

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Rescuing a Jesus for Liberals to Love”
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 19, 2017

Call to Celebration

Two thousand years ago, Rabbi Jesus proclaimed the arrival of the realm of God on Earth.

He brought good news to the poor, the outcast, the oppressed and the stranger.

Jesus came to turn everything upside down and on its ear. The first shall be last. Those who mourn will laugh. The rich shall be brought low and the wicked shall get their just deserts.

I don't know about you, but I'm still waiting for all this to happen. And over those two thousand years, many of us have lost our sense of connection with Jesus. Instead of the realization of Jesus' vision, we've gotten an institutionalized version of Jesus' message that has been domesticated to serve the purposes of empires.

The original, authentic Jesus has been lost in the process. I imagine if Jesus did come back, he'd have a heavy heart and a lot of anger witnessing what has been done in his name.

My message to you this morning is *don't give up on Jesus*. He is still there, in the shadows of the gospels poking his message out for us to hear. The institutionalization of Christianity couldn't wipe him completely out.

So let us come together this morning in the spirit of love and reconciliation.

Let us seek and find a Jesus we can love as we join together in the celebration of life.

Readings

Luke 4:16-22

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the jubilee year of the Lord's restoration." And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.

Matthew 15:10,11

10 And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person."

Mark 10:13-14

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not try to stop them, for the realm of God I announce is full of such as these.

Luke 6:20-21

Congratulations, you poor! God's domain,
 the restoration of paradise, belongs to you.
 Congratulations, you hungry! You will have a feast.
 Congratulations, you who weep now! You will laugh.

Luke 18:18-25

And a young ruler asked him, "Holy and good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me holy? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth." When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the realm of God."

Sermon

My heart is tuned for devotion. When I attend a Missionary Baptist Church and start singing, clapping, and swaying to the music, I get emotionally engaged and my heart opens up to the love feast. Then the minister stands up in the pulpit and quotes some passage from the letters of Paul. My mind engages, my faith is challenged and the party of praise is over. And then I hear the Trinitarian formula, "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," and I'm gone.

Love, devotion and praise can feed our hearts and connect us with each other and what is beyond our pitifully finite physical bodies. We are a unified part of a much larger organism of life. Religion exists to help us experience that unity in our bodies in this life. But religions also work very hard to build walls between each other to separate and segregate us.

And no religion works harder to disenfranchise other religions than Christianity. After all, John 14:6 says “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.”

This kind of religious elitism goes against the interfaith spirit of mutual acceptance and toleration of difference. In an age of global community, there isn't room for this kind of attitude any more. And in the process of resistance to theology we reject, Jesus can easily be thrown out with the foul bath water of orthodox Christianity.

Just what is that foul bath water? That water gets contaminated from the very beginning of the Christianity with the focus on Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' identity and mission gets completely erased when he becomes a blood sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the world. Paul, whose letters occupy more space in the Bible than Jesus gets, couldn't care less what Jesus taught or Jesus' vision of the restoration of paradise also known as God's Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. He died, he came back to life, and if you believe in him, you'll have eternal life. That is all you need to know about Jesus. This kind of theology that is widely practiced around the world makes me ill.

Even though Paul didn't care much for the life of Jesus, thankfully, the churches that worshipped Jesus did. The early church had a diversity of beliefs and practices to celebrate his mission and teaching. Of course there was lively debate and controversy about who Jesus was. Was he human or a God? Did he get elevated to the status of God after he died and came back or was he one with God the entire time? All these discussions and debates ended when the Roman Emperor Constantine incorporated the church into the Roman Empire four hundred years after Jesus' death. That began a long process of establishing orthodox theology and eliminating the heterodox. Our Unitarian views of Jesus became heresy.

Another stumbling block for many of us to connect with Jesus is the stories in the Bible that portray him as a miracle worker and faith healer. There are many miracles in the stories about Jesus stilling storms, walking on water and feeding thousands of people. Yes, I've heard Jesus knew where the stones were and people shared their food. But the healings, giving sight to the blind and making the lame walk and bringing the dead back to life all seem a little far-fetched to the scientifically minded analytical types. These miracle stories engage our suspicion that we're dealing with a charlatan which can then shut down our hearts.

The most disturbing aspect of Christianity is its messianic focus. Jesus is coming back. When he does the world will be reordered. The first shall be last. The evil will be punished.

Now, I appreciate the hope that usurious Wall Street bankers will be cast into the pit of hell and indebted minimum wage workers will occupy their offices. But that end times, redemption focus undermines the effort to be good stewards of the earth. What's the point of striving to prevent global climate change, save the land, water and air from pollution and mitigate species extinction if Jesus is returning to fix everything. Christianity becomes the enabler of denial so people can continue to live massively destructive lifestyles compromising both themselves and the planet.

I hope you're hearing I have little love of Christianity. However, I do love the fully human Jesus of whom we have but faint markings of his existence today. But in those faint markings, is a powerful, world transforming message of the heart.

The problem is we have no direct evidence of his life and death. We only have some sayings in the Gospel of Thomas; a reconstructed record of quotes called Q that Matthew and Luke use; and the record of the times from a Romano-Jewish historian named Flavius Josephus. The Gospels themselves are anything but history. They are impassioned testimonials of Jesus' messianic status. Yet hidden in these highly edited and evangelized texts are glimpses of what many scholars think are sayings of the real message of Jesus. Using literary criticism and historical and archeological research, we can converge on parts of the Gospels that communicate the authentic spirit of Jesus.

And in that record, there is much to love.

Fact or fiction, the first story about Jesus to love is his birth story. You have to look long and hard to find much to dislike about that lovely story of his birth in a stable. The idea that a king of faith can have such humble beginnings was a dramatic reversal of Greek and Roman ideas of divinity. Yet it is also consistent with the Jewish tradition. David was a poor shepherd boy before being identified by God as Saul's successor to the throne.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his ministry in his home town of Nazareth reading the words of the prophet Isaiah 61:1-2 that I'd expect were popular and revered at the time Jesus lived. These words are not original to Jesus but speak powerfully the core themes we'll see in other places that guide his ministry in Galilee. Good news to the poor, pardon for prisoners, freedom of the oppressed, healing and relief for debtors would have been a welcome messages for a people in servitude to the Roman Empire. If Jesus came back, I doubt very much he would come back as a white guy from Texas holding a confederate flag. More likely Jesus would come back as a black woman from inner-city Chicago, or as a Syrian or Sudanese refugee, or as a farmer in Bangladesh or a sex slave from Thailand. Jesus' identification was first and foremost with the marginalized rather than the elites.

The Jesus we find in Matthew, Mark and Luke was a rule breaker. He isn't worried about keeping Kosher. If it's the Sabbath and he and his followers walk through a field, pick some grain and eat it, he wasn't worried about that act violating the rule about working on the Sabbath. He didn't worry about washing his hands before eating if he didn't have any water around. What comes out of our mouths matters far more than what goes in. Our intentions decide whether our act is in alignment with God's will not the letter of the law. Jesus advocates the development of our inner life to guide our religious life rather than the formal conformance to the rulebook. This radically undermines the ability of a religious hierarchy to oppress their followers. And Jesus' primary concern was for the ordinary person not the oppressive rules (and taxation) of the high priests in the Temple.

The Biblical purity laws that controlled who had access to the Temple, the center of Jewish life, were the source of a lot of oppression. If you had even a small blemish on your skin, you were banned from the temple as impure and unclean. Marginalized and oppressed people who don't get enough

to eat and can't keep themselves clean *easily* become outcasts of society. Their skin reveals their social status. Jesus' vocation of healing was the work of restoring people to the Jewish community as much as magical healing powers. The words, "by your faith you are healed," can be seen as a knock on their exclusion from the community because of the visible signs of their health.

Another excluded and abused category of person in Jesus' time were children. Until they were of marriageable, child bearing age, they had little social status and suffered a lot of abuse. That was certainly how his disciples would have treated them. So for Jesus to reverse that treatment and elevate the status of the child violated the social conventions of the time.

One of the most characteristic traits of Jesus was this kind of dramatic reversal. In the story of the Good Samaritan, the holy men, the priest and the Levite, just pass by not even getting close enough to check on the poor, injured fellow. The Samaritan, the one reviled by Jesus' listeners, risks his own life to save him. Jesus puts compassion for those suffering first.

Jesus also associates with unsavory people – prostitutes and tax collectors for example. He eats and drinks with them. He doesn't differentiate when it comes to marginalized people. Everyone is acceptable to receive his attention, care and support.

Even rich young men are invited to follow him. Not so easy for them of course. As Jesus points out, the basic rules of morality apply equally to all. But the wealthy have a special test to meet to follow him and reap eternal rewards. Americans, even if we have small bank accounts, live today like kings compared to how the poor lived during Jesus' time. Many landless laborers were paid only enough to eat for that day. If you didn't work, you didn't eat. These people were homeless and had no possessions save the clothes on their back. The realm of God, the kind of paradise Jesus came to proclaim wasn't accessible for the wealthy. As impossible as a camel squeezing through the eye of a needle.

Again, what an incredibly counter-intuitive message! Who doesn't want economic security? Who doesn't want to be sure they have a warm place to sleep or to have food when they are hungry? Who doesn't want access to medical care when they get sick? Jesus just isn't into the concept of private property defended by walls or guns.

Jesus comes to bring to the world a different vision of a world order. Jesus asks, what would the world be like if God was the king? What would society be like if God was the emperor? It sure isn't going to look like what we've got now ... any more than it did back two thousand years ago under Roman occupation. And Jesus tells us what he thinks that world should look like most powerfully in these words:

Congratulations, you poor! God's domain,
 the restoration of paradise, belongs to you.
 Congratulations, you hungry! You will have a feast.
 Congratulations, you who weep now! You will laugh.

These are words that speak to my heart. They don't make sense. They are not a strategic five year plan for development. They don't respect the ruling class or the professional class that keep our society functioning of which many of us are a part. They don't address whether we should fight wars or pay high taxes.

What they do however is challenge the way our minds work to cooperate with systems of oppression. They challenge to the core our stereotypes and prejudices. Jesus gets in our face about any way we might make ourselves special and marginalize anyone else. Jesus teaches a kind of love that liberates our hearts and directs us to build an inclusive community with justice, equity and compassion as a base for all people.

My point is you can love Jesus without embracing Christianity. And Unitarian Universalism is one of the few places you can do that. If this fits you, welcome home.

Benediction

Finally some words from Luke chapter 12 that paraphrase words Jesus is highly likely to have said. A little good news to remember in times of trouble, a few words of inspiration to relieve the clutch of fear:

Don't fret about life – what you're going to eat—or about your body—what you're going to wear. Remember, there is more to living than food and clothing. Think about the crows: they don't plant or harvest, they don't have storerooms and barns. Yet God feeds them. You're worth a lot more than the birds! Can any of you add an hour to life by fretting about it?

Think about how the lilies grow: they don't slave and they never spin. Yet let me tell you, even Solomon at the height of his glory was never decked out like one of these. If God dresses up the grass in the field, which is here today and tomorrow is tossed into an oven, it is surely more likely God cares for you, you who don't take anything for granted.

Don't quit your day job, but know that the power of love endures.