

Draft

**JESUS RECONSIDERED**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson**  
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Thank you, Mary, for your thoughts on Jesus. Thank you, everyone, for being here today. A special thanks as always to our musicians who provide such great music. It's nice to have the predictability of such gifted musicians every week.

What else is predictable every year at our Unitarian Universalist congregations is the dilemma of Jesus. As surely as the sun comes up in the East (and there's a pun there if you hear it closely), twice every year we are required to consider the continuing story and influence of Jesus who could be Christ to many, teacher to some, or awkward guest at the table for others. Twice a year: Christmas and Easter – we have to decide how and if to celebrate these two most significant holidays in the Christian tradition.

Christmas is definitely the easier to celebrate for us. Jesus was born sometime and there's every good reason to celebrate the official birthday of a great teacher even if he was more likely born in March or April. And of course we have made Jesus' official birthday into a celebration of gift-giving, more meals, endless football, rich chocolate, and of course the pleasure of shopping.

Does that mean, however, that Christmas is mostly about gifts, family, food, and other tasks and only in passing about Jesus?

What's a good Unitarian Universalist to do about the birthday of Jesus?

A hundred years ago, neither Unitarians nor Universalists would have dreamed of such a question. Jesus was a great teacher and the center of all Christian faith. Of course his birthday would be celebrated.

The last few generations, the Unitarian side of our religious faith disagreed. More traditional of our churches felt comfortable talking about Christianity, Jesus, and God. Those churches tended to be in New England. Fellowships or other churches that were outposts of religious humanism were far less comfortable with religious language or anything that might smack of supernaturalism or miracles. God was left outside the back door and very rarely did the name of Jesus appear in our pulpits or songs.

I propose it is time to reconsider Jesus as one of our essential religious ancestors.

As Mary mentioned, we had a recent class called “Jesus Reconsidered” here at the Fellowship. We used Marcus Borg’s book “Meeting Jesus for the First Time” as a primary text. Dr. Borg is a liberal Lutheran theologian who was one of my teachers at seminary and this book came out about that time. Dr. Borg proposes two different Jesus’ for us: the pre-Easter Jesus who was radical and subversive teacher of Jewish wisdom, and the post-Easter Jesus who was the Risen Christ of Christian tradition.

For the purposes of our class, I proposed we ignore the post Easter Jesus Christ entirely. If you believe that Jesus was sacrificed on the cross to pay for our collective sin and that he was miraculously resurrected, then that is part of your own religious journey and we honor it. We do not force such a creedal belief on anyone here. Our preferred Jesus is the man who stood up to an empire and a corrupt theocracy in Israel.

We all know his story or at least what’s been brought down to us. We know that he was a deeply compassionate person. He ignored class divisions and outraged the religious authorities of Judea by his teachings. He knew the theology of his Jewish heritage very well and attempted to recast that theology in a more healing and inclusive way.

We know that Jesus must have been a man of considerable courage and vision. Anyone who could stand up to both the Roman and Jewish authorities put himself into a highly dangerous situation. As Dr. Borg and others note, the Romans were not in the habit of crucifying people who made bland statements like **“love one another”** or **“the meek shall inherit the Earth.”** He must have been so subversive and threatening that the Roman authorities had no real choice but to have him killed.

His theistic theology may be difficult for many of us to accept but his social teachings such as those distilled in the Beatitudes must have been as radical then as they would likely be now.

There are any number of reasons why we might look at Jesus in a new way. I will suggest two.

First, I believe we should reclaim Jesus as one of our own great forbears because he was a religious liberal of his own time and place. Here are some of the definitions of a liberal from the Random House dictionary: **“favoring progress and reform; open-minded and tolerant; characterized by generosity and willingness to give...”**

We can probably agree that Jesus was a religious and social reformer. Was he open-minded and tolerant? It would seem so from his interactions with people from all walks of life. His parables and teachings speak to universal themes: **“you have heard that it was said ‘you shall love your neighbor’ But I tell you, love your enemies, do good to those who hate**

**you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you, so that you may be sons (and daughters) of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the wicked and on the good, and sends rain to the righteous and to the unrighteous alike.”** Those words sound rather liberal to me and we religious liberals of any age have to stick together.

Let me add a caveat here. Jesus was Jewish and loved God. I expect he would have been by turns bewildered and amused by contemporary Unitarian Universalism. He would have been far more at home working with people like Shane Claiborne who is a leader in a new paradigm shift to see Jesus as radical. His book called *The Irresistible Revolution*, subtitled "Living as an Ordinary Radical", describes and advocates what he argues to be a truly [Christian](#) lifestyle. His Gen X approach to Christianity is more like Mother Theresa's direct experience rather than pontificating on Sundays.

Such personality traits of young leaders like Claiborne and others speak to personality traits of a human being called Jesus of Nazareth.

Dr. Borg writes in "The God We Never Knew" that the historical pre-Easter Jesus was a man who had a number of personality traits. Among them were these:

**“Jesus was a Spirit person...for whom the sacred was an experiential reality...Jesus was a wisdom teacher. Using provocative short sayings, Jesus (like Lao-tzu, the Buddha, etc.) taught an enlightenment wisdom flowing out of his experience of the sacred...Jesus was a social prophet...he challenged the domination system of his day, an oppressive social order with sharp social boundaries...”**

How might we reconsider Jesus from these personality traits? Would we see ourselves in them? We might be tempted to say we are social prophets. We tend to see social justice and prophecy by default as our ministry. That's most worthy but we also must accept we live in a very different world than the world of Jesus. He lived in a highly theocratic and authoritarian culture where 2% of the people had most wealth and there was absolutely no middle class. There was no education, no books, little music, no medical care, no rapid communications, and no spare food for most. Complain as we might about 'the system', we live far better lives than Jesus and his contemporaries.

We might for a moment wonder if we were **spirit persons** and the sacred being an experiential reality through us. We create art, we love music and books and can be filled with reverence when it comes to us. However, unlike Jesus and other teachers, we probably don't claim to raise the dead or have a special phone connection with God. That's left to the televangelists

on TV and their mission is mostly proclaiming what they insist God would say if God were to call them.

And being a Spirit Person is a little risky in our contemporary age. If we claim to be a mediator of the sacred, others might worry about our medication level. If we claim to be a Spirit Person simply because we know it to be true and not through discernment with teachers, then it's more likely we are indulging in wishful thinking along with an unhealthy dose of narcissistic delusion. We all know people like that.

That leaves the trait of being teachers of wisdom. I suggest we are embodied with that spiritual DNA of Jesus as our ancestor.

When we began the class, I explained our assignments, readings and so on. I also proposed that we not only reconsider Jesus as prophet, teacher and subversive radical but also as a person we could emulate.

Put another way, how might we take up the teachings and characteristics of Jesus as radical teacher of subversive wisdom ourselves? If we and Jesus shared a common humanity, we therefore might share some of his depth of wisdom and insight but for our generation.

I invited everyone to take one of Jesus' parables and rewrite it as wisdom for this generation and this society. I'd also included an option where people could write a parable on what Unitarian Universalism is today. People did both and I hope to share other submissions in coming months.

This particular rewriting by Mary of the Parable of the Two Sons from Matthew 21 is an example of how we Unitarian Universalists can be teachers of wisdom from all religious traditions and not just the ones we happen to like most.

I will read both parables. I would offer up these questions for our conversation time immediately afterward:

**Can we reconsider Jesus as a great Jewish teacher and radical and put aside the Risen Christ of Christian faith?**

**Can we take up the radical parables, stories, and ministry of Jesus and call it our own along with other great teachers like the Buddha, the women mystics of all traditions, Gandhi and others?**

**Can we plant the seeds of a new wisdom of Jesus and others that contains their spiritual DNA to be transmitted to new generations in new stories?**

**Can that wisdom be grown gently and its seeds tended lovingly?**

Here, now, is Mary's new version of the parable of the two sons:

# The Parable of the Two Sons

(Matthew 21: 28-32)

“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

Which of the two did what his father wanted?

‘The first,’ they answered.

Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.’”

# The Parable of the Two Daughters

Virginia Claire’s twin daughters, identical in every way but yet so very different, were approaching their high school graduation day. It was time to have that talk about their futures in the adult world. Their mother discussed the importance of higher education and made them an offer to finance their college degrees.

Megan had other ideas about her future as an adult. Mom, I don’t want to go to college. I want to get a job. Jim and I are very much in love, and as soon as we can save enough money to afford our own place, we want to get married after graduation. I want to start a family before I’m too old. Besides Jim has a good job, and he will support us both.

Marie instantly had visions of campus parties, freedom from parental supervision, and showers of praise from her parents dancing in her head like sugarplums.

She immediately grabbed the golden ring of opportunity and said, “I will accept your offer. I’ve always wanted to become a doctor.”

Virginia Claire had conflicting emotions. While she was excited that one daughter chose to accept her offer in outward obedience, she mourned the future of the other.

A year later, the mother learned the fallacy of lip service and the value of personal experience. Marie had taken the offer and spent a year burning the candle at both ends. Partying took precedence over studies. By the end of the first semester, she was on academic probation, and she was ultimately not

invited to return for her sophomore year. Megan graduated high school and got a good job, but soon realized earning enough money to get married, have a nice home, and start a much desired family was far beyond her reach on a non-professional salary. She went back to her mother and asked if she could claim the offer she had so foolishly turned down a year ago.

Which daughter obeyed her mother? Megan listened to her mother, but thought her way was best. Through her personal experience, she realized she needed support from a greater power to reach her goal only sacrificing nothing more than a little time. She delayed gratification, but ultimately she realized her heart's desire in its full glory. Marie had a different agenda from the beginning, instant gratification and selfish desires. She wasted her opportunity for a better life.