

Reclaiming Jesus

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Reading: "I Call That Mind Free" by William Ellery Channing (1780-1842)

"I call that mind free which masters the senses, and which recognizes its own reality and greatness; which passes life, not in asking what it shall eat or drink, but in hungering, thirsting, and seeking after righteousness. I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers; which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith and opens itself to light whencesoever it may come. I call that mind free which is not passively framed by outward circumstance; which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the Infinite Spirit. I call that mind free which does not cower to human opinion and guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world. I call that mind free which does not mechanically copy the past, but which listens for new and higher monitions of conscience. I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love; which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of his children. I call that mind free which no menace or peril can enthrall; which is calm in the midst of tumults, and possesses itself though all else be lost.

Reading: The Original Covenant of the Unitarian Universalist Association, 1961

1. To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship;
2. To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;
3. To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;
4. To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;
5. To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships and to extend and strengthen liberal religion;
6. To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land.

Meditation: Spoken and Silent

As you can see from these readings, we are not limited or weighed down by our history, but invited constantly to move and grow and bloom and live our faith. Over a hundred and fifty years ago, William Ellery Channing, the most famous Unitarian Christian Theologian, invited all people to “open themselves to light whencesoever it may come. And to discover everywhere the radiant signatures of the Infinite Spirit.”

Through the years, we hear his call, and we answer it when we experience a moment of deep connection-- when we feel the dappled sunlight filter down through green abundance to warm our face, when we look into one another's eyes and see one another's souls, when a piece of music or artwork moves us through joy to holiness, this is grace.

Let us now reach into our memories or open up in the present to find a moment of grace, a moment of unity with the ground of all being, a moment of awe, of unconditional love. And let us listen, in the silence, for the soft, gentle song of love.

Message “Reclaiming Jesus”

I want to try an experiment this morning.

Will you please take out your hymnal and turn to hymn number 268 -
Jesus Christ has Risen Today? Otherwise known as the Easter Hymn.

It’s a really beautiful song

There are four verses.

Scan through them, and pick your favorite.

The joke goes like this: Why do Unitarian Universalists sing so slowly?

Because they’re reading ahead to see whether or not they agree with the words.

If you don’t like any of them, turn to number 269,

It’s another setting of the same tune.

Don’t like those either? Try number 61.

Does everybody have a verse they’re happy with?

Diane, would you please play through the whole thing once?

Then I’d like everybody to come in and sing their favorite verse

At the same time.

Different words,

Same song.

Okay?

The first time I went to General Assembly,
the national meeting of all the member societies of
the Unitarian Universalist Association
was in 1997.

It was in Phoenix, and I drove out early

With my friend Carolyn

For professional days.

As a seminarian, it was quite intense hobnobbing

With all these ministers.

So when professional days were over

And the rest of the programming began,

I was a little burnt out,

And I decided to sing with the GA choir instead of going to still more
workshops and presentations.

The guest choir director that year was this guy from Nashville, Tennessee,

And boy was he dynamic!

He picked a really diverse bunch of music,

Including a gospel piece...

“Praise to God in the Highest...praise his holy name!”

It was a blast...one of the most fun pieces I’ve ever sung.

But a significant portion of the choir resigned in protest
And wrote a letter to the “World” magazine, outraged
That they’d been asked to sing this song that
Used non-inclusive, Christian language.
I remember thinking,
“Obviously, they haven’t looked to closely at the hymnal lately.

Some of our member congregations
Are still largely Christian.
I remember visiting one lovely place in Lincoln, Massachusetts,
Where there were two different hymnals in the pew racks,
And congregants regularly did what we just did and sang different words
To the same tune.

And of course, most of the people we claim as part of our historical legacy
Are Christian...
And what a wonderful flavor of Christianity!

For instance, we claim Arius,
The first person to be labeled a “Unitarian.”
Way back during the first Nicene Council,
He argued against the trinity,
Pointing out that there is no scriptural basis,
And believing that Jesus’s humanity
Enriched his status as a spiritual leader
Rather than diminished it.
That makes sense to me.

And we claim Origen, who disagreed with the Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin.
Oh, boy, does that seem important.
I’m hard pressed to imagine a more damaging thing to teach or preach
Than that we’re all inherently bad.

We claim Michael Servetus, who Bill Halligan portrayed this morning:
Who advocated for freedom, and reason, and tolerance,
And was burned for refusing to relinquish his right to interpret scripture
For himself.
He opened the door to a number of different schools
Of biblical criticism,
And that is something I think is really valuable and important.

We claim Francis David and King John Sigismund
Who authored the first state document
Affirming religious tolerance and the separation of church and state.

We claim Hosea Ballou
Who preached over and over again
On Universal Salvation,
Refusing to believe in hell
And instead preaching of a God who loves us
And accepts our suffering here on earth
As punishment enough for our sins.

We claim William Ellery Channing
Who led the movement away from Calvinism
To a faith of deeds, not creeds
and tolerance and the separation of church and state here in the United States..

And we claim hundreds of other liberal religious ministers, theologians, seekers and visionaries
Who over the years have preferred compassion to dogma,
And who have motivated through love rather than fear.
They all have good things to say,
Things that are relevant and meaningful even today.

When I read the New Testament,
I feel like Jesus himself would be pretty comfortable
in a modern UU congregation
If we could magically bring him forward through time.

Jesus' teachings on a personal relationship with God
and his way of teaching (using parables, stories and paradox)
Demonstrates both a willingness to think outside of the box
and a great sense of humor.

I think he'd be very much in harmony with our desire for acceptance
and spiritual growth—
the free and responsible search for truth and meaning—
and with our lack of a creed.

The Jesus I find when I go back to the New Testament
Or when I study my predecessors,
views God as a compassionate and personal force.

Jesus' social teachings reveal a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all people,
as well as an affirmation of justice.

A non-eschatological Jesus with a belief in the immanence of a utopian kingdom of God
here on Earth even fits with the UU vision of a world community with peace, liberty,
and justice for all.

But you do have to get past the language.

I can't tell you how many times in my seminary classes
 We got sidetracked by a conversation about how hard it is
To get past language that is non-inclusive.

As a woman, I do find it jarring,
 To read about "man" and "mankind" and "God the Father,"
But I just update the language in my head,
 Or paraphrase it,
Especially if I'm going to use it in worship at a modern UU congregation.

When I first started doing hospital chaplaincy,
 I used to be flummoxed when somebody would ask me to pray
The Lord's Prayer,
 Or the 23rd Psalm.
As opposed to my Christian colleagues, who knew them by heart,
 I had to carry a little cheat sheet.

But that's nothing compared to the first time I was asked to pray spontaneously.

We didn't really pray in our family growing up.

I had a vague idea that I ought to start with "Dear God," and end with "Amen,"
 But in between, I didn't know what words to use at all.
I think my first few prayers were pretty abysmal,
 Non-gender specific, no prayers of petition,
No anthropomorphizing of the deity...

But with practice, I did get better.
 I stopped thinking about which words worked for me
 And focused on what words would work for the person I was with.
I had to let go of my reaction to the words
 And focus on a connection from heart to heart.

When a patient asked me to pray,
 I would translate that into a feeling.
"I am representing God to this person,
 and he or she needs me to say,
I'm here, I see you, I care."

And then I would open my mouth,
 And the words would just come out.
I have prayed in Christ's name.
 I've prayed to "Lord Father God."

I've given communion,
And said, "This is my blood, this is my body."

Because I knew those were the words that the person I was with
Would hear as
"I am here. I see you. I care."

And because the feeling was genuine,
Because I WAS there with them,
Because I was open to see them,
Because I really did care,
The words didn't matter so much,
They would hear what they needed to hear,
No matter what I happened to say.
There would be a moment of connection
From heart to heart
That I choose to call Grace.

Bill Sinkford, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association,
Has been making a big push in the past few years
To use "language of reverence,"
By which he means Christian words and symbols
In UU worship.

Believe it or not, I don't agree with him.
I think the language we have,
The language of our principles and purposes,
Is plenty reverent.

And I think the trend should continue,
Toward using language that is more inclusive,
Less explicitly Christian,
In our speech and worship.
After all, we want to move toward the future,
Not live in the past.

But I also think there's value in being able to meet people
Where they are,
Using the language they're familiar with.

And there's value in exploring both the Christian scriptures
And our heretical heritage.

I see in society a great need for a Christianity that doesn't limit itself,
But is open to other ideas.
I keep fielding questions, via phone or in person,

From people saying,
“I’m a born-again Christian, but I don’t feel right in my community
Anymore because it’s too close minded,”
I think people are reacting against fundamentalism,
But they still find meaning in the Christian scriptures and liturgies.

What I usually tell these folks is that
Our common worship is broader than Christian worship,
And incorporates other traditions.

And I tell them that if they value diversity,
And would appreciate the opportunity to hear from people
Who are walking a different path,
And if they’re willing to accept those people
Without proselytizing
That they’d be welcome.

But I also tell them honestly that
We don’t offer communion as a part of our common worship
And that most of us don’t see Jesus as the only way to salvation...
That most of us don’t really think we need to be saved,
But that we do think we need each other.

When you put aside the words,
I think we come here to do three things.
To praise the creative spirit that forms and informs us all.
To let down our burdens and offer our wisdom by sharing our stories,
And to be reminded that we are not alone.

All of these things transcend language,
Transcend time,
Transcend our self-awareness
And lead us to a place of connectedness.

Were Jesus of Nazareth, the man, the myth, it doesn’t really matter which,
To appear in this sanctuary, today,
I’d like to think that though we didn’t speak the same language,
We’d be able to communicate somehow.

We could sing some of the beautiful music
That has been composed in his honor,
And beyond the words,
He would hear the feelings.

Joy would speak to joy.
Acceptance would speak to acceptance.

Compassion would speak to compassion.

Pain would speak to pain.

Confusion would speak to confusion.

Hope would speak to hope.

Love would speak to love.

And Grace would happen.

I'd like to end with a responsive reading.

Will you please open your hymnal to number 534?

Extinguishing the Chalice

"Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere; its temple, all space; its shrine, the good heart; its creed, all truth; its ritual, works of love; its profession of faith, divine living."

--Theodore Parker (1810-1860)

