

This Man Jesus

April 16, 2017

Before today's message... an unrelated reading from Father Gregory Boyle, a Catholic priest in the projects of LA...

Once the homeless began to sleep in the church at night, there was always the faintest evidence that they had. Come Sunday morning, we'd foo foo the place as best we could. We would sprinkle I Love My Carpet on the rugs and vacuum like crazy. We'd strategically place potpourri and Air Wick around the church to combat this lingering, pervasive reminder that nearly fifty (and later up to one hundred) men had spent the night there. About the only time we used incense at Delores Mission was on Sunday morning, before the 7:30 AM Mass crowd would arrive. Still, try as we might, the smell remained. The grumbling set in, and people spoke of "churching" elsewhere.

It was at about this time that a man drove by the church and stopped to talk to me. He was Latino, in a nice car, and had arrived at some comfortable life and living. He knew I was the pastor. He waxed nostalgic about having grown up in the project and pointed to the church and said he had been baptized and made his first communion there.

Then he takes in the scene all around him. Gang members [we had be working with] gathered by the bell tower, homeless men and women being fed in great numbers in the parking lot. Folks arriving for the AA and NA meetings and the ESL classes.

It's a Who's Who of Everybody Who Was Nobody. Gang member, drug addict, homeless, undocumented. This man sees all this and shakes his head, determined and disgusted, as if to say "tsk tsk."

"You know," he says, "This *used* to be a church."

I say, "You know, most people around here think it's *finally* a church." (Father Gregory Boyle, "Tattoo on the Heart," p72)

This evening, we, in beloved communion with our Muslim friends at Roswell Community Masjid, will be sheltering homeless families under our roof - this evening!!! Thank you!!! With this work, we are most definitely a church. That I know!

Our work with Family Promise won't be perfect. We'll mess up. We'll forget things. People will be inconvenienced. However...let's assume best intentions. Let's assume that people are trying their best...because people aren't perfect, people mess up, forget things.

The final idea of our church's mission statement talks about our "search for...justice both within our walls and beyond."

Yet let us not forget that with this work we are living our mission in a unique way – that we are enacting justice by bring those beyond our walls within. What a blessing for us! Again, thank you!

Now for today's message....

Christians believe that Jesus was the Son of God in human person who died for the sins of humanity and was resurrected on the third day... Or not!

Some Christians literally believe that Jesus was the Son of God in human person who died for the sins of humanity and was resurrected on the third day... Yet some Christians believe parts of this only metaphorically.

We can say that this man Jesus who, outside of the accepted, canonical gospels written between 50 and 100 years after his death...this man Jesus who left no paper trail, nothing written in his own hand...this man Jesus who appears in historical records as only a sidebar in off-hand remarks in instances that you can count with about half of the fingers on one of your hands....we can say that this man Jesus has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on human history.

After his death, several groups of people began sharing stories about the unique ministry of this man

Jesus. As time passed, and as one would expect, the stories diverged among various societies into different threads of belief, meaning and significance. The Roman authorities, seeking a unified pagan religion, suppressed, persecuted and killed the early adherents who believed Jesus to be the prophesized Messiah.

As Roman emperor Constantine solidified his hold on power early in the 4th century (he only had to eliminate seven rivals for the throne), some historians believe that he saw something beneficial in the organization of a particular thread of these “Christians.” This thread organized itself in each city by appointing a bishop through which power could be leveraged through local parishes and priests. These bishops reported to the bishop of Rome, a position known as the Pope. In the year 313, emperor Constantine permitted freedom of worship for these Christians. He soon realized that there were many, many other threads of Christianity that existed and that these other threads could potentially threaten unity amongst the empire. He then convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 to establish unity.

Out of this council, and some subsequent councils, was what came to be known as Christian orthodoxy - right Christian belief. If your particular thread of belief about the meaning and significance of this man Jesus contradicted the established Christian orthodoxy, you were known as one who believed wrongly – a heretic.

Radical Christian theologian Matthew Fox says, “If you're going to run an empire, [the orthodox Christian concept of] original sin is a useful idea, because it keeps your subjects confused about whether they even have a right to exist (Matthew Fox, “The Sun,” July 2015, p6).” (Interestingly, racism works the same way.)

The point of the history lesson is that what it means to be a Christian, orthodox or otherwise, was decided upon by people. Decisions could have been made differently under different circumstances.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition springs from six sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves

Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams called our tradition a “living tradition” because our faith “...depends on the principle that 'revelation' is continuous. Our religious tradition is a living tradition because we are always learning new truths (James Luther Adams, “On Being Human Religiously,” p12).” Continuous revelation means that revelation isn’t something locked in the past...locked in a book...never to be made manifest in our world, in our lives.

Some Christians today believe that if you only have faith that “Jesus was the Son of God in human person who died for the sins of humanity and was resurrected on the third day”if you only have faith in that, then you will be saved and will sit with him in heaven. This is a fundamentalist definition of Christianity. You must believe all of it literally...in its entirety.

For me, the principal characteristic of anything fundamentalist is that it is always reduced to a binary....it’s either right or wrong...all or nothing...black or white...no possibility for the unlimited shades of gray in between.

So let’s say you were raised as a Christian....possibly in a somewhat liberal Christian denomination. You were told what it meant to be a Christian and that if you colored outside the designated lines you might be putting your salvation in jeopardy. And when you heard admonitions about this, it made you feel badly....like there was something fundamentally wrong with you....yet you seemed to know in your heart that something about all you’d been told didn’t square with how you either saw Jesus’ ministry or the world.

So maybe you said to yourself, “I guess I’m not a Christian,” and you left it all behind.

And maybe that was years ago...and since that time, with the rise of fundamentalism, Christianity has been further reduced to a binary...where coloring outside the, lines even a little, doesn’t threaten your

belief, but condemns it.

And now you say to yourself, “I KNOW I’m not a Christian,” and Christianity is no longer even in your rear-view mirror.

In Unitarian Universalism, we allow you to color outside the lines you, or another denomination, set for you. We allow you to paint with the colors that speak to you...your colors on your canvas. And in a living tradition where revelation is continuous, ongoing and unbounded, we don’t ask you to settle for binaries. We don’t seek to define, encircle, restrict or confine the boundaries of your faith.

If you feel comfortable answering, I’d like a show of hand of those who were either raised as Christians or came to regularly attend or were members of a Christian church or denomination. First of all, thank you for showing courage to raise your hands, and for moving on from something that wasn’t working for you.

Just as we UUs don’t ask you to restrict your living faith, I am going to ask you not to allow them – the Christian church or denomination from which you came – to define Christianity for you. Don’t let their definition of Christianity lock you into their orthodox prison. Again, orthodoxy, “right belief,” and fundamentalist binaries were arrived at by people.

I am going to ask you to look at your Christianity not as a binary, but as a continuum. I am going to ask you to look at your Christianity not as a destination, but as a path. I am going to ask you to look at your Christianity not as orthodoxy, but as a continuously revealed artwork – a masterpiece of your faith story painted using your colors from your palate.

Might your now permissible outside-the-lines painting about Jesus provide new meaning to your life?
Might it allow you to bring back the beauty of Jesus that you left behind?

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth (Matthew 5: 3-5)

...but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone (John 8:7).

...just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it for me (Matthew 25:40).

Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another (John 13:34-35).

For example, the Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, who delivered my ordination sermon, describes herself as a Christian UU. She says, "For me, my prayer is to understand Jesus and to live in such a way as to make his life a living testimony that comes alive in me every day. In that way, he *is* resurrection, and therefore I can say I believe in resurrection."

While attending religious education at the Christian church of her youth, she raised questions about some of the miracles and teaching. Finally, after frustrating her teachers for weeks, she was politely asked not to return. She takes pride in being effectively expelled from Sunday school.

Christian theologian Matthew Fox, who I quoted earlier, was expelled from the Catholic priesthood by Pope John Paul II. He didn't take it personally, "In fact," he said, "I wear it as a badge of honor to have been silenced by people like that....There are worse fates than having the vow of celibacy ripped away from you (Matthew Fox, "The Sun," July 2015, p6)."

These are just two examples of Christians coloring outside the lines who, rather than abandoning the faith, abandoned the orthodoxy that sought to imprison it.

What can the ministry of Jesus teach us? It can teach us...

...to find the meaning of faith not in a book... but in your heart.

...to find the meaning of true duty and justice not in the masses... but in a single lost lamb.

...to find the meaning of riches not in love of money and comfort...but in love for others.

...to find the meaning of salvation not in a supersized world...but in the tiniest of mustard seeds.

...to find the meaning of success (i.e. capitalistic "salvation") not by serving only those who can help you work your way up the corporate ladder...but by serving the least of your brothers and sisters.

...to find the meaning of humility in leadership not by being served...but by being of service.

If you never were a Christian and were never able to get past the fundamentalism to even attempt to claim to understand this man Jesus; or, if your Christianity has been taken from you by orthodoxy, let the claiming or reclaiming of this man Jesus be an act of Justice. He's yours – not theirs.

May the revelation of this man Jesus in all his gentleness, kindness and mercy be continuous in your life. May his transformative ministry that focused on the "other," – the poor, the outcast, the dispossessed, the invisible, the forgotten, the homeless, a "Who's Who of Everybody Who Was Nobody" - be resurrected in your deeds and actions each and every day.

As Christian fiction writer Wanda Brunstetter says, "Remember as you go about your day that you may be the only Jesus some of your friends, neighbors, and family will ever see (Wanda Brunstetter, "The Sun," October 2014, p48).