is not an "anything-goes" kind of place, filled with people who don't believe in much of anything. Hardly!

To be sure, in this room, there is a broad diversity of beliefs and ideas about God and about Jesus. Still, I want to suggest to you that together we stand squarely in the midst of a long and honorable tradition of Liberal Christian faith, and ethics, and theology. And you and I need to claim our common ground, and be better able to articulate the faith and values that we hold dear.

Now, one of the reasons I want to emphasize the word "liberal" is because it has had such a long and distinguished career in theology. Liberal Theology has greatly influenced and shaped American society and culture.

The dominant religious perspective in this country up until the late 20th century was Liberal Theology. And even though things have shifted, and now a very different kind of theology is predominant, still, we liberal Christians are not going away. Our voices will still be heard. Our influence will continue.

The President of the United States, for instance, is a liberal Christian. Susan and I have even worshipped at the extraordinary UCC church on the South Side of Chicago that helped nurture Barack Obama's faith and values. Fact is, many of our prominent political leaders have liberal Christian roots.

So, what is Liberal Theology? What are we talking about here? Well, the best place to start, as always, is with the Bible. So, let's take a look at today's scripture reading from Genesis, about Abraham and Sarah.

And let me confess that, I like Sarah best. Abraham is wonderful, of course, with all his blind trust and faith in God. But, how can you not like Sarah? I mean, this is an older woman with some spunk! When Sarah, standing outside the tent, overhears three mysterious visitors say that she is going to bear a child, she laughs. She says to herself, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"

Notice, she doesn't say, "Am I going to have a baby?" Or, "Will I have to deal with diapers and toddlers in my old age?" No, what she says is, "Shall I have pleasure?" And I'm pretty sure she's not talking about the pleasures of motherhood....

Anyway.... Sarah realizes that these three strangers are divine messengers; but the message they have to deliver is sheer craziness; and so, she laughs. It's "You've gotta be kidding!" kind of laughter: incredulous, skeptical laughter - which, in this case, seems perfectly reasonable!

The passage ends with an amusing little exchange, in which Sarah denies laughing, because she thinks she's in trouble. "No, no - I didn't laugh," she says. "Oh, yes you did" - and now it is clear that one of these mysterious strangers is, in fact, the Lord. You can almost see him shaking his finger at her: "Oh, yes you did."

But apparently God is also having a little fun with this; because, in the end, the miraculous child is named after Sarah's little outburst. The baby is named Isaac, which in Hebrew means laughter.

So, I want to lift up Sarah as a role model for the kind of believer who refuses to take things at face value. She models out for us a certain kind of faith, an incredulous faith, that is willing to be skeptical, and to ask questions, and to seek further evidence.

This skeptical sort of faith is so typical of us liberal Christians - for we are open to spiritual experience, to be sure; but we want to understand divine truth in the light of reason, data, and personal experience.

As much as possible, you and I want our faith to fit with everything else we know. This is a hallmark of Liberal Theology. Other sorts of Christians may be willing to separate their faith from science or psychology; but not us. Some Christians compartmentalize their faith: not us! Instead, we synthesize our faith. We expect it to fit with science, history, and everything else we know about the world.

Which is why someone like Dr. Ben Carson is completely baffling to us. Here we have a brilliant neurosurgeon, a man of science, who denies the very theory of evolution upon which all medical science and biology are based.

Which seems weird. But, in fact, there are many religious people who substitute faith for thought. Not us! Some people have a faith that is so fragile, they fear that if you pull one thread, the whole fabric will come unraveled. No!

In fact, we liberal Christians would say that hard questions and thoughtful probing are at the heart of our faith, and that our liberal faith leads us to rigorous, clear thinking.

Thus, we don't have to check our minds at the door when we come to worship. For us, no question is off-limits; and no faith assumption is so sacred that it cannot be challenged.

Which leads to the first of four themes, four "Big Ideas" that I want to suggest to you, are the common ground that we share as liberal Christians.

This first one is **individual autonomy**. For many religious people in the world, authority is primarily located in external sources, such as the Bible or the Book of Mormon or the Q'uran. Or, it is located in the priesthood or bishops. Or, it is found in church creeds and doctrines.

However, we religious liberals tend to be quite suspicious of authority. And so, even though we respect our scriptures and we respect our clergy, we also believe that nothing is true simply because a respected authority says so. We liberal Christians believe that people have a right to think for themselves, and make their own judgments.

That's the first one. The second Big Idea is what I had in mind when I said earlier that we **synthesize** instead of compartmentalize. You and I seek to bring together the sacred and the secular. We liberal Christians believe that our faith cannot stand apart from the secular world; that it has to connect, not only with science, but also with art, literature, history, and contemporary culture.

Liberal Theology has always been a way for religion to embrace the Enlightenment, and for the world of science and ideas to embrace religion. We have charted a middle path between religious orthodoxy on the one hand, and a godless secularism on the other.

The third Big Idea in Liberal Theology is **process** or **flow**. We believe that life is all about movement and change. Everything is in flux - in process - and everything is connected to everything else. This is an organic view of the world; and it stands over against a more mechanistic, static worldview.

Liberal Theology does not accept any truth as being unchangeable and immutable. Now that doesn't mean that there is no such thing as truth; it simply means that "God is still speaking." And thus our knowledge and our understandings of truth will continue to change and evolve over time.

That's why we liberal Christians refuse to see the world as being black-and-white; we reject dualisms like good and evil, or the saved and the damned. We tend to see the world in terms of continuums rather than dualisms, because our organic perspective helps us to recognize a fundamental continuity and connection in all things.

Another major difference is that our more conservative brothers and sisters tend to emphasize human sinfulness and moral failure, while we liberals tend to see human nature in more positive terms. While some religions emphasize human depravity, Liberal

Theology contends that each person is a precious and beloved child of God, created in the image of God.

This more elevated view of human nature has led to the fourth and final Big Idea I want to share with you this morning, which is an emphasis on **ethical behavior**.

As you may know, Catholics don't have Sunday School, nor do European churches. Sunday School is an American *Liberal Christian* invention. In 1837, a Congregationalist minister named Horace Bushnell wrote a book called *Christian Nurture*. His revolutionary idea was that young people are not suddenly saved by Christ one day. Instead, children are nurtured into faith, and nurtured toward personal morality and Christian character.

Thus, religious education is not just about learning the right doctrines; instead, the primary goal of Christian education is character formation and personal growth. Thus, we liberal Christians tend to see religion as a means to develop human potential.

And that is why Liberal Theology is famous for its emphasis on social ethics. We believe that we are called by God to help human beings reach their full potential. So we are called, not only to provide services to those in need, but also to help to change things and make the world a better place, by improving social structures, caring for the earth, and creating a more just society for all.

So, four Big Ideas that we liberal Christians hold dear: individual autonomy, synthesizing instead of compartmentalizing our faith, an organic view of reality instead of unchanging truth, and a strong social ethic.

Dear friends, I hope that these ideas resonate with you; and that perhaps this may help you better understand that you and I are indeed part of a long and proud tradition of faithful, thoughtful, and courageous Liberal Christians: who dare to ask hard questions, who dare to think outside the box, and who strive, day by day, to change the world.

Who knows? Maybe you might even join me in reclaiming the L-Word, instead of being embarrassed by it. ☺

Above all, my friends, may we be people of faith without certainty, and yet people of deep conviction. May we continue to move forward with hope, trusting in the gentle, restless, ever-flowing, spirit of God. For Jesus' sake. Amen.