

“Exploring Christianity”

A RE for All Homily

Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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*(Sung:) Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me
Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus love me. The Bible tells me so.*

Clearly some of you also know that song. Since first appearing as a song in 1862, generations of Christian children have learned this simple song and its straightforward lesson: Jesus loves me.

The centrality of LOVE to Christianity is enduring. Even our own Unitarian Universalist sources refer to “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” Indeed, even Jesus when asked to explain what matters most in life answered, “love God” and “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Of course, we humans do not always do a very good job of loving—either each other or the gift of Life and the gifts of this earth that sustain our life. Jesus knew this. Jesus knew we would screw up, hurt each other and ourselves. Jesus could look around and see all kinds of people hurting from disease, from bigotry, and from an unjust political occupation. In response, Jesus loved. Jesus loved people you were not “supposed” to love—a Samaritan woman from a different gender and religious background than him; a tax collector who was seen as a political enemy; a person with leprosy, a contagious skin disease that meant most people would go nowhere near them.

In the Christian tradition, Jesus is seen as a teacher and a model of this great love. Jesus loved in such bold ways that he created enemies who killed him in the end. Jesus died a horrible, painful death on a wooden cross. And yet, even in his dying, he showed love and forgiveness to the criminals dying beside him and to the soldiers who put him on the cross. Jesus was willing to die for his message of love.

This could have been the end of the story. We could never have known about Jesus. But those who learned from Jesus to love boldly began to tell others about Jesus and the loving God Jesus believed in. In time, stories about Jesus would be written down and read by others—stories we still read today in the Christian Bible.

Many Christians say that Jesus came back to life after his death because God loved Jesus too much to let him die. And, many Christians believe that like Jesus we too can live again after death if we believe in Jesus’ message—at least if we believe the right things or live the right way. Many Christians also say that Jesus *was* God, living here on earth as a person to teach

us about the love God has for all of us. Our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors were Christians who challenged some of the ideas about Jesus and God that other Christians had. Unitarians did not think Jesus was God. They thought he was like all of us—a human person trying to live a good and meaningful life. Universalists did not think God would only love those who believed in Jesus’ story and lived the right way. Universalists believed God’s love was so big that we are all loved, even if we screw up or have ideas different than our neighbors or our church.

The truth is Christianity is a really big, really old religion with a lot of different beliefs and ideas within it. Many of us have experienced this variety of Christianity in the churches we have attended or the people we have heard speak claiming that their ideas are “Christian.” And, frankly, some of those churches and those ideas seem to me to be really far away from Jesus’ message of love. And yet, for all of the complicated history and complex theological ideas in Christianity over the century, there is still the simple gift of Jesus’ life and message of boldly loving others. Whatever else we may feel or think about Christianity, may we embrace this gift of love, a source of spiritual insight even for us UU’s.

Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven
 Mindful of our need for ethical meaning in life
Hallowed be thy name
 May we honor our longing for purpose
Thy kingdom come
 May goodness and justice prevail
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven
 As fully in the world around us as in our aspirations
Give us this day our daily bread
 May our daily needs to live be met
And forgive us our trespasses
 And may we seek healing for the harms we cause
As we forgive those who trespass against us
 As we also seek to be healed from the harm upon us.

Lead us not into temptation
 May we not succumb to indifference
But deliver us from evil
 But seek freedom in loving
For thine is power and the glory
 For a good and beautiful way of living is possible
Forever and ever. Amen.
 Here, now, and in days to come. May it be so.