

CONFESSIONS OF A CHRISTIAN HUMANIST

Rev. Kit Ketcham, March 23, 2008

A UU Sunday school teacher is sitting in a circle with her charges to talk about Easter. "What can you tell me about Easter?"

"The Easter bunny brings us jelly beans and chocolate and we all go to our grandparents for dinner," says the gourmet in the group.

"Yes, that's right, and what else can you tell me?"

"We dye eggs and then our mom hides them and we hunt for them."

"All of those are lovely traditions, but Easter is also a religious holiday. Does anyone know about that part?"

"Is it the one where we all bring flowers?"

"Not exactly. It has to do with Jesus..." No response.

"Who died on the cross..." No response.

"And on the third day..."

"Oh, Oh!" a little boy raises his hand. "I know! On the third day, his mother went to his tomb..."

"Yes..."

"And saw the stone had moved away..."

"Yes, yes! You've got it!"

"And Jesus had come out..."

"That's what a lot of people believe..."

"And seen his shadow, and that's why we have six more weeks of winter!"

I'm sure that our kids know a much better, more accurate version of the Easter story, but this joke---which demonstrates the rather mixed ideas that many kids have about religion and holidays---does reveal how hard it can be to communicate the meaning of the Easter season, when there is so much disagreement in the religious world about Christian doctrine and so many secular and pagan associations with Easter. Thanks to my Bremerton colleague the Rev. Liz Stevens for her version of this story!

Last year, I spoke to you about Jesus, who has always been a hero of mine. I talked about Jesus' strength and courage and the life lessons his ministry offered to the world. Jesus' values are very similar to many of our Unitarian Universalist values: to seek justice; to treat people as we want to be treated; to work for peace; to know the difference between material values and true values; not to judge; not to harbor grudges; to be modest and unpretentious; to be generous and not just so we get repaid.

This afternoon, I want to speak to you about viewing Easter through the lens of a Christian Humanist, since we have been examining the Sources of UUism this year. That's me. That's very possibly many of you. We CH's share a skepticism about Jesus' physical resurrection from the dead and the other miracles ascribed to him, but we acknowledge that there are human traits and mysteries which come together to form stories that are both magical and contain great truth.

How can one be both a Christian and a Humanist? By traditional standards, it may not be possible. I know there are orthodox Christians who have a very limited view of what it means to be a Christian and my version of Christianity doesn't fit.

There are also orthodox Humanists who have a limited view of what it means to be a Humanist and my version of Humanism doesn't fit.

Then there's also my view, in the mix, that Jesus was not a Christian and that he was a Humanist! This tends to throw people off, as you might expect!

When I spoke with the kids a few minutes ago about Easter and what they knew about it, we heard some typical things. What might you add to their list of "what do you know about Easter?" (response)

My list is much like yours: Easter is about spring, rebirth, baby animals, flowers, candy, Easter eggs, new growth, death and life. Easter is also about misunderstandings, vision, strength, forgiveness, betrayal, greed, and violence. And Easter is about love and hope and generosity.

How does my Christian self see Easter? I believe that Jesus was human and not a God, so my Christian-ness has more to do with the wisdom of his message: the teachings that the kingdom of heaven is within each person, that it is better to give than to receive, that laws are made to help humans, not hurt them, that love is more powerful than political might, and that out of terrible tragedy can come new life.

This past week, we have reeled after the news of the death of our gifted musician friend Devin Ossman, who played so beautifully for us last week. And I have felt the humanness of the Easter story very deeply. Our community has experienced the loss of a human being whose life was memorable, who gave the world the gift of beauty and creativity.

His death came apparently within hours of his being here with us, sharing his music, with the promise of new moments together to come, and this fact makes this time in our lives most poignant and can help us to understand better how the life and death of Jesus affected his companions and the world in which he lived.

Jesus was a remarkable human being, whose radical ideas changed history. Because of his ideals and his message of a new way of living, he has been deified, made into a God, by the passage of time and the tendency of human beings to want to set our heroes on a pedestal.

The story of Easter, then, has taken on great significance in the Christian and not-so-Christian world. Believers on one side and non-believers on the other side throw darts back and forth and threaten hell and damnation or ridicule and insult upon the other. As their rhetoric accelerates, we can see that not only are there fundamentalist believers, there may also be fundamentalist non-believers, all so sure that they are right that they can't hear any truth but their own.

During this past week, I had set myself the task, the discipline, of reading each of the Christian scriptures describing the individual days of Holy Week, the seven days preceding Easter, and considering them through my Christian Humanist lens. I'd like to share some of those thoughts with you.

Last Sunday was Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week, a week in which the story of Jesus' life rises to a climax and ends in his death and a new life.

The events described in the scriptures of the week are a panorama of utterly human events, performed on a stage with the backdrop of ancient times and cultures. I have seen these things happen in our time as well. They are not peculiar to the first century nor confined to the women and men of that day. We see parallels to these events in our own culture today.

On Palm Sunday, a brilliant teacher and leader hears loud “Hosannas”, a cheer that means “deliver us”, as he rides into Jerusalem humbly seated on a donkey, welcomed by throngs of people overjoyed to see him, eager for his wisdom, hoping for his help in overcoming the misery of their lives, expecting him to overthrow the oppressive regime and set them free.

At the same time, the teacher’s so-called friend and companion is looking for a way to profit from the popularity of this man and makes a deal to betray him.

During Holy Week, the Christian scriptures tell of other events and interactions which show the humanity of this story in vivid detail. If I were to go into detail for each one, we’d be here till next Easter! But let me mention some of the human themes I see playing out during this week in religious history, and invite you to consider them yourself at a later time.

On Palm Sunday, we read of the expectations of the welcoming crowd and are warned about the betrayal by a friend.

The next day, Jesus’ friend Mary generously anoints his feet with an expensive ointment and Judas gripes about the cost, suggesting the money should have been given to the poor.

On Tuesday, the scripture reminds us that Good and Evil are intertwined, that what is good for one person may be evil for another. Judas is expected to betray Jesus; this is God’s will, according to the scriptures, which ought to make it a good thing. But the result is agony and death. On the other hand, by his death, Jesus ensured that his teachings would live forever. What is good and what is evil?

In the reading for Wednesday, Jesus identifies Judas as his betrayer and, angry and humiliated, Judas vengefully sets Jesus's death in motion and contributes to the immortality of his teachings.

In Thursday's scripture, Jesus performs the humble act of serving his disciples by washing their feet, charging them with the responsibility to serve others and to love one another.

On Friday, as the week builds toward its climax, we see a courageous man speaking his truth with integrity to the authority figures of the day and we see a cowardly man distancing himself from that courageous man and denying their friendship.

On Saturday, two secret admirers, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, a tax collector, arrange the burial of Jesus' body, offering the kindness they were afraid to offer openly to a man they nevertheless admired and loved.

And today, Sunday, we recognize the grief and disbelief of the friends and followers left behind. We understand their inability to take in the idea that their leader is truly dead. We don't blame them for wanting it to be different, for we've all been there, hoping to see a different ending. Only one person recognizes that Jesus is not really dead, that he lives on, whether we consider it a literal resurrection or the immortality of Jesus' teachings.

How often these themes are repeated in human history: a visionary leader bursts onto the scene, shifts the trajectory of culture, suffers at the hands of friends and enemies, and comes to a tragic end. Few heroes live out their lives in peace and quiet. Most sacrifice themselves on the altar of altruism.

Only in the movies do heroes ride off into the sunset to rescue fair damsels (or nations) another day. Most suffer the slings and arrows of opposition as well as the sweetness of approval and a sense of accomplishment. We see this right now in our presidential election campaign.

Most of us are not heroes in the way of Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, Shane , Wonder Woman, Xena, and others. Most of us just put one foot in front of the other, day in and day out, and if we change the trajectory of culture, it's in very tiny increments. And we all experience betrayals both large and small, in marriage, in health, in work, in family, in friends.

I see Jesus as a young man who has done a lot of thinking and study about his religious heritage, has diverged from the traditional path and has developed a theology that is focused on lovingkindness instead of obeying rigid laws which hurt people.

Those whose job it is to uphold those rigid laws are fearful. Does his message mean chaos in their world? They use the disappointment and frustration of Judas, a man who had expected Jesus to rise up as a rebel leader against Roman rule, to bring down this charismatic leader who hoped to change Jewish culture and who taught a way of life so different from the rigid purity laws.

Using his Jewish heritage and culture as a foundation, Jesus sought to help people see that true freedom from oppression lay within, that an inner life in relationship with the Holy was more to be prized than the overthrow of Caesar's rule. He planted this seed at that time and lived it out himself, that we might have a model for our own lives.

Yet even those who profess to take Jesus' message most seriously often find themselves (ourselves?) ignoring the inner life in favor of fighting windmills. I certainly do this. I criticize others' behavior or beliefs at times while neglecting to nurture my own relationship with the Holy.

Holy Week and Easter can be a time for self-examination, for considering our inner lives and how our lives compare to Jesus' classic example of goodness and mercy. We are here to deliver the world---hence, the Hosanna! And in so doing, we will struggle against the criticism and undermining by those who are disappointed in our efforts---the Judas' kiss.

It is an age-old challenge for human living. You may be punished for the good you do in the world. Do good anyway.

During this week of thinking about the events which led to Jesus' death on the cross and the resurrection story, whatever its actual facts might be, it popped into my head to wonder, "what would it have been like for Jesus to be in that dark place, having been to hell and back, perhaps both literally and figuratively, and then to see the light begin to grow, to see the stone, the barrier roll away, and to be free of binding shroud and painful wounds?"

And it occurred to me that many times we humans are in such a dark place---our hearts are dead from grief, from addiction, from illness, from abandonment, from the host of human disasters to which we are heir. And very often, a light begins to appear, perhaps slowly at first, perhaps imperceptible to others, until we find new life outside the tomb which had imprisoned us.

We have all been there, in one way or another. We have despaired over the turn of life's events; we have wondered if we will recover from the losses, from the illnesses, from the upheavals we've experienced.

On Holy Saturday, the day when Jesus' family and friends are most bereft, most despairing, not remembering, in their grief, that he has said he will be with them always, we witness the simple kindness of Joseph and Nicodemus in preparing Jesus' body, generously bringing the linens and the special spices used in burial, offering Joseph's own tomb for Jesus' body, rolling a stone across the doorway themselves so that others need not take on this task.

And in these acts of human kindness, the seeds of renewal are sown. Because, according to the scriptures, Jesus was no longer in the tomb the next day, the Sabbath. And here the mystery begins. Was his body removed by his enemies? By his friends? He had said he would be with them always; did that mean physically or spiritually? We can't know for sure, though we are pretty certain that dead bodies don't come back to life, despite all the ghost stories we've heard.

On the other hand, we recognize the reality that immense ideas don't die, that timeless wisdom is immortal, that love never ends, that there is indeed, in these ways, life beyond death.

And in that realization, my Christian humanism finds hope and comfort. I understand that my life on this planet is limited, that I have only a certain, unknown, amount of time to do what I can do. I have learned that there is light beyond the darkness and that I can learn from even the most grievous sorrow, finding healing in a new path, a new life.

In my darkest times, I have experienced the kindness and generosity of those around me. And whether or not I have shifted the trajectory of culture one iota, I feel joy that I am living in this time and place, and each Easter reminds me that new life is always there if I will just accept it.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Hymn # 274, “Dear Mother-Father of us all”

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our generosity and kindness to each other is our legacy, the way our lives will be remembered. May we live out our ideals daily, expressing our love for each other, and offering goodness and mercy at every opportunity, that our integrity will be unblemished and our lives a beacon of hope. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.