

***Seinfeld* As Religious Metaphor**

Presented by the Rev. Peter Connolly
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When I decided to write a sermon about *Seinfeld* as religious metaphor, I wrestled with the idea of the premise of the show, articulated at the end of Season 4: a show about nothing. Could a show really be about nothing? I decided to take a closer look and I found out that, yes, it was a show about nothing, so it turned out that this is a sermon about... nothing. [Return briefly to seat. Return to pulpit.]

Sorry, I forgot, that was my sermon on Zen.

When I first entered the search process for Unitarian Universalist candidates for settled ministry positions, shortly after graduating from divinity school, I stayed in communication with fellow Andover Newton Theological School graduates, some of whom were seeking positions in churches of other denominations. When I spoke to my friends in the ministry of churches in the Baptist and UCC traditions, they told me of interviews where they were challenged to provide interpretations of various Biblical scenarios-- "synopes," they are called in theological circles.

When I candidated for a position in UU Church of Bowling Green, Kentucky, no such questions were posed to me. Instead, at various meetings and at shared restaurant meals, there were references to what I may call the "Gospel of Seinfeld." There were also references to the "Gospel of Monty Python," but that is a subject for another day. The banter included phrases such as "Not that there's anything wrong with that" and "anti-dentite" and "close talker" and "You're *so* good-looking."

I remember thinking "Lucky I'm a *Seinfeld* fan." The next thought was, of course, "Isn't it an odd advantage to have over other candidates, if they are not *Seinfeld* fans?" And the next thought was: "Wait. This is what it means to have a good match with a congregation-- to be able to meet on the same plane of interests. If we can talk about *Seinfeld* and Monty Python and baseball and movies we like, isn't this a sign of compatibility rather than favoritism?" It was an interesting series of thoughts.

I thought “This is a congregation with an unofficial religion as well as an official one-- the religion of **Seinfeld** affiliation.” Fortunately, I was familiar with the concept from Andover Newton where the unofficial religion on “the hill” was *Star Trek*. That one I couldn’t identify with so much, but I expect that I will hear a *Star Trek* sermon sometime somewhere in the future.

The television show *Seinfeld* began its nine-year run on NBC in July of 1989-- 35 years ago, remarkably. Now might be as good a time as any to take a look at its place in the cultural pantheon and what it is that pulls together people of varying backgrounds onto the common cultural field of Seinfeldiana. This is a show that led the Nielsen ratings in its sixth and ninth seasons and finished among the top two every year from 1994 to 1998. In 2002, *Reader’s Digest* named *Seinfeld* as the greatest TV program of all time. In 2008, *Entertainment Weekly* ranked the show as third in their list of “Top Twenty-five Shows of the Past 25 Years” behind *The Sopranos* and *The Simpsons* [Wikipedia].

When Jerry Seinfeld announced in 1997 that the show would cease production the following season, the news made the front page of all the New York City dailies, including the *New York Times* [Wikipedia].

In preparation for today’s sermon, I watched ten episodes of *Seinfeld* over a day and a half. Now, you might say-- what kind of a job is this-- he’s getting paid to sit and watch *Seinfeld* episodes all day? Well, I don’t blame you. But there’s another side that you may not have considered: I was not confined to a hospital bed and I was not a nursing home patient and it’s inherently unnatural, I think, to sit inside watching sitcom reruns all day. There’s something pathetic about a grown man watching TV in the daytime all day long.

Somewhere I came across a reference to the Commandments of *Seinfeld*; a website called “listafterlist.com” provides a bunch of them including “Thou shalt not double-dip,” “Thou shalt keep greeting cards for a minimum of two days,” “Thou shalt eat Snickers bars with a knife and fork,” “Thou shalt not wear a dinner club’s jacket home,” “Thou shalt not re-gift or de-gift,” “thou shalt not attempt to return to the bookstore a book that one has read while sitting on the toilet,” etc. Well, this is all well and good in terms of getting down the details of your Seinfeld trivia mania, but I’m a little more interested in the broader implications of the behavior of the characters on the show, so I compiled a list of the *Seinfeld’s Ten Rules of Behavior* as

distilled by synthesizing the plot events of the series of the episodes I viewed.

They include:

1. Avoidance is always the best first option.
2. Never do what your instincts tell you. (This is a quote from George.)
3. The highest good is immediate personal satisfaction.
4. Honor thy father and thy mother-- from a distance.
5. Image is everything.
6. Success in relationships depends on your skills in deception.
7. Convenience is everything.
8. Personal convictions are fluid, depending on your desires of the moment.
9. You have nothing to be ashamed of-- if you don't get caught.
10. You are the center of the universe.

At this point, the term “cynicism” floats to my consciousness. *Seinfeld* does, indeed, present a cynical attitude towards getting by in the world (and that seems to be the ultimate goal-- getting by with as much ease, as little labor and as much pleasure as possible).

Being cynical in this circumstance means behaving out of selfish motives with the belief that others, too, are behaving out of selfish motives and so we are justified. In Chapter 2, verse 11-- sorry, Season 2, episode 11, “The Chinese Restaurant,” Jerry, Elaine and George are waiting interminably for a table at a Chinese restaurant prior to their plans to see a showing of *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, purportedly the worst movie ever made. Jerry is looking forward to the sarcastic comments they will make at the theater. George is frustrated that another patron is taking forever to finish his phone call on the only pay phone available when George has a “very important call” to make-- very important to him, so, very important, period.

The long wait for the phone finally ends. George rushes to the phone, but a woman casually steps in front of him and picks up the receiver. George is furious: “I was here before you! I was standing right here!” The woman replies “If you were here before me, you’d be holding the phone right now, wouldn’t you?” George’s furious response: “You know we’re living in a society! You’re supposed to consider other people!” The irony, of course, is that George would do the same thing if he were the woman, with no moral compunctions and plenty of self-justification.

George rails “I can’t believe the way people are! What’s the story with humanity?” This is one of my favorite moments in the series because it boils down the largest of issues, the whole concept of humanity, to the small concern of a man in a restaurant with too much time on his hands obsessed with a phone call to arrange a date, one of the seemingly endless streams of dates with women that never lead anywhere but to the next obsession with the next woman for the shallowest of motives.

And yet, is this not a facet of the human condition, at least here at the one-quarter point of the third millennium for Americans of a certain socio-economic status? Are we not caught up, every day, all of us, with considerations we’d be skeptical of if we were able to step back and look at the larger picture?

The beauty of *Seinfeld* is that it allows us to look at the triviality of the concerns of our everyday life in a way that is entertaining, not jaundiced. The characters of Jerry Seinfeld, Elaine Benes, George Costanza and Cosmo Kramer are self-absorbed twits as the British might say, but the actors succeed in making them charming enough or comical enough, that we can laugh along with as well as at them. It’s a dangerous line, in some ways. It allows the viewer to give a “pass” to behavior that we would find unacceptable if not abominable in persons with less surface charm than Elaine and Jerry and less comic entertainment value than George and Kramer. Personality matters and flattens out the landscape of moral respectability. Something to be aware of and to watch out for when we too easily accept the unacceptable in ourselves or others because there is a cheap trade-off that provides some momentary satisfaction.

In Chapter 3, verse 17, otherwise known as Season 3, episode 17, “The Boyfriend,” Jerry is stymied because of the “man friendship” he is forming with Keith Hernandez, the All-Star Yankee first baseman of the time. He doesn’t quite know whether to shake hands or to offer an oblique sexual gesture because his own motivations are obscure even to himself. This, you might think, would lead him to realize that maybe 30 minutes of meditation were called for; or some professional help might be useful; or a call to one’s minister, maybe, or a wise friend. But instead, Jerry, alone on his island of delusion with his fellow exiles, just wanders over the deserted landscape in search of *bon mots*-- catchy, clever jokes.

In the same episode, different verse I guess, there is an elaborate description of someone who was spat upon, perhaps by Keith Hernandez in action on the field, chasing a fly ball and coming too close to the railing. The question: Was it really Keith Hernandez or someone else who did the spitting? Jerry works out a scenario that disproves the Keith Fernandez theory through a complicated series of steps through which the offending liquid item (they always use phrases like “liquid item”) could not have traveled, unless it was a “mystery liquid item.” As the scenario unfolds, you realize you’ve heard these phrases in these cadences before and, pretty late in the season if you are like me, you realize that they have just been running through the “mystery bullet” objection to a theory concerning the assassination of President Kennedy. Except *Seinfeld* would use the term “JFK” instead of “President Kennedy” as being catchier, more synthetic, less human. I had to admire the audacity of the scenario and the cleverness of its handling of this historical event.

Except for me, the assassination of the 35th president of the United States is not just an historical event. It was one of the central events in the growing up of many of us here in this room. All of us who were living at the time, and at an age when remembering is possible, can tell you where we were when we heard the news that the president was shot and when he died. I was being kept after school for some forgotten infraction as a seventh-grader at Boston Latin School. One of the other kids in the room had smuggled in a transistor radio and he was listening to it surreptitiously through an earphone. On the way out of the room at the end of detention, he gave me the shocking news.

Here we come to a threshold that all of us share and that we call by different names. The terms I use are the sacred and the profane. There is nothing sacred about the assassination of President Kennedy. There is something sacred about the shared nature of humanity that we can hold a shared memory as a shared experience. “We Are There” is not a shallow television network slogan, but a shared reality. We know, together, what it means to have hopes publicly shattered, to see the energy of youth blotted away; to experience the slow-motion unfolding of the explosion of a skull and the subsequent scrambling of a widow-soon-to-be and the confusion of a ceremonial procession turned into a public horror. We have emotions attached to that experience; they are shared emotions and they are sacred. We are, in those moments, being human together.

A snarky series of remarks on a “Seinfeld” episode cannot stain what is sacred in our memories. But it can make it profane. It can encourage us to erase the horror of our experience in the flattening of the moral landscape. We can be entertained, but we have to be careful that when we are, we do not behave as if life is merely a series of casual and inconsequential moments.

Sometimes *Seinfeld* handles the theme of self-obsession and death with a deft touch. In Chapter 2, verse 2, Second season, second episode, called “The Pony Remark,” Jerry makes an ill-considered statement while at a dinner celebrating the 50th anniversary of someone he thinks... vaguely... is the second cousin of his mother. The woman is an immigrant from Poland. Jerry is making frivolous conversation just to get through what he considers the dreariness of the company. In remarks intended to insult people inconsiderate enough to be wealthy enough to be able to afford ponies, he haphazardly says “I hate anyone who ever had a pony growing up.” To this, the old woman of the celebrating couple, named Mania, says “I had pony! All my friends had pony! All right, that’s enough!” and storms off. A few days later, Jerry gets word that she’s died. And, lo and behold, he is in a moral quandary because the funeral conflicts with the final game of the series of Jerry’s softball team. Comedy ensues. Jerry’s narcissism is played out in high relief and it’s easy enough to mock his decisions and the predicament that he gets himself in.

One of the most controversial episodes of *Seinfeld* occurs in Chapter 7, verse 23, Season 7, episode 23, in which George, true to his cheapskate nature, purchases wedding invitations with envelopes of such a dubious quality that the glue is actually toxic, at least if you lick too many. Susan, his fiancée, licks envelopes until she passes out. And, yes, she dies. And yes, George is relieved because despite the fact that he is engaged, he has had second thoughts and has been spending most of his energy thinking of ways-- short of the truth-- to get out of his engagement.

It strikes me that the intent of the writers, as the series progressed, was to “push the envelope” (so to speak) to see how far they could go in getting the audience to continue to stay engaged with the characters while making their self-absorbed behavior more and more disturbing to the viewer. There is no doubt in my mind that the extent of the damage-- the death of a young woman-- pushes the envelope-- the toxic envelope-- past the breaking point. Before the second episode of the finale is over, George is obsessed with

trying to get a date with a celebrity, Marisa Tomei. The inconvenience of the impending marriage is behind him-- he is on to his next reckless passion.

To give the series its due, the writers and producers, Jerry Seinfeld included, were well aware of the knife edge on which they played. Before the last episode aired in 1998, there was a buzz across the nation-- how was the series going to end? In Boston, the *Globe* ran a contest, asking readers to suggest an ending. The best ten were published and they were wonderful. Lots of imagination, lots of engagement. But the writers were determined to push home their point. These four self-absorbed and even self-obsessed individuals, charming and comic as they were, having soaked up nine years' worth of viewer identification, affection and loyalty, were put in a position to be as recklessly narcissistic as usual, but for higher stakes.

Chapter 9, verse 24-- "Revelation." The four find themselves in the small town of Latham, Massachusetts, where they are as a result of an airplane crash that occurred as a result of Kramer's Three Stooges-like behavior. Trying to get water out of his ears, he jumps up and down in the NBC private jet they are taking to Paris for "one last fling," causing the pilot to lose control. They survive and kill time waiting for another flight. As they wait, they are witness to an overweight man getting carjacked at gunpoint. Instead of helping out, they watch and, predictably, make wisecracks about the man's weight while Kramer captures the crime on his camcorder. Then, they walk away.

This time, however, their self-absorption has consequences. This time, their assumption that all actions are more or less meaningless, all results concerning others more or less random, all actions without meaningful consequence come up against a harsher reality. The victim is aware that the crime has been witnessed and that the witnesses are walking away. When he tells the reporting officer, the four are arrested because of the "duty to rescue" law, also called the "Good Samaritan" law which is in effect in eight states including Massachusetts. It requires persons observing a crime to "rescue others in peril." Finally, consequences. Finally, the application of a moral code that recognizes a common humanity as a higher obligation than convenient self-regard.

In Part 2 of "The Finale," various characters from the whole series are brought to the trial to testify as to the character of the four as illustrated by their callous self-absorption in situations known by these individuals.

Testifying to the character of these four are the “bubble boy” whose fragile support system they recklessly damaged, the elderly woman from whom Jerry stole the loaf of marble rye from a bakery, the virgin Jerry dates in the episode that results in the ubiquitous phrase “the master of my domain,” Lola, whose wheelchair was replaced by a faulty one by George and Kramer, the library cop, and others, including Robin, the woman whose child’s birthday party is disrupted by a small kitchen fire from which George flees, tossing elderly persons and children out of the way. Our four friends are convicted and sent to prison where, astoundingly, they engage in the same frivolous inconsequential behavior. Some people never learn.

In the end, there is consequence. In the end, there is justice in the moral universe. But it’s not very satisfying, is it? “We *liked* these characters, Jerry!” Don’t we have a right to *like* the characters on our sitcoms? What’s the world coming to when you’re not even supposed to *like* the characters that are providing you entertainment? It’s just *entertainment*, isn’t it?

I’ll conclude by again listing what I’ve identified as Ten Guidelines for Living in the World of Seinfeld.

When I have finished, I will ask you to join me in a unison reading of our Seven Principles as found early in our gray hymnal.

1. Avoidance is always the best first option.
2. Never do what your instincts tell you.
3. The highest good is immediate personal satisfaction.
4. Honor thy father and mother-- preferably from a distance.
5. Image is everything.
6. Success in relationships depends on your skill in deception.
7. Convenience is everything.
8. Personal convictions are fluid depending on your desires of the moment.
9. You have nothing to be ashamed of if you don’t get caught.
10. You are the center of the universe.

Unison Reading:

“The Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism”

Amen.

Resources: “Seinfeld: The Complete First Season” on DVD;
various “Seinfeld” episodes aired commercially;
Wikipedia articles on “Seinfeld,” “Seinfeld: Episodes,” “Duty to Rescue.”