

## Revisiting the J-Word

### Readings:

From the Gospel of Matthew, 22:40:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two Commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

From an article by Bill McKibbin, in the August 2005 issue of Harpers Magazine:

“Since the days of Constantine, emperors and rich men have sought to co-opt the teachings of Jesus. As in so many areas of our increasingly market-tested lives, the co-opters—the TV men, the politicians, the Christian “interest groups”—have found a way to make each of us complicit in that travesty, too. They have invited us to subvert the church of Jesus even as we celebrate it. With their help we have made golden calves of ourselves—become a nation of terrified, self-obsessed idols. It works, and it may well keep working for a long time to come. When Americans hunger for selfless love and are fed only love of self, they will remain hungry, and too often hungry people just come back for more of the same.”

**Sermon: “Revisiting the J-Word” by Bill Graves      October  
2005**

I’ve been attending UU churches for over 35 years. One of the things I actually like to do best is sing in choirs. A number of years ago I remember vividly our choir director saying that an unwritten rule around here is the G-word doesn’t get uttered more than 1-2 times in a service and the J-word better not be mentioned at all--except limited use is tolerated on Christmas and Easter, I guess for the sake of nostalgia. We seemed more comfortable talking about Buddha or Vishnu or Mohammad.

For most of my adult life that word, “Jesus”, conjured up two pretty settled images: First, for me, it represented *a discredited worldview preserved mainly by the ignorant for the sake of false comfort*. Doesn’t that make you want to smack your lips with smugness? Secondly, when I cast my gaze upon all those other misguided religions out there, Jesus represented, for them, *a sacred relic to be protected from insight at all costs*.

I think the seeds of my phobia were planted in my formative years when I was told every Sunday that the whole ball game was about “believing”. “Faith” was the number one goal and criteria of a good, Christian life. Faith that Jesus Christ was “the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God of God, Light of light, true God from true God, begotten not made...” Begotten not made? Who has a clue what such words from the Nicene Creed mean?

No matter how hard I tried I was unable to make myself just “believe.” I wondered how many others could either but just kept their mouth’s shut. So, since I couldn’t believe I shut myself off for nearly 45 years. Some of you

may be able to identify with that. But then, for me, along came Seattle U STM. I could hide no longer since I was confronted by a required course. That course was Christology: An opportunity to endure a dousing by the “J-word” in monsoon proportions.

Early on in this course I squared off against writings of a professor from Oregon State Univ. named Marcus Borg. I started reading a book of his intriguingly titled: “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time”. So here is Borg, one of the leading, Christologists in the world, saying he never could really “believe” all that stuff about Jesus either. For Borg, leading a “Christian life” was not primarily about “faith” in dogma, it was about having sympathy with and incorporating into one’s life Jesus’ major teachings, how he lived. This simple change in focus encouraged me to take a second look.

Let me offer a huge disclaimer here: I am by no means trying to convert anybody today. Many of us have gone beyond considering ourselves to be “Christians”, at least with a capital “C”, or in a way that is exclusive to wisdom from other sources. What I am offering, however, is testimony that when an old UU like me meets Jesus again for the first time, an older adage comes to mind: Did I perhaps throw some of the baby out with the bath water? Indeed, has our dominant culture not kept the bath water but ignored the baby?

So what I’d like to do today is take a very cursory look at that “baby”--what for me is at the heart of Jesus’ mission and teaching. And, I’d like to do that in somewhat of a dialogue with a founder of the Unitarian movement almost two hundred years ago, a prominent Boston clergyman named William Ellery Channing. I suggest this is a fitting and proper thing to do for two reasons.

First, there simply would never have been a Unitarian or Universalist denomination without Jesus. I'm sure you know that both strains were originally reform movements, efforts to get back to "pure Christianity", to liberate Jesus from the tomb of dogma within which centuries of theological calcification had encased him. In July 1800, at the commencement of his ministry Channing auspiciously announced:

I examined the evidences of Christianity with caution, and I think without prejudice; and I am convinced that this religion is truly divine...My object is to discover the truth. I wish to know what Christ taught, not what men have made him teach.

The second reason why Jesus' may have some relevance to us UU's is that when one examines his central message, one is sure to find concepts foundational to our UU movement as it exists now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Inherent worth. So let me plunge right into Jesus' most revolutionary message which coincides with our UU First Principle (see the back of your orders of service) that every person possesses an inherent worth and dignity. Jesus announced on the first day of his ministry that God "...has anointed me to preach good news to the poor". We see him repeatedly honoring and enjoying table fellowship with those considered the dregs of his society such as tax-gatherers and prostitutes. Women who were denied full participation and personal standing by his culture were accepted by him as disciples and treated as equally capable. He said we should respect and embrace those ethnically, culturally and religiously different, even those deemed "enemies" by society. The last shall be made first; turn the other cheek, a rich person aiming for heaven is like a camel trying to walk through the eye of a needle. On and on and on—An incredibly radical challenge to social norms and power

structures whether it is 30 A.C.E. or 2005 A.C.E., is it not? Obviously, such a messenger had to be squelched. It has happened over and over again.

At a personal level this message can be vastly healing and liberating. Jesus defined a new paradigm for the Source of Life, the Ground of Being, what is of ultimate value in our lives, or....what some call God. He challenges conventional wisdom by indicating that at the center of everything is a reality that wills our well-being, rather than a demanding and vengeful overlord. Even the most wretched are always valuable, there can be purpose in every life. Its easy to see why this idea of inherent worth is immensely popular in the barrios of Latin America where liberation theology is practiced in spite of efforts from the Vatican to squelch it. It is also the symbolism behind our UU chalice. Radical inclusiveness. Whoever you are, whatever you are, you are welcome here. You are valued. You are saved.

On a societal level, Jesus' message is most challenging. It is not welcoming to structures that foster human misery through compartmentalizing society and promoting domination/oppression among the divisions: Classism, racism, sexism, patriarchy, tribalism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, combative patriotism, economic predation. His call is to transform away from world views based on hate, prejudice and domination, and towards the obverse, which happens to correspond to the UU Second Principle: "Justice, equity and compassion in human relations." It is a call for nothing less than a radical and effective reordering of power relationships, perhaps the most radical call imaginable.

At this point we might shift our focus slightly to consider a paradox implied by a statistic: Approximately 85% of Americans define themselves as Christians. I'm guessing many of you would agree that the culture they and we have built is marked almost to an unprecedented degree by greed and

violence. Recall for a second just a little bit about what Jesus actually taught. We have a remarkable disconnect going here. Bill McKibbin strikes at the heart of the paradox with one of those gems I would like to make into a bumper sticker, although its probably a bit too long: “Its hard to imagine (he says) a con much more audacious than making Jesus the front man for a program of tax cuts for the rich or war in Iraq.”

Jesus’ message may be impossibly idealistic. Yet, it would seem possible that if some meaningful part of that 85% of Americans woke up, and took seriously the actual message of their savior, the greed and violence that mark our way of life might be moderated. However, many Christians, epitomized by Mel Gibson, seem to be preoccupied with his violent death as symbolized by the cross.

William Ellery Channing and our Unitarian forefathers and mothers seem to have taken the actual message of Jesus more seriously than our contemporary culture. Channing was a leader for almost forty years in the campaign for abolition of slavery. He inspired, mentored and ministered to a virtual social action army at Boston’s Federal Street Unitarian Church including Dorothea Dix, crusader for the mentally ill; Horace Mann, promoter of free, public education; Samuel Gridley Howe, pioneer in the education of the deaf and blind; Julia Ward Howe, composer of “Battle Hymn of the Republic”; not to mention a young Ralph Waldo Emerson..

You might have anticipated my drift but I’ll tell you anyway: Channing’s ministry was grounded on the teachings of Jesus. Channing declared in 1819 in his Baltimore sermon which is kind of the Magna Carta of the Unitarian movement:

Our own source of sympathy for the fallen...was not derived from the

schools of ancient philosophy, or from the temples of Greece and Rome. Rather, we inherit it from Jesus Christ.”

The great principle on which his wonderful sympathy was founded, ...was his conviction of the greatness of the human soul. He saw in humanity the impress and image of Divinity....

Deeds Not Creeds. Another pillar of our UU identity is actually a slogan coined by the same Willam Ellery Channing: “We are a religion of Deeds Not Creeds.” 2000 years ago Rabbi Jesus seemed to be saying essentially the same thing. In his day the norm of religious practice was grounded on a legalistic and literal reading of scriptures and that was producing a very divided and fundamentally unjust society. Sound familiar? Interestingly Jesus was not the only reform rabbi of his day. Another was a Rabbi Hillel. Both were reacting against an ingrained Judaic notion that salvation and social respectability flowed from a strict observance of scriptural law, particularly purity laws such as are contained in the Book of Leviticus. Jesus spoke of fundamental problems with such legalism, such literalism. He saw religion reduced to worshipping a book of laws rather than involving the heart or being life-affirming. And he saw doctrinal rigidity conflicting with justice in individual cases.

So Jesus said simply: “On these two commandments [love your God and your neighbor] hang all the law and prophets.” On that basis he repeatedly counseled that justice and compassion, particularly when the oppressed are involved, overrides scriptural law. And so he personally defied strict laws in the Hebrew scriptures which are still there relating to tithing, obeying the Sabbath, having contact with lepers or with menstruating women, etc., etc. One stunning implication of this has to do with those who today would rely on purity laws of Leviticus or elsewhere in scriptures to justify uncompassionate

treatment of gays and lesbians. Again, I can't help but be perplexed about a culture calling itself Christian, yet apparently wearing blinders regarding Christ's actual ministry.

An implication of Jesus' rejection of religion that relied on unbending, spoon-fed, external authority was an encouragement to the faithful to form their own judgments. We UU's can appreciate that he appealed to the imagination and intelligence, not simply to the authority of revealed tradition.

Channing never permitted a creedal affirmation of any sort to be a condition of membership in his church. Hear him thunder in this excerpt from the same, pivotal 1821 sermon:

We are astonished at the hardihood of those, who, with Christ's warnings sounding in their ears, take on them the responsibility of making creeds for his church, and cast out professors of virtuous lives for imagined errors, for the guilt of thinking for themselves.

....

Spiritual Transformation. The third aspect of Jesus' ministry I think is central is his call for spiritual transformation. To really accomplish a world whereby all are accorded dignity would necessitate a spiritual transformation on both the individual and societal level. It would seem to require a society more aligned with feminist values of compassion and community than a patriarchal paradigm of domination and independence. I would describe it as a change at a spiritual level, (i.e., in our hearts) in what we consider most important in our lives (i.e., our God or Gods). It implies a retreat from an ego-driven, self-centered orientation that worships seven false Gods of our culture: Affluence, achievement, appearance, power, competition, consumption, individualism. Rather, we are invited to move towards the God Jesus proclaimed which for me is synonymous with compassion, justice and

humility. Life purpose and meaning is thus shifted from loving oneself to loving one's God and one's neighbor.

Conclusion. In summary, Jesus' ministry in its most pared-down essence is, I think, a call for a way of life founded on human dignity, personal ethical responsibility and spiritual transformation, all based on the principle of love.

I have tried to emphasize several times how radical this principle truly is. Lest we dare leave here this afternoon smugly confident that we've got it right, but virtually everybody else has it totally wrong, let me close with a little food for thought. Right now I am taking a class on the theology of the Catholic monk and mystic, Thomas Merton. In 1961, Merton was seeking to articulate a non-violent manifesto grounded on Jesus' teachings at a time that fear about security was a national obsession. See if these words have some application to you, today:

“To some peace merely means the liberty to exploit other people without fear of retaliation or interference. To others it means the leisure to devour the goods of the earth without being compelled to interrupt their pleasures to feed those whom their greed is starving. And to practically everybody peace simply means the absence of any physical violence that might cast a shadow over lives devoted to the satisfaction of their animal appetites for comfort and pleasure.

So instead of loving what you think is peace, love others and love God. And instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed—but hate these things first in yourself, not in another.

And so, in a cherished UU tradition inherited from our Christian heritage, let us never be deterred from discerning the truth for ourselves guided by the

spirit of life, compassion, justice and humility. If you do that I would submit that you could, if you wished, claim without hypocrisy to be following the path taught by Rabbi Jesus.

© Bill Graves 2005