

The Jesus I Know

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Central Unitarian Church
Paramus, NJ
May 20, 2012**

Audio of this sermon is available online at <http://www.revmatt.org/podcasts/jesus.mp3>

Readings:

Matthew 13:1-24

Excerpts from “Beyond Spirituality,” 1994 *Berry Street Essay* by Carl Scovel
<https://uuma.site-ym.com/Page/BSE1994>

Sermon:

Over the years I have often heard through the grapevine—which is how I hear about a lot of things— through the proverbial grapevine—second-hand, third-hand, rarely first-hand—I hear about a discussion of my religion. It usually goes something like this:

“What is Matt’s religion?”

“I think he’s a Buddhist...”

“No, he’s a Christian...”

“No, he’s a Humanist...”

“I thought he was a Pan—something—that thing that nobody can pronounce.”

That would be Panentheist.

I preach often using Buddhism, Christianity, Humanism, and Panentheism because these theologies and religious practices speak to me. I have eyes and ears to see and hear them. Taoism, another source I use often, was left out. But so were Paganism, and Hinduism, and Islam, among others. They don’t resonate as strongly with me personally. I don’t hear or see them as well as the others. They are my growing edges, if you will. On the other hand, I am not a Buddhist, or Christian, or Taoist, or Humanist, or Panentheist—and yet I am all of these things. I am not Jewish, Pagan, or Hindu, or Muslim, but if I am to become a better Unitarian Universalist, I will open my eyes and ears also to these faiths.

What I find interesting is the perceived need to label. What difference would it make if I were one of these things, all of them, or none of them? Why in 2012 are we still asking this question. As Carl Scovel says, "Let's get on with it."

It is also often passed on to me—second-hand, third-hand, rarely directly, that I talk too much about God and Jesus. Never that I talk too much about Moses or Buddha, or that I use too many passages from the likes of Thoreau, Emerson, Channing, Parker, A Powell Davies or James Luther Adams, Dr. King—never that I tell too many stories from Buddhism or Islam, Judaism, all of which I do quite often.

I've even been asked if I am trying to make this church more Christian. I am not trying to make this church more Christian any more than I am trying to make it Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Thoreauvian, Emersonian, or Kingian. But I do firmly believe that the dominant force in Christianity will, within the next few decades, be their liberal, emerging wing, who are more like what we Unitarian Universalists have always said that we are. I freely admit that what I am trying to do is to preach and teach a new Unitarian Universalism that will keep us current with the times, will keep us from becoming, as Carl Scovel put it in a different essay than I read this morning: "a slightly eccentric, intellectualistic, exclusively humanistic cult that no one takes seriously." You see, one of our strengths is in our diversity, our pluralism. Not because it is good to be inclusive or creedless, but because in our diversity we learn from each other and grow.

I believe most Unitarian Universalists completely misunderstand this point. They don't have the ears to hear or the eyes to see. We are not a refuge for religious or non--religious dissidents. We are not a potluck religion in which you can be anything you want or believe anything you want. We don't embrace many faiths out of some sense of inclusiveness. We are not the Central Muslim, Humanist, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, Jewish, Panentheist, Pagan, Unitarian Universalist Church...

And yet we are all these things. This is the field of good soil where a crop grows, where we lose and find ourselves ripe for the harvest. We gather with differing beliefs because in that diversity we learn, and grow, and are nurtured. You don't have to BE a Christian or Jew or Pagan to be a Unitarian Universalist or even to celebrate Christmas, or Hanukkah, or the winter solstice. But, we have to understand these faiths if we are to understand ourselves. If we reject Christianity or any other faith outright, neither can we be fully Unitarian Universalist. We have to have ears to hear and eyes to see. Ours is an intentionally complex and difficult faith. We draw from many sources. This does not mean we become many things. It simply means we draw from many sources and we use that knowledge in deepening our own faith.

Historically, Unitarians and Universalists never rejected the liberal Christianity from which they emerged. They never rejected Jesus' teachings or the wisdom of the Bible, they simply rejected the doctrines and the dogmas that sectarian and secular institutions alike have tried to impose upon these sacred wisdoms. Over the centuries we have mistaken those doctrines and dogma for the faith itself. We have lost our ability to see and hear other interpretations.

When challenged by religious fundamentalists about what UUs believe, I have learned to say, because nothing else will satisfy them, "We simply try to follow the teachings of Jesus." This is language that they have ears to hear.

And yet, some of you—perhaps most of you—probably reject my statement as exclusive and too Christian. But if we take Jesus' teaching at their essence—love your neighbor, love your enemies, care for the least among us, turn the other cheek, go the second mile, be like the good Samaritan, blessed are the poor, the peacemakers, the pure of heart, and so on—how can we go wrong? What other prophet of either modern or ancient times hasn't said the same thing, even if the cultural contexts and analogies were different. These are the doctrines that have been imposed by men, neither are they exclusively Jesus' teachings.

Most of the people coming to Unitarian Universalist churches today are not rejecting Christianity outright. They are usually looking for a more inclusive and progressive place to practice their faith, which most often includes Christianity. Buddhists and Pagans, Atheists and Agnostics, Humanists, and Panentheists don't come to Unitarian Universalist churches simply because they don't have their own houses of worship to go to. They come, like Christians, because they are looking for a different way to practice their faith. Because they/you are looking for something more in their/your lives.

Unitarians and Universalists never rejected Jesus' teachings. We have done nothing but embrace them since before our faiths were ever organized by name. All our religious ancestors ever did was reject the restrictive doctrines contrived by religious institutions. Unfortunately, those doctrines, created and enforced by the powers that be, have somehow become the dominant force in Christianity.

Let me say now that I cannot and do not deny any Christian their belief in Jesus as their personal savior, or as a divine part of the holy trinity, any more than I can deny a Muslim their submission to Allah, or any other person any aspect of their particular faith. I often can't win on this point, as I have had Christians tell me that my views exclude them and I have had atheists tell me that my views exclude them.

And yet all I am asking is that you have the ears to hear. One of the fundamentals of Unitarian Universalism that often goes overlooked, that we have learned from our Jewish brothers and sisters, is that there can be more than one interpretation of the same story. There can be more than one truth. This is why Jesus taught in parables. Not to impart an single, absolute truth, but so that many people could hear and see the message through their own eyes and ears.

So let me tell you about the Jesus I know. Because the Jesus and the God I know are probably not the same one many of you have rejected. Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church once said after being confronted by an atheist member of his congregation about his belief in God, "Let's talk, because I probably don't believe in the God that you don't believe in either."

There was a human being in the first century who was called "Divine," "Son of God," "God," and "God from God," whose titles were "Lord," "Redeemer," "Liberator," and "Savior of the World."

Before Jesus ever existed, all those terms belonged to Caesar Augustus. In the tradition of Greek mythology, the emperor was assigned immortal powers and godlike traits to make him more powerful.

To assign these traits to Jesus was to strip that power from Caesar. They were taking the identity of the first Roman emperor and giving it to a Jewish peasant. As scholar, John Dominic Crossan, says, "Either that was a peculiar joke and a very low lampoon, or it was what the Romans called *majestas*, and we call high treason."

A poor young Jewish itinerant preacher calling himself, or allowing himself to be called the son of God, savior, and Lord, was an act of radical non-violent resistance to Roman power. Then he commenced to empower the least powerful as greater than those with legal power. I have often wondered why the Roman authorities didn't arrest Jesus the minute he walked up the mount and began to preach the Beatitudes. Certainly they should have carted him off the moment he rode through the gates of Jerusalem.

His message was both one of high treason and great heresy, whether he actually said and did the things attributed to him or whether the early Christian gospel writers were simply embellishing the tale, they were directly challenging Roman rule. This lends new meaning to the words, "give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

We can look even deeper at Jesus words in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

Today we see and hear these passages through a particular lens, but they are also acts of radical non-violent resistance. Jesus earlier said that he had not come to abolish Jewish law, but to fulfill it. An eye for an eye did not mean violent reciprocity. It didn't mean mutually assured destruction. In Jewish law it was a measured and more humane approach. An eye for an eye was better than a life for an eye. It meant that if you offend me in some minor way I may respond in kind, but I won't kill you or cut off your hand for stealing a loaf of bread. Jesus went even further because he was primarily challenging Roman authority, but doing so in the Jewish sense of the word, without violence. He was advocating justice, not violence. Today we seemed to have blurred the distinction between the two.

By turning the other cheek, when we have been assaulted, we offer the offender the opportunity to offend again, thus increasing the risk that they will be judged and brought to justice. Under Roman rule, even if you were sued, you had to be left some basic creature

comforts. By offering your coat, your only remaining access to comfort, to someone who has already taken the shirt off your back, you have refused to be made lesser, and may put them at risk for taking what is not theirs to take. By going the second mile, one was putting Roman soldiers at risk. They were allowed to enlist citizens to carry their packs a certain distance, but no further. If you go the second mile, then they are at risk for requiring what they cannot.

And even if all of these acts are simply acts of goodwill and humility, they achieve the same purpose. They take away power from those who would wield it over you and remind them that all people have worth and dignity. All are welcome. When people ask me how to explain Unitarian Universalism, or how to be a good Unitarian Universalist, I respond, “Say and do very radical things in very matter of fact ways.”

Of course some of you still haven’t heard a word I’ve said, or you’ve summarily rejected my words as too Christian, or too theistic, or too religious, or too traditional, simply because I am wearing a robe today. How many of you have thought to yourself this morning, or even whispered with someone else, “I wonder why Matt is wearing his robe today.” “Or that’s just too much, too formal, too traditional, too Christian?”

And yet since the protestant reformation, the wearing of the Geneva robe, an academic vestment, was an act of protest—a protestant statement against the exclusive authority of the priests in the Catholic Church. Wearing an academic robe in the pulpit was a radical act of non-violent resistance—an affirmation that freedom, reason, and tolerance had a role in the pulpit—that we are a prophethood of all believers. And to combine the secular robe with the sacred stole? Heresy indeed to some, but also a clear statement that the sacred and the secular are inextricably intertwined. Not at all a symbol of tradition and orthodoxy.

Today, we too often throw out the baby with the bathwater. We have either chosen to forget, or more likely never took the time to know and understand—to have the ears to hear and the eyes to see the message that Jesus brought to the world, which was a complex and difficult message.

The Jesus I know is a teacher who used parable and story to reach the widest possible audience, so that many would have the ears to hear and the eyes to see.

The Jesus I know is a revolutionary who fought oppression, and violence, and unearned power with peaceful means.

The Jesus I know is a heretic of the greatest proportions who said very radical things in very matter of fact ways.

The Jesus I know is a prophet because his words remain with us today ringing as strongly as ever if we would only hear them.

The Jesus I know is human—flawed as we are, tempted as we are, learning as we are. If he were God, then nothing he did or said would have been particularly remarkable. Gods have

always been given immortal powers and qualities. Jesus' humanity is what makes him remarkable, and gives us the hope that we might be able to emulate him. If he were God, why would we even try? We, like Jesus and like Caesar before him, are completely and utterly human.

The Jesus I know is a therapist who listened to stories of tragedy and sorrow, of illness and disease, who offered a loving hand and a listening ear, and then said time and again, your faith is strong, your faith has saved you, let it be done as you have wished.

The Jesus I know is a Universalist who embraced all sorts of unsavory characters: tax collectors and doubters, braggarts and religious zealots, prostitutes and poor fishermen, the mentally ill and lepers.

The Jesus I know is a Christian who chose love over violence.

The Jesus I know is a mystic Jew who lived both in this world and beyond, who chose justice over vengeance.

The Jesus I know is a Pagan who tried on the mantle of immortality not only to challenge the authorities, but because he recognized that we all have within us a spark of magic, a divine spark, that we are all part of the same interdependent web of existence.

The Jesus I know is all of these.

If this makes me a Christian, then so be it. When Rabbi Jesus, the radical Jewish teacher was asked whether he was the son of God. His answer all the way to the cross was, "You say I am."

Amen, Shalom, Salaam, Namaste, and Blessed Be.