

RECLAIMING JESUS

Rev. Scott W. Alexander
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Sunday, December 12, 2010

Reading Before The Sermon

From "The Christian Paradox" by Bill McKibben, an American Methodist writing for Harper's Magazine, August 2005

At the moment [in America], the idea of Jesus has been hijacked by people with a series of causes that do not reflect his teachings. The Bible is a long book, [and there is a lot in there that is] seemingly contradictory and hard to puzzle out. But...Jesus was pretty specific about what he had in mind for his followers...love your neighbor as yourself. [This] will suffice [as an accurate summary of the core message of Jesus]. There is no disputing the centrality of this message, nor is there any disputing how easy it is to ignore that message.

Love your neighbor as yourself: although its rhetorical power has been dimmed by repetition, that is the radical notion, perhaps the most radical notion possible. Especially since Jesus, in all his teachings, made it very clear who the neighbor you were supposed to love was: the poor person, the sick person, the naked person, the hungry person. The last shall be made first, turn the other cheek, a rich person aiming for heaven is like a camel trying to walk through the eye of a needle... On and on and on – [Jesus'] was a call for nothing less than a radical, voluntary, and effective reordering of power relationships, based on the principle of love.

Depending on which poll you look at, somewhere around 85 percent of [Americans] call [themselves] Christian. [America] is a place saturated in Christian identity. [But today is that identity truly] Christian? The dominant theologies of the moment...[that of the popular televangelists and the consumer-orientated, suburban megachurches] undercut Jesus, muffle his hard words, deaden his call, and in the end silence him. In fact the soft focus consumer gospel of the suburban megachurches is a perfect match for the emergent conservative economic notions about personal [prosperity] rather than collective action. Privatize Social Security...keep health care for people who can afford it...File those under "God helps those who help themselves."

A rich man came to Jesus one day and asked what he should do to get into heaven. Jesus did not say he should invest, spend, and let the benefits trickle down...He said sell what you have, give the money to the poor, and follow me. Few plainer words have been spoken. And yet, for some reason, the Christian Coalition of America – founded in 1989 in order to "preserve, protect and defend the Judeo-Christian values that made this the greatest country in history" – [recently] proclaimed that its top legislative priority would be "making permanent President Bush's 2001 federal tax cuts."

The power of the Christian Right rests largely in the fact that they boldly claim religious authority, and by their very boldness convince the rest of us that they must know what they are talking about. They're like the guy who gives you directions with such loud confidence that you drive on even though the road appears to be turning into a faint, rutted track. But their theology is appealing for another reason too: it coincides with what we WANT to believe. How nice it would be if Jesus had declared that our income was ours to keep, instead of insisting that we had to share. How satisfying it would be if we were supposed to hate our enemies. Religious conservatives will always have a comparatively easy sell.

The [pure and original] gospel [of Jesus] is too radical for any culture larger than the Amish to ever come close to realizing, in demanding a departure from selfishness, it conflicts with all our current [selfish American] desires. Taking serious the actual message of Jesus, though, should [could] serve [to] at least moderate the greed and violence that marks this culture. It's hard to imagine a con much more audacious than making Christ the front man for tax cuts for the rich or the war in Iraq. If some modest part of the 85 percent of us who are Christians woke up to that fact, then the world might change.

(End of Reading)

I shared the words of Bill McKibben precisely because, since our earliest days as a religious movement in Colonial America, this perspective is where Unitarians and Universalists (and since denominational merger in 1961, Unitarian Universalists) have been theologically focused when it comes to Jesus. In fact, the very reason we are a separate American denomination is because the early Unitarians and Universalists radically disagreed with the mainstream Christianity of their time – both Puritanical Protestant and Roman Catholic expressions – about what the life, death and teachings of Jesus meant. Listen to the words of Rev. Theodore Parker from an Easter Sunday Sermon he preached in the 1840s; you will hear echoes of Bill McKibben:

Jesus...is the greatest person of the ages; the highest product of the human race. He taught the absolute religion, love to God and man.... There are duties he teaches us far different from those most commonly taught. He was the greatest fact in the whole history of man...His mind was full of great ideas, his heart aflame with noble sentiments.... Jesus summed up all the law and the prophets in love to god and love to man.... His sympathy was with the oppressed and trodden down, and very practical sympathy it was too.... I do not believe in the perfection of Jesus – that he had no faults of character, was never mistaken, never angry, never out of humor, never dejected, never despairing....

Men claim that Jesus had no error in his creed or in his life, no defect in his character. Then of course he is not a man, but God himself, or a bare pipe on which God plays; and in either case there [was] no example in the man.... He was not a God, but a man, showing us the way to God; not saving us by his death, but leading us by his life.... I think that Jesus of Nazareth was greater than the Evangelists suppose him to be. They valued him for his miraculous birth and works.... I do not believe his miraculous birth and works; I am sure he was not the Hebrew Messiah.... Men vastly underrate the character of Jesus in looking to make him a God. He preached natural religion, gave men a new sight of humanity.... He went out to seek the lost – the poor, who had none to comfort; the sick, who had nobody to heal them; the despised children of Abraham.... He came to seek and to save the lost....

Now we have Jesus for our model...I have always looked on Jesus as the greatest pattern of a man that the human race has produced.... [And then Parker ends] Today is Easter Sunday.... [Many] celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. To me all that is mythology; yet I welcome the day which brings men to a consciousness of that great soul, and wish men could see what he came for, and how he did his work. This seeking to save the lost is the special thing which makes him so dear to mankind.... It is this which makes this memory so precious to the world.

In his time, then, Parker (who, I would remind you, like all Unitarians and Universalists of the day were decidedly and piously Christian) was challenging Christianity to return to what he and the other Unitarians of New England called “The pure and original message of Jesus of Nazareth” – namely the social message of love, compassion and justice which the gospel narratives (the biblical books of Mathew, Mark,

Luke and John) report that he taught all over Galilee. This is the same message which United Methodist and Christian Radical Bill McKibben is articulating to the Christian community today...that the religion of Jesus – that radical gospel of love he taught – has been hijacked by a religion about Jesus whose message is all about personal salvation, by taking Jesus as your personal Lord and savior. Today, Unitarian Universalists, whether or not we self-identify as “Christian,” nonetheless believe that the theological value of Jesus is not what he can do for us...but how we can take his teachings about humanity and social justice into our hearts, and live more compassionate and loving lives. Most Unitarian Universalists (indeed most of you in this room this morning) do not singularly self-identify as “Christian”...for most of you the “boundried Christian narrative and metaphor” – that compact religious story that solely revolves around the life and death of Jesus – is simply too constraining a spiritual place to be.

But none of this is to say – and please hear this loud and clear, friends – none of this is to say that we as a movement have rejected our Jewish and Christian roots, or that we UUs are, as a rule, hostile to the Christian message as we understand it...nothing could be further from the truth. While we can no longer be understood as a Christian denomination, Jesus and his message still play a significant role in our theology, our ethics, and our social action.

All this is by way of my respectfully saying that this Unitarian Universalist, spiritually connected as I am to the life and teachings of the one called Jesus of Nazareth, believe many conservative American Christians have, in fact, hijacked (or at least co-opted) Jesus as this morning’s reading suggested, and have distorted and twisted his life and message into something he would not recognize, nor even vaguely approve of. Indeed, if Jesus somehow came back to earth and found himself in one of the huge suburban megachurches which bear his name, he might angrily turn over the tables – as he did during his own life with the moneychangers in the temple. I believe the spiritual and ethical tragedy within Christianity today – and, as you all know, the Christian family is so incredibly complex and diverse that there are many widely differing schools of Christian theology and expression – but the tragedy within Christianity today is that so many who vociferously claim to be Jesus’ true and most passionate followers have almost totally, in my view, lost sight of his pure and original message. Indeed, one of my friends back in Washington recently had a bumper sticker which read, “Jesus: Protect me from your followers!”

Back in seminary in the 1970s, I took a course in comparative religions from a distinguished scholar named Frederick Speigelberg. I learned many things from this wonderful teacher, but one of his observations I will never forget...he repeatedly expressed his belief that, over time, most religions (indeed maybe all religions!) significantly lose sight of their original, core message; over time subsequent generations of believers change or soften or harden the original faith message into something that is barely recognizable to those who hold fast to the original, pure vision. Both McKibben and I believe this is what has happened to much of Christianity today.

So what is the pure and original teaching of Jesus of Nazareth so much of Christianity has lost sight of? Bill McKibben said it succinctly in this morning’s reading. “Jesus was pretty specific about what he had in mind for his followers...love your neighbor as yourself.... Jesus’ call was for nothing less than a radical, voluntary, and effective reordering of power relationships, based on the principle of love.”

For me personally, this social and ethical message of compassion and care for our fellow human beings is powerfully summarized in the Book of Matthew, one of the four official narratives in Christian scriptures which, while terribly incomplete and in places contradictory due to the fact that they were each

written by several different authors fully 2 to 3 generations after Jesus' death, nonetheless describes what we know of the life and teachings of Jesus. The book of Matthew reports that just days before his Crucifixion, Jesus was teaching his disciples as he often did, by way of an allegorical story. Jesus is imagining God standing at the gates of heaven on judgment day, with two groups of human souls standing apart from one another. In the allegory, he turns to one group standing there and says:

"Come, you that are blessed...[come and] inherit the Kingdom prepared for you...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And [God] will answer them, "Truly I tell you, much as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me... [and then Jesus taught that God turns to those human souls who were not generous and compassionate (who were not just and loving) to their fellow human beings while alive on earth and says] "[But you] that are accursed, depart from me...for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

This, my Unitarian Universalist friends, is the pure and original – and, we must never spiritually forget, incredibly demanding – religion of Jesus. In a Galilee racked with social violence, inequality, and oppression, this simple carpenter preacher taught an outward looking, social gospel of compassion, justice and love. Like my conservative Christian counterparts, I was trained in seminary in rigorous Biblical scholarship and analysis...so I can tell you, as a matter of scriptural and historical fact, that if you look all together at everything Jesus is reported to have said, taught or believed in...almost all of what he preached is about humanity creating a just and compassionate society for all, especially the disadvantaged and despised. His was not a gospel of privatistic salvation (or harsh moral condemnation of those different from himself), but of active love, inclusion, and care for all human persons. And I would point out to Pat Robertson and James Dobson and, so many other mean-spirited conservative Christians that claim to speak for him that Jesus in the historical record did not talk about abortion or birth control...nor about the morality of two people of the same gender falling in love...nor about stem cell research and cloning...nor about prayer in schools or posting the commandments in court rooms...nor about women submitting to the superior authority of their husbands...or any of the other distracting hot-button issues that so dominate the agenda of conservative Christians today. Jesus talked – rather and almost exclusively -- about social justice and economic sharing...period.

In his important book "Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity," Bruce Bower (a practicing Episcopalian) writes of conservative evangelical Christianity: "[This kind of] Christianity betrays Christianity's most precious traditions...it has...warped Christianity into something ugly and hateful that has little or nothing to do with love and everything to do with suspicion, superstition, and sadism.... Quite often [this vocal brand of conservative Christianity] denies the name of Christianity to [real] followers of Jesus who reject [this] barbaric theology. In essence...[conservative Christianity] has stolen Jesus – yoked his name and his church to ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that would have appalled him. A religion whose public faces today include Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, James Dobson ...is...not something the earliest followers of Jesus would recognize as Christianity...."

And then Bower concludes, "If the first Christians were exposed to the rhetoric [and actions of these conservative Christian spokespeople] they might well ask in astonishment, 'How did these vicious people manage to steal the name of Jesus?'"

I believe that when discussing Christianity today, it is crucial to draw a distinction between:

- 1) The original religion of Jesus – the compassionate, inclusive, justice-oriented religion he almost singularly taught and exemplified, and
- 2) The religion about Jesus that has lately taken root in America – the privatistic, exclusionary, dogmatic faith that is taught in many conservative churches, that devotes almost no time to issues of social justice in our world today but instead simply promises eternal life to anyone who simply says he "believes" in Jesus as a personal savior.

To this "Christian-friendly" Unitarian Universalist minister, who also closely identifies with both humanism and Buddhism, being a Christian is more about how you, day to day, actually live with and care for your fellow human beings, rather than it is about who you believe is your personal savior. I like the way the great American poet, Carl Sandburg, once expressed this. "In the great city of Chicago, I know only two Christian men...and they are both Jews!"

More than a century-and-a-half ago, the great Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing said that what our liberal church seeks is not "The one Christ" but "A thousand, thousand Christs." What he meant, of course, is that no matter what spiritual label we choose for ourselves, Jesus' teachings call us to live our lives with more gentleness, more justice, more compassion, more inclusion and understanding...and more love – practical, active love – for persons around us.

And that, dear Vero friends, is what I would have you spiritually focus on this Christmas season in the year 2010. What I would like all of us, as Unitarian Universalists, to seriously focus on this holiday season is how Jesus (and all the other truly great religious teachers of humanity – Buddha, Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, to name a few) – call us spiritually out of the naturally selfish confines of our comfortable private lives, into wider circles of compassion and care for those around us, most especially the poor, the hungry, the homeless, and those who are denied healthcare. I don't know about you, but I am spiritually and ethically chastened by what Jesus said we must do during our earthly lives. Did he really expect me (as he said on numerous occasions as he wandered through Galilee teaching his radically socially inclusive form of Judaism), did he really expect me to "sell all I own and give it to the poor"? The totality and depth of that sacrifice is simply too great for me to imagine. So perhaps that, rather than take what Jesus said literally, we should take to heart the spirit of what he was saying.

In this Christmas season, perhaps it is enough for me to know, deep in the heart, that I – with others of good faith – have a moral responsibility to create a social order where no human beings suffer unnecessarily. Perhaps it is enough for me believe that I have a moral responsibility – and the ability – to live ever more generously and, at a bare minimum, to each year give back in charitable contributions at least 10% of what I make to my community and persons in need...and to demand – again, with others of good will – that my society protects the unprotected, and provides all with work, health care and a decent standard of living. The Jesus that I, as a religious person, have welcomed into my heart is that insistent voice which constantly reminds me that I must – in spite of my naturally selfish inclinations – tend less to self, and more to others. The Jesus I have welcomed into my heart is that insistent voice which reminds

me that I can live with more compassion, more sacrifice, more justice and love. I can become a better, more generous and compassionate person...and so can everyone else in this room.

Christmas must never be about crazed and greedy shoppers trampling store workers to death and punching each other, as I saw on the evening news the weekend after Thanksgiving, as they fight their way toward expensive flat-screened televisions – Dear God, help us foolish Americans! Christmas must be about people like you and me, quietly growing larger, more inclusive hearts. Christmas must be about people cultivating more generous lives, and a true vision of social justice for our society. This is what the simple Galilean preacher taught us...this is the message we must never forget, and must always, always keep close to our hearts. Amen.