

Would Jesus Have Been a UU? by Rev. Doug McCusker

President Abraham Lincoln once said, "We should never assume God is on our side, instead, we should pray and worry earnestly about whether we are on God's side." I thought about that quote when I was asked to deliver this sermon by our good congregant's Ray and Natalie Davis. They asked me to ponder the following question, "if Jesus were alive today, would he be a UU?" Juxtaposing Jesus for God, as many people have done, but I do so with no theological claim, I am left with the following warning: "We should never assume that Jesus is on our side, instead, we should endeavor to be on Jesus' side."

On the surface I believe Ray and Natalie are asking if Unitarian Universalism is on Jesus' side. Are the values we promote and the actions we take consistent with Jesus' teachings? To answer that, we must come to an understanding of who is Jesus, what did he teach, and what is Unitarian Universalism. I hope you don't have plans for the rest of the day. But, seeing that we only have 15 minutes or so to plumb the depths of these loaded topics, I will give you my humble opinion gleaned from what I believe to be their essences, not their entireties.

I start by noting the way the Davis' prefaced the question: "If Jesus were alive today?" Aha! My first clue. They are referring to the historical Jesus of Nazareth who lived in Palestine over 2000 years ago, and was crucified by the Romans for the crime of political insurrection. Immediately, I can eliminate the Jesus as promoted by Paul, the resurrected Christ figure, who many Christians around the world would say is still with us in spirit as the living God. But this doesn't really simplify things. Jesus of Nazareth is one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of humanity.

For the last hundred years, Biblical scholars and archeologists have been sifting through the earth trying to identify any remains of this single individual. Talk about a needle in a haystack! The search for the historical Jesus has not yielded any solid evidence of his physical existence. It has however, corroborated the veracity of the contextual setting of the Gospel stories. While we may never find Jesus' DNA lying around, we are learning more and more about the man we know as Jesus.

Jaroslav Pelikan in his book, *Jesus Through the Centuries* cites at least 18 different images of Jesus. He wrote that "for each age, the life and teachings of Jesus represent contemporary answers to the most fundamental questions of human existence and of human dignity." In the first century after his death he was characterized as the Mind of the Cosmos and the Eternal Word of God. In the 13th Century, Thomas Aquinas identified him as a rationalist theologian. Later, in the Romantic period of the 1800's he was viewed as a poet. In the 20th century as a Liberator of the oppressed. And if you want to see how people have depicted him in art over the centuries, just go on the Internet. There are thousands of images, each fitting what the artist wanted to see. We can add Shape Shifter to Jesus' long list of identities.

What I see in the written accounts of Jesus is a first century Palestinian Jew who lived in the Galilee region of northern Israel. He was a skilled laborer during a massive building project by the Romans several miles from his hometown of Nazareth. He most likely found work in Sepphoris as a carpenter. He was a political radical who advocated for the poor and oppressed and railed against the Jewish establishment who got too cozy with the occupying government. For this he was crucified as a revolutionary. In the

3 brief years of his ministry he was a prophet that announced the coming of a Kingdom of God. He was a healer, a wisdom teacher and a mystic who had direct experiences of the divine. He was also illiterate. For his message to survive, others had to write it down after he died. And that is where all the confusion started. How much of what we know are Jesus' true words or words to fit the agenda of the chronicler.

Last week, I asked my students in the Building Your Own Theology class who Jesus was to them. I got answers such as teacher, prophet, saint, holy man, and spiritual example. These were all modern UU's answering that question from their individual perspectives and coming up with similar answers to mine. We all saw Jesus as an enlightened figure who had transcended the ego and selfish desires. To use a metaphor, he is like the first fish who poked his head out of the water to see the clouds and stars. How strange he would have sounded to the other fish having glimpsed something they could not see. But we all saw him as a human. No one said God or Son of God. That doesn't surprise me because one of the historic hallmarks of Unitarian Universalism is the rejection of the deification of Jesus.

Like most religions, Unitarian Universalism has a canon of foundational texts, albeit unofficial, that helped steer the tradition in its early days. One text that caused great controversy when it came out in 1838, is known as the Divinity Address by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson was a former Unitarian minister who resigned his pulpit at the Second Church in Boston over philosophical and theological differences with the prevailing Christianity of early Unitarianism. By 1838, he was already famous as an essayist and poet. The graduating class at the Harvard Divinity School, which was the main Unitarian seminary at the time, invited him to be their guest speaker at their graduation. Emerson delivered a masterpiece that laid down the tenets of Transcendentalism and liberal religion.

In his sermon he offered an understanding of Jesus for which he was immediately attacked, but still resonates with most UU's today. It does with me. Emerson writes,

“Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with an open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it; and had his being there. Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man; and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, ‘I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me he speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think?’ But what a distortion did his doctrine and memory suffer in the same, in the next and the following ages!

Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion. As it appears to us, and it has appeared for ages, it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration about the person of Jesus. The soul knows no persons. It invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preference but those of spontaneous love.”

According to Emerson, when Jesus' followers began to venerate the teacher as God, they distorted the message. Jesus was here to proclaim that all of us are divine, not just him. Jesus saw the soul as the nexus of the human connection with the

universe. And that connection is love. When we strip away our fears, our insecurities and desires we find transcendent love. In so far as we love, we are infused with God. Simply put, God is Love. For Jesus there were only 2 things that we need to do: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus' teachings came out of his Jewish tradition. He was not out to start a new religion, especially one about him. He wanted to help his followers deepen their Jewish faith. His mission was to help others transcend their attachments to laws, material possessions and even family so they could awaken to new possibilities of cooperating, sharing and loving everyone. This was what he called the Kingdom of God. If those words turn you off, think of "enlightenment" or "beloved community."

Mohandas Gandhi in his book *The Message of Jesus Christ* wrote "There is one thing that occurs to me, which came to me in my early studies of the Bible. It seized me immediately when I read the passage: "Make this world the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness and everything will be added to you." I tell you that if you will understand, appreciate and act up to the spirit of that passage, you won't even need to know what place Jesus, or any other teacher occupies in your heart."

Gandhi goes on to write that Jesus laid out everything we need to know about the Kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount. Our readings this morning are the opening words of that famous sermon. Jesus may have been talking to that particular crowd that day, but he was really talking to all of us about justice, compassion, love and peace: "Blessed are the poor, the meek, the hungry for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful, the pure and the peacemakers for they will see God. Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, offer your other cheek to those who strike you. Do to others as you would have them do unto you."

So, if I circle back to the initial question, "If Jesus were alive today, would he be a UU?" my answer would be another question: Do you believe that Unitarian Universalism embodies Jesus' teachings? In other words, are we on Jesus' side? I'd like to think so, at least most of the time.

As religious liberals, we see the divine essence in our fellow beings, which we call inherent worth and dignity. We uphold the essential goodness of humanity and maintain a vision of world peace and global community. We believe that living an ethical life in the here and now is more important than speculating about our rewards and punishments in an afterlife. We believe that liberty, justice and equality in society are manifestations of love. We embrace wisdom from other cultures and seek knowledge with our minds so that humanity may progress and evolve into an enlightened universal consciousness.

Every religion can claim to be the most righteous, but how many are humble? It's not what we say we believe that matters, but what we do in the service of others. At the end of the day, after we extinguish our chalice and walk out of those doors, do we love the poor, the meek and the oppressed as we love ourselves. Would we give away everything we own and follow in their footsteps. Are we the most merciful and pure in heart? Are we the peacemakers, the persecuted and the reviled? Do we love those who do us harm?

Let's face it, UU's fall short just as much as anyone else. We get caught up in illusions of superiority and righteous indignation. We are prone to hypocrisy and

indifference to the plight of others. We judge and hold grudges and see the specks in other's eyes without noticing the log in our own.

On our good days, when we act on our principles and live up to our promises to one another, we could easily be the church of Jesus, or Siddhartha, Mother Theresa, Ramakrishna, Muhammad, or fill in the blank with the holy person of your choice. But so too could the Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Mormons, Protestants, Catholics and any other religion that places love at the core of its teachings. When any religion transcends the need to be right or powerful, and instead serves the needs of the oppressed out of the spirit of love, it moves closer to the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Real prophets, teachers and saints aren't attracted to a religious tradition, they emerge out of it. We are all called to be prophets of love, compassion and justice. We are all divine. We don't need to be Jesus, we need to be who we are meant to be and share that with the world. The soul knows no persons. It invites every being to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preference but those of spontaneous love. Then, there will be no need to worry if we are on God's side. The thought won't even occur to us.