

“The Jesus Who Talks About Love”

The First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

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In many a previous December, I have used the occasion of Christmas approaching to speak about Jesus, about the several ways he is most often regarded by Unitarian Universalists, or how scholars most recently or most cleverly think of him, or how any of us might draw inspiration or wisdom from his life and teachings.

Today, I'm going to do a bit of all three, with a folk song thrown in. The basic assignment, though, is that last one: seeing if there isn't something about Jesus that makes him abidingly important in our own faith journeys.

That was the promise that religious liberals held out in the theological battles of two centuries ago in these parts, when congregations like ours were divided on the issue of whether Jesus was God as well as a person. The people in the majority here, as in most towns of eastern Massachusetts, the people who would end up being called Unitarians, said Jesus was a person, like us, only better – so much better, in fact, that they might call him divine, or even their savior.

But the point was, the Jesus whose life was so exemplary was a person like us, a fellow human, and therefore someone whom we might hope to emulate, whose teachings we might hope to live out, as he did.

They disagreed with each other about Jesus' place in the scheme of things, whether he was central or simply one of the ways one might come to religious truth, if that. But among the Unitarians, there weren't many Trinitarians.

We go on having a plentitude of opinions about Jesus and his place in our religious lives. In fact, in the latest pamphlet from the UUA on UU Views of Jesus, one of the five authors proposes that Jesus, though he lived and died as a person, was resurrected as the church. This point of view serves as a counterbalance to the point of view expressed by another author that Jesus is of no use or interest to her at all.

In between, three writers describe three Jesuses that strike their fancy: the champion of justice, the wise mystic, the man of compassion.

The writer Stephen Mitchell has a Jesus he likes, too. Mitchell is worth your knowing about, because he specializes in making religious texts – especially those of Eastern religions -- accessible with his translations and explanations. He's a sort of Zen Buddhist Jew himself, but he wrote a book about ten years ago, The Gospel According to Jesus, in which he offered his own version of Jesus' life and teachings.

This year he produced a short, simple version of his ideas about Jesus in a book for teens, boldly titled Jesus: What He Really Did and Said. As some of you know, a group of scholars called the Jesus Seminar has been at work since 1985 at the same task of extracting from the New Testament those things that seem most apt to be historical, rather than legendary or the work of polemicists, people pushing their own interests.

But as Mitchell acknowledges, it is the same effort Thomas Jefferson undertook with scissors and paste. Jefferson believed that “Among the sayings and discourses imputed to [Jesus] by his biographers [that is to say, by the writers of the four gospels], I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality, and the most lovely

benevolence; and others again of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism, and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same being.” [xxiv]

Mitchell recalls having the same feeling as a boy. “I was attracted to Jesus’ authentic words, but I had very much disliked many of the passages that were added later. Some of these passages are actually the direct opposites of his authentic teaching about God’s love, like the saying at the end of Mark’s Gospel: ‘Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever doesn’t believe will be damned.’ These sayings make Jesus sound ignorant and small-hearted, and they make his God sound like a cruel tyrant. I think that Jesus would be appalled to hear such words put in his mouth.” [xxiii]

The story of Jesus as Mitchell reconstructs it for teens in less than a paragraph is this:

“Jesus was born in the same way as you or I. He was probably an ordinary kid who grew up in an ordinary small town, having his own likes and dislikes, his problems and squabbles, probably brighter than most of his playmates, possibly kinder. Perhaps – if the townspeople thought of him as an illegitimate child – he had a more difficult time than most of us. But he weathered the difficulties, learned a trade, grew up to be a fine carpenter and a fine man. At the age of about thirty, he had an extraordinary experience of waking up to the truth. For the next year or so he went around ‘healing’ people and teaching them, in words so alive and beautiful and compelling that they have as much power today as they did when they first came out of his mouth. He was a man in love with God, who gave himself completely to the acts of human kindness that proceeded from that love.” [109-110]

That’s the Jesus Mitchell chooses to believe in, and it is a Jesus he says he loves, even as he loves the Buddha just as much, and Lao-tzu, and the wisest men and women from all the great spiritual traditions.” [xi]

He says Jesus was “one of the most beautiful men who ever lived. He himself would probably not have considered himself beautiful or even special. He would have said that we are all beautiful, we are all special, because – and he did say this – we are all children of God.” [xxx]

He says, “Jesus was one of the greatest spiritual teachers who ever lived.... He inspired people who met him.... [22] After knowing him, they began to treat other people with more kindness and compassion....[23] The people he most respected were those who acted kindly toward everyone they met. Treating your fellow human beings with love and respect is the best way to love God, Jesus taught. He especially loved those who helped the poor and unfortunate.” [24]

Before I go on, let me bring in the song. It’s one that some of you know well, I’m sure. It was written by David Olney and sung by Emmylou Harris on her CD, *Cowgirl’s Prayer*. It’s a talking song, where Ms. Harris speaks Olney’s lyrics with a musical background. These are the words:

Man you should have seen me way back then.
I could tell a tale, I could make it spin.
I could tell you black was white,
I could tell you day was night.
Not only that, I could tell you why.

Back then I could really tell a lie.

Well I'd hire a kid to say he was lame,
Then I'd touch him and I'd make him walk again.
Then I'd pull some magic trick.
I'd pretend to heal the sick.
I was takin' everything they had to give.
It wasn't all that bad a way to live.

Well I'm in this desert town and it's hot as hell,
But no one's buyin' what I got to sell.
I make my lame kid walk,
I make a dumb guy talk,
I'm preachin' up a storm both night and day;
But everyone just turns and walks away.

Well I can see that I'm only wasting time,
So I head across the road to drink some wine.
This old man comes up to me.
He says, "I seen you on the street.
You're pretty good, if I do say myself.
But the guy that come through here last month, he was somethin' else.

"Instead of callin' out for fire from above,
He just gets real quiet and talks about love.
And I'll tell you somethin' funny:
He didn't want nobody's money.
Now I'm not exactly sure what this all means,
But it's the damndest thing I swear I've ever seen."

Well since that time, every town is the same:
I can't make a dime, I don't know why I came.
I decide I'll go and find him,
And find out who's behind him.
He has everyone convinced that he's for real.
Well I figure we can work us out a deal.

So he offers me a job and I say fine.
He says I'll get paid off on down the line.
Well I guess I'll string along.
Don't see how too much can go wrong.
As long as he pays my way I guess I'll follow.
We're headed for Jerusalem tomorrow.

[“Jerusalem Tomorrow”]

The lyrics hit me powerfully, and for a couple reasons that relate to what I've been saying. By plunking us down into that particular moment, just before Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, I at least am struck by Jesus' humanness. Great healer and teacher as he apparently was, as lovely as his words and life were, he is vulnerable and mortal like everyone else. We know it, because we know what the narrator doesn't, that the trip to Jerusalem will prove a horrific disaster. We know this guy is about to be murdered by the state.

But we also know that people will go on talking about him after that, repeating the things he said, dressing up his biography with the kind of miraculous events that would help convince people to listen to the story. As the Catholic theologian John Dominic Crossen says, the question isn't whether the Christmas story or the resurrection are historical. He's perfectly happy to concede that they aren't. They're just the kind of tales that people told then about people they revered. The question, he says, is what was it about Jesus that provoked the reverence in the first place.

And Crossen has one theory, and others have their own. But I think the song may have it right: "Instead of callin' out for fire from above, [Jesus] just [got] real quiet and [talked] about love." Furthermore, "He didn't want nobody's money" – he wasn't looking after his own interest; he actually practiced what he preached.

Even Mitchell's simplified version makes Jesus' message more complex than that, involving such matters as the Kingdom of God, but the heart of the message is just that call for acts of unselfish love. [6]

I think for tens of millions of Christians and others through the centuries, that is what Jesus is all about – more than he is a consubstantial person in a triune godhead, more than his resurrection from the dead saves believers from damnation – as important as those doctrines and a thousand others are to countless Christians and others.

I think people in the towns flocked to hear him speak about love and kindness and mercy. They also came for the healing, as Mitchell and Crossen and I and nearly everyone else would agree. But I'm not sure even the healing wasn't so efficacious because of the power and authority he garnered with his words about caring and charity.

I think people today, including some people in this room, have a special place in their hearts and in their beliefs for Jesus as someone who calls them to be more generous and less avaricious, less judgmental and more forgiving.

Mitchell's right, you can find another Jesus in the New Testament (unless you're reading Jefferson's). "For example," writes Mitchell, Jesus teaches us not to judge (in the sense of not to condemn) but to keep our hearts open to all people; the later 'Jesus' is the final Judge, who will float down terribly on the clouds for the world's final rewards and condemnations. Jesus cautions against anger and teaches the love of enemies; the later 'Jesus' calls his enemies 'children of the Devil' and attacks them with utmost savageness and contempt. Jesus isn't interested in defining who he is...; the later 'Jesus' talks on and on about himself. Jesus speaks of God as a loving father, even to the wicked; the later 'Jesus' preaches about a god who will cast the disobedient into everlasting flames." [xxiii-xxiv]. In Jefferson's words, "There is internal evidence that parts [of the Gospels] have proceeded from an extraordinary man, and that other parts come from very inferior minds." [xxi-xxii]

But that first Jesus is there, too, the one Mitchell calls authentic, the guy who "Instead of callin' out for fire from above," got real quiet and talked about love. We'll

never know if he really talked real quiet (any more than Mitchell can know how good a carpenter Jesus was). But we know Jesus spoke about love, about mercy, forgiveness, kindness, and caring, and that Jesus is worth remembering, worth listening to, worth thinking about.