

Jesus: Prophet and Zealot – Rev. Doug McCusker

Here we are on the 8th day of January and we are still trying to let go of 2016. What a year! It feels like one of those incessant coughs that won't go away. I'm sure just as many people died last year as the year before, but it seems like prominent people, cultural icons, were dropping like flies. Three singers that pushed the envelope of sexuality: Prince, David Bowie and George Michael left us too soon. One of my favorite progressive rock bands growing up was Emerson, Lake and Palmer. Only Palmer survived 2016. Right at the very end of the year, the same day that I saw her take possession of the plans to the Death Star, Princess Leia a.k.a. Carrie Fischer died, and her mother Debbie Reynolds followed her the next day.

It was a year of mass shootings, terrorist attacks, Zika virus, fake news, a Cubs Championship and of course, how can ever forget, a nasty, divisive presidential campaign that seemed to hit a new low every day. None of the tough issues that affect our nation were discussed beyond the thinnest surface veneer of sound bites and tweets. All we got was reality TV acrimony, fear tactics and a horse race that reduced our democracy into a bare-knuckle brawl. I would be glad that it's over if it wasn't for the horrendous results.

From my personal vantage point I saw three segments of our society coalesce behind a populist billionaire, celebrity real estate developer who promised to single handedly turn back the global economy and the march of culture to take us back to a fictional era of greatness. The Christian Right, White Supremacists and working class males from the rust belt tipped the scales out of a fear that the power they once enjoyed was slipping through their hands. I know this is a gross over-simplification, but as Frederick Douglas once said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand."

I know we are not a monolithic community in which everyone believes in the same thing or votes the same way. Maybe some of you are happy that Donald Trump is about to be our next president. I don't begrudge you your victory. Democracy is our system and unfortunately, the Electoral College has spoken. All that remains is the Inauguration in 13 days.

But as your pastor, I have witnessed deep grief, anger and despair from you all in the wake of the election. I carry it too. Based on the campaign rhetoric and the Cabinet nominations, I fear for our planet, poor people, immigrants, Muslims, the LGBTQI community and for decent civility in the public square. And that is something that I want to burn up and cast in the air as we enter 2017. I want us to move beyond fear and despair and wake up to the agency that we all possess. I want us to do some soul searching about our deeply held values and principles.

Let's start with the 7 principles that our Unitarian Universalist congregations promise to affirm and promote:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process;

6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Do any, some or all these principles feel like they are under attack? Are these principles worth fighting for? If your answer is “yes”, then you cannot sit on the sidelines and let our ideals be trampled. Now is a moment of truth and clarity. It is not enough to be a Unitarian Universalist on Sundays inside the safe confines of our building while our nation is under siege by those who lust for power over others. This is a time to speak and a time to act. This is a time to be a Unitarian Universalist religious zealot.

What Would Jesus Do? That’s right, you heard me. What would Jesus do? Let me clarify who I mean by “Jesus”. I mean Jesus of Nazareth, the uneducated Jewish carpenter who was born in a backwater province of the Roman Empire; grew up in an era of great social upheaval and vast economic disparity; and who gathered a motley band of followers to overthrow the priestly elite who were in cahoots with the Roman occupiers. I’m talking about Jesus, the man, the prophet and the religious zealot who was arrested and executed for sedition.

That’s not the Jesus of my Catholic upbringing. I was taught about the Jesus of the gospels; a miracle worker who spoke in riddles about peace, love and an ethereal Kingdom of God. He was a likeable character with his flowing hair and white European features. He was always depicted with children and animals in a bucolic setting or hanging from a cross with a halo surrounding him. Jesus the man, was merely the outer shell of a God incarnate. Jesus was born of a virgin, had no siblings and never sinned. He died to open the gates of heaven and establish a new covenant between God and humanity.

This was the Jesus created by the evangelist gospel writers several generations after his death. The gospels are amazing narratives about this enigmatic figure and his ministry, which lasted about 3 years. They were never meant to be a historical record but inspirational stories about a venerated spiritual leader who was believed to be the messiah of the Hebrew prophecies.

The gospels are an example of a literary genre called Hagiography, which is an idealized biography of saints and spiritual beings. Christianity, particularly in the Middle Ages, produced many of these stories, but other religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Zoroastrianism have similar hagiographic accounts of their holy people. Typically, they focus on the lives and especially the miraculous works of the subjects. Some people look down on them pejoratively as uncritical exaggerations or propaganda. I treat them along the lines of mythology, which are vital cultural stories containing wisdom and spiritual meaning that transcend historical facts. They are not to be taken literally, but to be used to understand more deeply the human potential and how we should treat one another.

The gospels of Jesus were all written after the year 70 of the common era. That’s an important fact because that was the year that the Romans crushed a Jewish revolt that lasted 4 years and resulted in the complete annihilation of Jerusalem; destruction of the Holy Temple and a massive diaspora of the Jewish people all over the Mediterranean region and beyond. It was a cataclysmic event in Jewish history.

Mark, Matthew, Luke and John steered clear of depicting Jesus as a Jewish revolutionary so as not to pique the ire of the Roman authorities. Plus, the zealots and insurrectionists were being blamed by most of the Jewish people as the ones who

brought on all the Roman violence. Many scholars believe the gospels were written to separate the Jesus followers from Judaism, who had become persona non-grata by the Romans. Therefore, Jesus the spiritual prophet is the Jesus we know.

Reza Aslan explains, “in the end, there are only two hard historical facts about Jesus of Nazareth upon which we can confidently rely: the first is that Jesus was a Jew who led a popular Jewish movement in Palestine at the beginning of the first century; the second is that Rome crucified him for doing so... Crucifixion was a punishment that Rome reserved almost exclusively for the crime of sedition. The plaque that the Romans placed above Jesus’ head as he writhed in pain – “King of the Jews” was called a titulus and, despite common perception, was not meant to be sarcastic. Every criminal who hung on a cross received a plaque declaring the specific crime for which he was being executed. Jesus’s crime, in the eyes of Rome, was striving for kingly rule, which was treason, the same crime for which nearly every messianic aspirant of the time was killed.”

So, does looking at Jesus as a revolutionary zealot diminish his legacy or make him an irrelevant figure? Quite the contrary. He is someone who I can look up to in my ministry as a courageous truth teller who dared oppose those who corrupted his religion, oppressed his people and attacked the very principles for which he stood. And as best we can surmise, he led a non-violent insurrection. Foolhardy perhaps, especially against the brutal Roman regime. Yet in the end, long after his death, his followers did succeed in overtaking the Roman Empire through non-violence.

Jesus’ life teaches us that though the struggle for justice may be difficult, dangerous and seemingly impossible, we do it because it is right not because we expect instant gratification or even resolution in our lifetimes. Many of the issues that are at the heart of today’s injustices go back centuries, such as racism, colonialism, religious domination, patriarchal oppression and economic disparity. The march toward justice lurches back and forth, two steps forward, one step back. And yet we must keep our shoulders to the boulders for the sake of humanity.

Jesus was an organizer, who methodically built a following from among the poor and rich alike. His moral message about love, compassion and equality was the real threat to the tyrannical powers of his day. And it is the same today. This afternoon, at 12:30pm you all are invited to join us for a four-week study of Reverend Dr. William Barber’s book, *The Third Reconstruction: Moral Mondays, Fusion Politics and the Rise of a New Justice Movement*. I have had the immense fortune to hear Rev. Dr. Barber speak several times. He is truly a prophet and a zealot cut from the same cloth of Jesus of Nazareth.

He writes, “As much as the human being is a political animal, I know that each of us is also a spiritual being. We have learned in our work in North Carolina that, whatever our religious traditions, we cannot come together to work for the common good by ignoring our deepest values. Rather, we grow stronger in our work together as we embrace those things we most deeply believe, standing together where our values unite us and learning to respect one another where our traditions differ.

We cannot let narrow religious forces hijack our moral vocabulary, forces who speak loudly about things God says little about while saying little about issues that are at the heart of all our religious traditions: truth, justice, love, and mercy. The movement we have witnessed – the movement we most need – is a moral movement.”

That is What Jesus Would Do. And that is what we must do: Embrace those things we most deeply believe, stand together where our values unite us and respect one another where we differ. This is the only way that we will be successful in resisting the forces of injustice, oppression and division. Let us turn in our hymnals to #474 and read together the words of Keshab Chandra Sen as arranged by Rev. John Haynes Holmes.
May it Be So!