

THE FAITH WE DARED NOT NAME
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
November 13, 2011

Thank you, Toni, for your reflection. Thank you as well to Allen, Dillman and also Monica for your partnership in the service today.

And thank you all for being here this morning.

This morning we continue exploring our identity as Unitarian Universalists. Last Sunday I mentioned that it was important we see ourselves as religious. That did not mean we must return to the religious faith of Christianity. We can, however, understand it in a new way.

So this morning I would like to add to what Toni just said about our relationship with Christianity – or more appropriately to Jesus in whose name Christianity got started. Jesus was, after all, a devoted and revolutionary Jewish resident of Palestine.

First, I should mention a caveat. I am not Christian nor have I ever considered myself one. I loved the Christmas carols as a child but not for their theology. Gifts around the tree and a dark room with the fireplace meant much more.

I never went to church until I attended a Unitarian one in 1984. I was horrified to learn in my 30's that I'd been baptized as an 9 weeks premature infant on December 29, 1949. Family and doctors believed I would not live so baptism was a natural precaution in a Protestant New Hampshire family of upper class.

I read about Christian belief as a child but it never made any sense. The idea of original sin, a son of God (who I didn't believe in either) dying on a cross, and the whole miraculous story of his birth didn't add up.

I still resent deeply the Judeo-Christian language of the 12 Step world and have re-written an important passage "How It Works" in AA as a result.

Christianity isn't my cup of tea. Jesus is a whole other matter.

This is why he is important and I would invite us to spend a little time in conversation right after I finish to talk about his legacy some more.

I'd invite us to reconsider our relationship with Jesus in three ways: first, he is one of our most important religious forbearers; second, his ministry of non-violence still resonates with our own view of the world; and third, we do not have to shoulder Christianity to love Jesus as a mentor among others.

First, our recent generations of Unitarians (as opposed to Universalists) seem to have tossed out the spiritual Jesus with the Christian bathwater. The religious humanist movement in the 1920's and 30's helped reframe

Unitarianism of the day to social justice and compassion without the mystery and ritual of traditional religion. The humanist manifesto of 1932 spoke in its Tenth Assertion **“there will be no uniquely religious emotions and attitudes of the kind hitherto associated with belief in the supernatural.”** Other statements in the Manifesto spoke of traditional religion as filled with superstition and not useful in the modern world.

All that aside, Jesus was one of our religious ancestors. Without him, there would have been no stirrings of Unitarianism or Universalism in the early Christian world. There would have been no Servetus to argue that the nature of God was unity rather than trinity. More importantly, the doctrine of unbounded compassion and right relationship might never have become part of our civilization’s ideals.

It’s quite understandable that many of our religious ancestors and some here today have fled tyrannical and unjust religious communities that focus more on sin and power than on the evolution of the human being.

However, let’s suppose you had an ancestor in your family who was a powerful teacher, widely admired, but who was Christian? Would you ignore them or pretend they didn’t exist? Would you hope that their DNA never made it into yours? Would you close your ears every time someone mentioned their name because their teachings were misused and corrupted by the powerful?

I hope I’d be proud they were an ancestor and I’d try to learn from them. Jesus was a founder of our faith. We ignore that at our peril.

Second, can we separate the post-Easter Christ from the pre-Easter Jesus and celebrate the Jesus who practiced non-violent revolution?

We know many examples of non-violent resistance to tyranny. Gandhi practiced it as he attempted to free India from the colonial yoke of the British Empire. Near to home, Martin Luther King Jr. used tactics of non-violent resistance in the Civil Rights struggle. We have seen non-violent revolutions in Europe in 1989 and others in Latin America. The Arab Spring began as non-violent resistance. The Occupy Wall Street movement still does its best to follow the path of non-violent resistance.

Both Gandhi and King learned the teaching of non-violent resistance from the teachings of Jesus. In the reading this morning, Walter Wink mentions three simple verses that would seem on the surface to be passive acceptance. In fact, all three are examples of non-violent resistance that invert the power of the oppressive to the oppressed.

We of Unitarian Universalist faith are justly proud of our own non-violent responses to injustice. We don’t start wars, we don’t wave around weapons, and we have been crusaders for social justice for hundreds of

years. Have we been successful given our small numbers? It's hard to know but I propose a better question: can we lift up with pride the theory of non-violent resistance by our ancestor Jesus?

Third, do we have to take on the identity of Unitarian Universalist and Christian if we are to follow the teachings of Jesus? I don't believe so.

Of course I should note there are UU Christian communities including one here at UUFC. There is an international group called the UU Christian Fellowship. Our Unitarian churches in Europe and some in New England are Christian Unitarians and Universalists.

Most of us are probably not Christian except from our earlier years. We are immersed in a culture that is predominantly Christian, of course, and that tends to flavor our religious and social climate. I mentioned it a few minutes ago about AA and other 12 Step programs.

However, I also am aware that outside the shrill voices of fundamentalist religious groups, there's increasing willingness to find truly interfaith bonds. Diana Eck who is a religious scholar at Harvard University speaks of this as religious plurality in America. In her book "*A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Became the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*" she speaks of the extraordinary breadth of religious views today in America including the non-religious.

Here's an example. Some of you know that this week I was at advanced interim training in Virginia. It was a small class and we were together for five days of intense work. There were two Congregationalists, two Lutherans, two Episcopalians and the instructor was United Church of Canada. I was the lone Unitarian Universalist and I wondered how we'd all get along.

It was quite marvelous. We shared stories about remarkable congregations including ones no one would ever want to visit (this wasn't one of them). We shared horror stories (again, I had no reason to mention you). The first morning I was asked to do an opening prayer. I recited the metta practice that we do sometimes here:

May you be filled with loving-kindness

May you be well

May you be peaceful and at ease

May you be free from fear.

They loved it and asked if I could send it to their email so they could use it at their churches as a prayer. Of course, I replied, and sent it off immediately.

On the last morning, another minister who proudly has a rainbow Christian symbol on the back of her car read a version of Jesus' beatitudes to

us. It is from a clearly contemporary version of the Bible called 'The Message' and is very disliked by traditionalists. I will now read part of what she read as a final prayer before we have brief conversation:

4 "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. 5 "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are - no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought. 6 "You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat. 7 "You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'carefull,' you find yourselves cared for. 8 "You're blessed when you get your inside world - your mind and heart - put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. 9 "You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are..."

May we take those words to heart.