

The First Baptist Church, Midland
Galatians 3:23-29
February 14, 2010 – Chinese New Year

Traveling the Path to Virtue

A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

Theme: Chinese Philosophy Touches Christian Theology

I must say that as I begin this message I am truly flattered. I am not standing in this pulpit today of my own volition. Rather I have been invited by our Chinese community to bring a word on this special occasion to affirm the unity of our Chinese and American cultures. When Jianwei extended the invitation I looked at him and asked, “Do I have to speak in Chinese?” When he assured me that I didn’t, I quickly accepted the opportunity before he could change his mind. So I hope you will find something helpful from this westerner who is seeking to share a word born out of his meager understanding of the Chinese culture.

Now I must tell you that I had fun this week and learned a lot in the process of my preparation. In fact, some of what I’m going to talk about might challenge your thinking because I’ve found some parallels between Chinese philosophy and Christian theology that are amazing. More than that, we’ll be using metaphors in ways you may never have considered before.

But before I get to that, allow me to share a humbling insight that came my way. Since it is the Chinese New Year, I decided to check out my animal. You know, there are twelve different animals in the Chinese Astrological Horoscope, and your animal is determined by the year in which you were born. I discovered that I’m a *Rat!* Essentially this means I’m a bottom dwelling, scum sucking disease carrier. I’m a hoarder and may be perceived as quick-tempered and sharp-tongued. “Yea,” you’re saying to yourself, “so that explains it.”

Well, this wasn’t too uplifting so I thought, “Okay, how about Paula.” It turns out she’s an *Ox!* Evidently, the ox is steadfast and solid, a born leader, quite dependable and possessing an innate ability to achieve great things. She is a tireless worker who is detail oriented and believes in doing things right the first time. The ox is considered to be smart, trustworthy, caring and honorable. If you need honest, steady and unbiased advice, call on the Ox.

Then it struck me... no wonder we’re a match made in heaven. You’ve got your bottom dwelling, scum sucking disease carrier married to a steadfast, solid, dependable, trustworthy, caring, honorable, tireless worker. How lucky can Paula be?

Isn’t it fun to see the traditions embraced by different cultures? This astrological mapping goes back thousands of years. And this morning as we honor this important Chinese festival, there is something else I’d like to introduce to the African American and Caucasian members of our congregation which is also a gift from our Chinese brothers and sisters.

It’s called the Tao Te Ching. A few weeks ago, Jianwei gave me a wonderful gift which I have thoroughly enjoyed reading. It is an ancient Chinese book of sacred wisdom written 6,000 years before Christ by Lao Tzu. Later redactors of the book, divided it into 81 sections. The

word *Tao* means “path,” *Te* means “virtue,” and the word *Ching* means “ancient text”. Hence, this book is an ancient text embracing the wisdom one needs to travel the path to virtue. And it is fascinating because it’s filled with statements that clearly parallel our scriptures... wisdom that came into being thousands of years before our sacred book was written.

Within this wonderful Chinese wisdom literature, there is a fundamental concept called *The Great Integrity*. This Great Integrity is the infinite, undefined truth. It always existed and it is the essence of peace in our world. Moreover, this Great Integrity is the source of our being, and when we become distracted from the Great Integrity, we lost sight of who we were created to be and we bring harm upon ourselves and the world in which we live, including the environment. People who do not embrace the Great Integrity or who do not seek to walk in harmony with the Great Integrity will be broken as individuals and will bring division to their relationships with others. But as we strive to place ourselves in the hands of the Great Integrity, we are fulfilled and peace reigns in our hearts now and always.

Now admittedly there are many in this sanctuary who could speak with much more understanding related to the Chinese story, but I believe I can safely say that as the dynasties and governments of China have unfolded, people have lost sight of the Tao Te Ching and the results have been painfully disappointing because the abuse of power by leaders who have missed the mark has caused great suffering and distress to the Chinese people and their land. But lest we in the western world find ourselves pointing fingers in the direction of our Asian brothers and sisters, let us be quick to realize that we in the western cultures have done exactly the same thing.

It is interesting to point out, I think, that our word for sin in the New Testament literally means *to miss the mark!* In the Tao Te Ching, they talk about “missing the mark.” You see, in both the Eastern and Western cultures there is a similar – dare I say it – theology/philosophy underlying our basic understanding of the world and our place within it. We all sin or “miss the mark” and fall short of the glory of *The Great Integrity*... excuse me, I mean we all fall short of the glory of God. Do you see the parallel in thinking?

Consider a few other clear cut connections between this Chinese philosophy and our Christian theology...

The Tao Te Ching tells us the Great Integrity is... the inexhaustibly fertile source of the universe.

The Bible tells us that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...” (Genesis 1:1)

The Tao Te Ching says the Great Integrity is the spirit of life that never dies... The Bible says, “I am the resurrection and the life... everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25)

The Tao Te Ching says keep filling your bowl, and it will spillover... Keep hoarding gold in your house, and you will be robbed.

The Bible says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal...” (Matt. 6:19)

The Tao Te Ching says allow your love and concern for others to define your essentiality...

The Bible says, "Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love...(I Corinthians 13:13) The Bible says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind soul and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself." (Matthew 22:37-39)

I could go page by page through the Tao Te Ching and find parallels with our sacred Christian writings. For you see, ultimate truth is truth... it can never be trumped and it never changes. Now we as a Christian people find our way to God and to this truth through a unique individual whom we believe to be Jesus, the Son of God. And upon this understanding we take a sharp detour between our theology and the Tao Te Ching philosophy. But you see the point... God has been at work from the very beginning of time nurturing his creation and nursing us to wholeness as a mother suckles her child and protects her well being. And on this note I want to draw one final parallel.

When I was reading the 52nd verse of the Tao Te Ching, I was immediately drawn to my understanding of the feminine side of God. Of course, this side of our Creator is one we do not often consider because most of us are more comfortable with the masculine imagery for God. After all, we do faithfully respond to our God as Father and Son. But is our God limited to gender? Or does our God transcend the qualities we know as male and female? Indeed, I believe He (and notice the pronoun most often used for God)... I believe He does.

Well guess what... we are not unique in this perspective. The teaching of the Tao Te Ching suggests much the same truth. In fact, it sounds like the lore coming out of our American Indian culture. Listen to what it says... "Everything has a common origin that we might call the Mother of the Universe. Once in pre-conscious times we were all a part of this Mother, just as we – all her children – were part of each other... Some thousands of years ago, our species alone issued a declaration of independence from our Mother. Now it is time to reunite with her."

What does this mean? For you and me it means we all find our origin... our beginning... in God. Like our mother, God brings us into the world and nurtures us and calls us into a relationship with each other. But then we strayed from our connections with this nurturing power and presence of God and broke the relationship with our source of being. Now it is time for humankind to find its collective way back to this loving and nurturing God.

I recently discovered through the kindness of John Walter a wonderful video that brings this point to life. It focuses upon the teaching of a guy named Rob Bell. Listen to what he says which unveils this truth... (Listen to the Nooma video entitled, *She*)

Isn't it amazing... the truths that transcend time and culture. As Jesus once said, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free!" *So on this Chinese New Year, may you embrace the God who's bigger than any of our language and who transcends our cultures. May you celebrate all of the images and pictures and metaphors that help us better understand who God is and what God is like. And may we all be comforted by our God as a mother comforts a child. Amen and AMEN!*

