

Our UU Theological Tapestry: The Christian Imperative of Forgiveness, Love and Service

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This morning's sermon is part of a series that I call "Our UU Theological Tapestry. Today we will be exploring the breadth and depth of the Christian tradition out of which our UU faith was born.

I'd like to begin with a little story. A visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church sat through the sermon with growing incredulity at the heretical ideas that were being spouted. After the sermon a representative of the Membership Committee asked the visitor, "So how did you like it?" "I can't believe half the things that minister said!" sputtered the visitor in outrage. "Oh, good," said the church member, "then you'll fit right in!"

We, Unitarian Universalists, are the first to admit, for good, bad or indifferent, that theologically speaking we are not you're your grandmother's understanding of church. Indeed, many people, primarily those who follow the traditional path of Christian theology and whose emphasis begins with the death and resurrection of Jesus, do not comprehend how we could even remotely be called a liberal Protestant denomination. *Through their lens we are heretics on the best of days.*

Because we have evolved into a faith tradition that embraces many different theological perspectives, it is understandable that there are those who think that we have strayed too far from the Christian mainstream that birthed us, and that we are not worthy of the Christian moniker as it is understood by the majority of Christendom. In fact, there are those among us from an older generation who grew-up in either Unitarian or Universalist traditions who sometimes wonder the very same thing. Yet, if one were to thoughtfully reflect upon the Purposes and Principles that guide our Unitarian Universalist faith journey, one

would see behind each carefully turned phrase the imprint of the teachings of a man from Gallilee, whose life pushed every boundary that separated us from our better selves, from each other, and from Creation, itself.

As Unitarian Universalists, it is true that we do not agonize over Biblical interpretations or doctrinal disagreements or dogmatic mandates. (On that note, I recently heard a joke about a UU Church that had a sign on the front lawn that said, *Bible study on Monday night. Bring your own Bible and a pair of scissors.*) While we are not **that** disrespectful of such an important and influential book (at least I hope not), it is true that with our 21st century minds and hearts we are not especially concerned as to whether or not Jesus died for our sins, or if he meant for bread and wine to actually **become** his body and blood, or whether or not he bodily resurrected to heaven. And for those people who hold those beliefs as central tenets of their Christian faith, it is not hard to understand their perplexity when we, too, claim Christianity as an important foundational thread in our own theological tapestry.

So exactly what is it about Christianity that we embrace, you might be wondering, yourself, at this very moment? Instead of the aforementioned conundrums, we desire to lift-up what we perceive to be the higher truths of Jesus' ancient teachings...truths that speak to the heart of our humanity, **truths that recognize the depths of our failings and the redemptive power of our compassion and forgiveness...**truths that penetrate the layers that define us and affirm our very existence *regardless of our net worth, or intellectual acuity, or moral failings.* Instead, there are those among us who take seriously Jesus notion that the Kingdom of God is at hand, and that our thoughts, our words, our deeds matter in the world of which we are co-creators.

Jesus believed that the transformative power of love, as he understood and explained it, is *always* accessible and is only made manifest when we choose to allow it entry into our own hearts. Plain and simple. ***This is the radical Christianity that we, Unitarian***

Universalists, hold-up with great import. *This is the Christ in whose footsteps we are willing to walk.*

Through the story of Jesus' life and ministry, that is woven from many different threads of perspective and narrative, we are able to see the world through his eyes, as well as through his own suffering and joy. **His anger toward injustice feeds our own.** His tenderness toward those filled with shame or hatred or confusion and self-loathing motivates our own empathy. **His uncompromising righteousness toward helping others claim their birthright of dignity and respect compels us to serve one another.** His silent, healing touch reminds us of our own human hunger to feel, give and receive the deep power of unconditional love. THIS is the Jesus to whom we can relate.

From our very first Principle that says: we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to our last Principle that says: We respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part...*the Christian Gospel inspires us to reflect meaningfully upon our place in the world...how we walk in it, what we receive from it, and what we give back.* After all, ours is a relational Universe. With every breath that we take, we draw from and return to the One Breath. **Call it God, call it Spirit of Life, call it the Source of our Creation, call it what you will.** Right down to our very molecules, we are made from heavenly stardust, infused with energy, passion and dreams. We are the stuff of Creation and are in constant symbiotic relationship with everything within its realm.

The Christianity that informs our 21st century UU journey comes straight to us from the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus, knowing that he cannot compromise his beliefs even in the face of death, goes into the garden to pray. And there, giving voice to his deepest pain, asks that God might take this cup from him. But there is no supernatural intervention at work here...there is only the beating of his own heart in the depths of the Great Silence. **And somewhere in the midst of his own agony and despair the words that he speaks find their answer**

in a swelling of inner strength, unflinching courage, and personal conviction. *It is deep within his own being that he connects with the Godforce of his faith and finds peace with his decision.* It is only then that he is able to do the unthinkable, to transcend the barriers of hatred and prejudice that surround him, and offer forgiveness to those who are blind with fear and would do him harm.

This is the Jesus who inspires UU Christianity. This is the person who speaks to our own suffering, who recognizes our own fears and insecurities, and who sees what is holy and worthy in each of us, even when we cannot. This is the Jesus who refuses to accept the social boundaries that we construct which separate us one from another. **This is the Jesus who recognizes that all that we need to create heaven on earth, we already possess.**

Let's get personal here, and name the pink elephant in the room. It is not a secret that many modern-day UU's tend to throw the baby out with the bath water. When it comes to the enormous expanse of our theological arc, there tends to be a knee jerk reaction when it comes to Christianity. We can talk about Buddha, sex and politics and just about everything else under the sun, but mention Jesus more than once a year and some people start breaking out in hives. For everyone who has left traditional Christianity behind, I understand that there are as many different reasons for their departure as there are people. Yet, when you push past whatever it was that turned you off, you will find that what is left is what is most important. *For those with eyes to see and ears to listen.*

Perhaps in a world gone mad, it was inconceivable then as it is now, for many to believe that such profound goodness in a person, such uncompromising compassion and unconditional mercy could not come from anyone less than a god. *But Jesus, himself, believed in the realm of human possibility.* He never compromised the dream...even unto death. And what was that dream? That love and forgiveness can heal all wounds, **that we are each called to bring forth our best selves to the**

altar of our humanity. That hope must always be kept alive. *That we can accomplish more together than apart.* That when we serve each other, we serve a higher purpose that brings us into a deeper communion with all of Creation.

Lest anyone think that we reject his divinity because of our own intellectual arrogance or 21st century superiority, I would like to say that on the contrary, we are less concerned with all that in part because we humbly accept his call to claim responsibility for embracing our own lives with open minds, and caring hearts and serving hands. It is precisely his humanity and his ministry that compels us, and not what centuries of Christian doctrine and dogma have turned him into.

I once had a Professor of Christology at Boston College named Fr. Joep von Beeck who said, “It’s not that Jesus wasn’t able to sin, it was that he was able NOT to sin.” In other words, he was able to call forth his better self and reject those emotions, words and deeds that harmed others. And is that not what he challenges us to do across the centuries, knowing that we will not always be successful, but encouraging us to keep trying, anyway?

The Christian imperative of love, forgiveness, and service is an important thread in our tapestry of faith, and we should never

Amen and Blessed Be