

Jesus and the UU Tradition

Early on in my ministry with the Nashua UU Church I created a tradition for myself, and then got ensnared in it. In one of my early years there I said I'd use the Sunday before Easter—known throughout the Christian world as Palm Sunday—to offer a sermon on my take on the life, legacy, and meaning of the earthly ministry of Jesus, as told in the biblical accounts. It didn't take more than a couple years before Palm Sunday became known as the day for Steve's annual "Jesus Sermon."

As it turned out my ministry up there lasted for 24 years. Trying to do twenty-plus variations on Jesus got to be a bit of a challenge. I got caught in a tradition of my own making. Since my ministries since then have of a much shorter duration, I figure I can revisit it now without getting trapped by it.

I did do a "Jesus Sermon" here a year or so ago using Christopher Moore's delightful book "Lamb." This one goes in some different directions. It's a change of pace from our taking on the very weighty issue of immigration last Sunday. [And consider the invitation I offered earlier in the service to sign the letter calling for just compensation for those who did the work on our roof as an addendum to last Sunday's sermon.]

One bit of continuity from last Sunday, however, is that I'm going to lead off with Woody Guthrie again with a song he simply titled "Jesus Christ."

Unlike "Deportee," of which we heard a very wonderful rendition last Sunday by the choir—and Eric Semple on guitar, Woody recorded this one and sang it quite often. Interestingly enough, he set his words to "Jesus Christ" to the tune of a song called "The Ballad of Jesse James." Part of the words are:

"Jesus Christ was a man who traveled through the land; A hard working man and brave.

And he said to the rich, give you goods to the poor; And they laid Jesus Christ in his grave."

"When Jesus came to town all the working folks around believed what he did say.

But the bankers and the preachers had him nailed to a cross as they laid Jesus Christ in his grave.”

There are more verses, but you get the idea. For Woody Jesus was a working class hero who stood up for the little guy and got himself killed for it. What is of interest to me with all this is that Woody Guthrie—by most accounts—did not consider himself a Christian in any doctrinal sense. He was much more of a universalist in that he believed all of the world’s religions offered certain valuable truths—and he was not specifically tied to any one of them. His attraction to Christianity was an attraction to the ostensible founder of that religion much more than it was to the precepts of faith itself. In writing “Jesus Christ” Woody was using the most iconic figure of the culture he was a part of to address the plight of American workers in the 1930s and 40s.

Ironic as it may sound, I find Woody’s attraction to the figure of Jesus akin to his attraction, for a time anyway, to the American Communist Party. Each provided him an avenue for comradeship and solidarity with the struggling, working class people of his day. If Guthrie regarded the goal of communism as offering a better way of life for those who were barely scratching by on the edge of life, then he was all for it. And if Jesus was a man who, in Woody’s eyes, got himself killed for standing up for the little guy, then Woody would stand with him.

But, as was the case with both Christianity and Communism, Guthrie has little use for any kind for any kind of dogma—be it the secular dogma of Communism or the religious dogma of Christianity. For the CP leaders his message was: I’ll come your rallies and sing my songs, but don’t ask me to sit through your interminable meetings and parrot your party line. For Christians it was: I see in your founder a working class hero, but don’t ask me to attend your services and listen to your preachers and buy into your doctrines. As he put it in his autobiography *Bound for Glory*: “I seldom worship in and around churches, but always had a deep love for the people who go there.”

Okay, time to bid Mr. Guthrie good-bye for now, and to take note of how ubiquitous, how all over the map that is to say, the person or figure of Jesus is. He’s there for Woody Guthrie’s strongly leftist leanings, while also being held up as central to the tenets of the religious and political right wing in this country. For orthodox Christians he is the intercessor between human beings and God—and

they are all kinds of variations on that belief. Then as we saw a few Sundays ago, in that sermon I did on Kurt Vonnegut, as avowed an atheist as Vonnegut was, he still said his moral code derived from Jesus' Sermon of the Mount. He has been the inspiration for countless works of art and music over the centuries, as the anthem offered us by the choir demonstrates. How can the same guy show up in so many different places? Who was that guy? And how can his name and image be viewed in so many different ways?

One answer to my own question is that it is precisely because the figure of Jesus is so shrouded, so hidden from view, that he can be seen so widely and so diversely interpreted. He's a little like a Rorschach ink blot that invites all manner interpretation to those who see it. At the same time, this highly enigmatic figure is such a predominant one in Western culture, that his effect can scarcely be ignored.

Since the title of this sermon is "Jesus and the Unitarian Universalist Tradition" I figure I'd better at least speak to that. Jesus does fare prominently in the story of our own liberal religious tradition. Our faith traditions of Unitarianism and Universalism had their origins, as most of you know I assume, in liberal Protestant Christianity. And while the person of Jesus was central to our Unitarian and Universalist spiritual ancestors, I am certainly aware that such is no longer the case. This does not mean, nor should not mean, however, that Jesus has been banished from our midst. It's just that many of us now follow a religious or spiritual path that is not definitively Christian focused. At the same time I feel we UUs need to be aware of the place of Jesus in our greater narrative. And this is why I make a practice—whether on a Palm Sunday or not—to offer my take at times on this strange and enigmatic figure.

To briefly return to my "Who was that guy?" question, one good, short, and to the point answer comes from someone else I've referenced in previous sermons, the late biblical scholar, Dr. Marcus Borg. In his book *The God We Never Knew*, which I've drawn on previously, he draws a distinction between what he calls the Pre- and Post-Easter Jesus. Of the Pre-Easter Jesus, Dr. Borg says: "This Jesus is a figure of the past, a finite mortal being born around the year 4 BCE. In his early thirties, after one to three years of public activity, he was executed by the Roman authority. That Jesus, the flesh and blood Galilean Jewish peasant of the first century is no more." Close quote; that's it. So where to from there? From there

we go to the Post-Easter Jesus as seen through the various sets of lenses of the New Testament gospels.

It was through the lens of these Gospel writers, and the authors of the New Testament epistles, that the Galilean peasant, as Borg identifies him, became the post-Easter Jesus Christ for Christians. The Gospels are not biographies of Jesus in the manner that we understand biography today. They are documents produced by the First and Second century church to authenticate the claim they were already making about one whom they came to call The Christ. They are portraits and not photographs, and the portrayers already knew the picture they were going to produce before they every produced it. The Gospels also, if read with a proper eye, demonstrate how what eventually came to be called Christianity began as a sect or cult within first century Judaism before becoming a free standing religion of its own.

But even as I probe the question of “Who was that guy?” I have to acknowledge that it not the most important one when it comes to appreciating the true legacy of this shrouded figure. This was the point made by the 19th century Unitarian minister, Rev. Theodore Parker. He was a real radical in the world of mid-19th century Boston-based Unitarianism. He was also a rather stern looking guy if the picture of him in our vestry is any indication.

Parker said the emphasis should be on the teaching of Jesus and not on who he may or may not have been. He urged his fellow Unitarians of his day to concentrate on what he called the religion *of* Jesus rather than the religion *about* Jesus. The religion of Jesus is what he taught about love and compassion and justice; the religion about Jesus is the doctrines and dogmas that later became attached to his name. Parker's point was that the truth of Jesus' teachings did not rest of the personal authority of the man at all; but rather in the inherent and universal truths contained within his teachings.

Rev. Parker noted, by way of analogy, that the truths of Euclidian geometry did not rest of the personal authority of Euclid but on their own inherent truth instead. And the same went for Jesus and his teachings. They contain truths of their own no matter who may be speaking them. I think Parker's counsel is still worth heeding by UUs today. We UUs should not, in my opinion, give Jesus away to Christian orthodoxy; but rather hold up the universal nature of his teachings

about what it means to live a "Godly," if you will, life of love, justice, and compassion.

To loop this back to Dr. Borg for a moment, he wrote an introduction to a book called *The Parallel Sayings of Jesus and Buddha*, which shows many similarities in the teachings of these two teachers of wisdom. Marcus Borg: "Jesus and Buddha were teachers of world subverting wisdom that challenged and undermined conventional ways of seeing and believing in their time and every time...they taught a way of transformation...Despite language and imagery, the way taught by Buddha and Jesus strongly resemble each other. In their wisdom teaching I see no significant difference."

While Buddha lived some 500 years prior to Jesus, Dr. Borg discounts the idea that Jesus was somehow borrowing from him. Borg's explanation, which has overtones of Parker, is that each of these teachers and spirit guides had a transformative experience that put them in touch with certain timeless truths, knowledge, and wisdom that can call humanity to its more elevated self. In the Jesus legends, Jesus of Nazareth gets his wisdom while spending time alone in the wilderness where he resists the temptations of materialism as set forth by a Devil figure. Gautama Buddha, after renouncing his privileged upbringing, also wanders off on his own and gets his message while meditating under a Bo tree. Jesus in the wilderness; Buddha under a tree. It's essentially the same story with different characters, different locales, and different places in time.

Each of them, as their stories and legends tell it, gathered a band of followers unto themselves and deliberately placed themselves outside the conventional workings of their respective societies. From that standpoint they challenged the many conventions and assumptions by which their societies lived with what Borg quite rightly calls "world subverting wisdom."

To stay with Dr. Borg for just a bit longer, he points out that for all the similarities between Jesus and Buddha, Jesus took a more confrontational approach to the powers and societal structures of his day. The Jesus figure of the New Testament makes more of a frontal attack on the worldly powers of his day than did Buddha. This is why, as Woody reminded us, "They laid Jesus Christ in his grave."

The world subverting wisdom of Jesus, as Borg calls it, had largely to do with power. The Jesus figure of the gospels (whoever the person behind the figure may have been) challenged the whole notion of power as dominion--or of power as the means to force one's will upon another. He apparently recognized a certain legitimacy in civil authority when he said "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's". But when he went on to say "Render unto God the things that are God's" I think he was really talking--in a metaphorical way--about another kind of power. He was talking about the power of example, the power of persuasion, the power of witness that comes simply by standing on the side of love, standing on the side of the dispossessed and the disenfranchised of this world. It was from that vantage point that Jesus offered his world subverting wisdom and spoke his truth to the more worldly forms of power and authority.

This was the same kind of power that Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King and Archbishop Romero—to cite but three examples—also chose to adopt and exercise. And for their efforts they, too, were laid in their graves. But they were anything but defeated, even in death. Their legacies, like that of Jesus, live on.

The Palm Sunday story, as it is being told in Christian churches around the world today, appears to be about a popular uprising that Jesus' presence kicked off during the Passover celebration in Jerusalem. It so frightened the authorities that they had him killed along with a few other poor souls who were also slated for execution. The most captivating part of this story for me is the reported refusal of Jesus to resort to any kind of force or violence himself, and forbidding his followers to do so as well. Maybe he knew that he had his own kind of power; one that would outlast his earthly life. He was right about that. The Roman authorities executed any number of leaders of popular uprisings around this same time and place. But the only one were still talking about is the one who lost his life by questioning the very legitimacy of their power itself. World-subverting wisdom, indeed.

One more pass at Marcus Borg as I wrap this up: He points out, correctly, that neither Jesus nor Buddha intended to found a new religion in their respective names. Buddha taught within the framework of the Hinduism of his day, just as Jesus taught within the framework of the Judaism of his day. They each lived and died a Hindu and a Jew respectively. I am not knowledgeable enough to speak

from the Buddhist side of the aisle, but I have to wonder what Jesus would make of the religion that is now carried forth in his name.

There is much, I feel, that would gladden him. The compassion and caring done in his name to those whom he termed "the least of these" would, I'm guessing, be heartening. I think also of the advocacy efforts, whether done in Jesus' name or not, on behalf of what our UU Principles call "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations" and "the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." He would, again, be heartened by such efforts. I doubt seriously whether Jesus would actually care if they were done in his name or not, or if they were done in the name of a religion bearing his name or not. The important thing to him would be that they just get done.

At the same time, it boggles my mind that the name of this simple teacher of subversive wisdom has been appropriated in ways that perpetuate cruelty and hatred. If he could somehow see the terrible wars fought in his name, and the tortures and persecutions that took place over whether or not persons held to the "correct" beliefs about him, to say nothing of the fear and hatred perpetuated in his name today, he may well wonder if he should have ever shown up at all.

But I can't leave it at that. I think the real reason we human beings have, and have helped create, figures like Jesus and the Buddha, and others similar to them, is because we need an ideal of who we can be at our best. It doesn't even matter what names we gave these figures. We need them, however we may name them.

Be that as it may, I do believe in resurrection, of a sort. I believe as do most Christians and non-Christians alike in keeping alive the Jewish Galilean prophet's subversive wisdom. While I no longer adhere to the doctrines that have come to make up the religion *about* Jesus--doctrines he never promulgated himself--I find much that is worthy in the religion *of* Jesus. And I'm grateful for the role that our Unitarian and Universalist forebears played in making that distinction.

As I've been suggesting throughout this sermon--what Jesus, and Buddha, and many other wise teachers of humanity have offered over the ages are particular expressions, spoken within particular historical settings, of a larger voice, and a universal message. That's the point made in our closing hymn, "It Sounds Along the Ages."

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