

How UUs View Jesus
A Sermon by the Rev. Terre Balof
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‘Tis the season, and along with other Unitarian Universalists and folks from other faith traditions or no faith tradition, it is time to pause for a moment to figure out what to do with this season of the year. Like many UUs, I come to this season as one who sees Jesus as the spiritual and prophetic teacher whose enlightened words guide my actions. Yet I also draw wisdom and strength from the teachings of other faiths, from the grandeur of nature and from the innocent wisdom of our children. For me, Christmas is about remembering the teachings and the spirit of Jesus, even as I rebel against the commercialism that binds many of us during this season. AND with many people of faith, I shudder at the appalling distortions of Jewish, Christian and Muslim texts and teachings that justify the most horrific acts and the most blatant prejudice and oppression. Much of what I see labeled as Christianity is not what I remember or recognize; so, you see, I struggle with this season and how to reclaim Jesus from the fundamentalists.

I am not unlike Unitarians and Universalists across the centuries who grappled with the dogma and doctrines of Christianity as it emerged from the Aramaic culture in which Jesus’ teachings were birthed. Much of Unitarian and Universalist history has been spent in a search to find the “right” way to speak about and believe in the religion OF Jesus rather than the religion ABOUT Jesus. It has only been in the last century or so that Unitarians have moved away from the label of liberal Christianity. This has been, for the most part, a healthy move as we committed ourselves to the individual search for Truth and broadened our faith. And yet in more recent decades, our tradition has fallen into dishonoring part of our heritage—that is, we have forgotten where we came from in an effort to incorporate rational, scientific approaches to the exploration human potential and faith. We accepted the rational mind and often left behind a rich part of our heritage that encouraged the exploration of the whole person. Today, in many congregations it is much more permissible to talk about Buddhism than to explore our curiosity about Jesus. In our response to the sometimes overwhelming fundamentalism of our society, we have rejected the core of our heritage. Sadly, there are times in which we have not made space

for committed UUs who ground themselves in the teachings of Jesus, or those seeking a Beacon of Liberal Religion to find space to honor the rich heritage they bring from their Christian faith of origin. Especially in this day when fundamentalism rides across our nation like the horsemen of the Apocalypse, we need to be a welcoming place especially for searchers of the Abrahamic faiths who wish to explore rational discord and moderation in action and belief.

As our larger culture whets its appetite on books such as *The DaVinci Code*, we need to encourage the curiosity about how Christianity came to be. We need to encourage people to learn about the many and diverse beliefs during Christianity's early centuries, about who the historical Jesus might have been and the similarities between the words of Jesus and those of other great religious teachers. We need to remember and to honor our heritage and spread the news that for many centuries heretics, believers and martyrs have faithfully protected two threads of belief about the teachings of Jesus that I believe to be closer to the intent of Jesus' ministry than much of what we experience today.

Our two threads of faith are that God is One and that we are all of one family, that no one is condemned for eternity, that all souls return to the creator. This is the grounding from which Unitarian and Universalist thought grew over the centuries. Whether we are agnostic, pagan, Jewnitarian or believe Jesus is a prophet whose teachings we should follow, we have only to look into our history to find example after example of those who grappled with the meaning of Christianity for their lives as they sought moral and ethical guidance. For example, the thread of our faith was strengthened at King's Chapel in Boston, which is the oldest congregation on this continent that survives. Their minister in 1785 announced he needed to resign because he didn't believe in the Trinity. The congregation said most of them didn't believe in it either, so they edited the Book of Common Prayer and deleted all references to the Trinity. Thomas Jefferson grappled with Jesus and Unitarian faith, then edited Christian Scriptures into what is now known as the Jefferson Bible. Of course, much earlier, in 1553, the Spanish doctor Michael Servetus helped frame Unitarian beliefs when he wrote the treatise on the Errors of the Trinity, stating that the Trinity was not scripturally based. When he was burned at the stake, a martyr for Unitarian thought, he became a reminder

of the danger to those who seek freedom of thought and become religious dissenters. Our history is full of preachers and theologians who sought to understand the teachings of Jesus, from Hosea Ballou's writings of the Atonement to Theodore Parker's sermons on the Transient and the Permanent in Christianity.

As each succeeding generation grappled with particular issues of culture, faith and social causes, UUs have refined and honed our understandings of faith. Certainly in the past century and really since the Transcendentalists, we have enlarged the scope of our faith. We have engaged the wisdom of the world's religions; we have been in the forefront of social justice movements; we have honored our connection to the interdependent web of existence. We have honored the strength of the human spirit. And, in response to our culture, we have often dropped the thread that connected us to the earliest exploration of the teachings of Jesus. Yet in every generation, UUs must engage our Judeo-Christian heritage and struggle with the current cultural ethos. We need to find a way to live OUR beliefs in the world. This needs to take place in part because our culture is predominantly Christian, because the foundation of our country was laid by many who held the basic tenets that we claim as UUs and because we have an inclusive voice that needs to be heard in our nation and the world. Our generation of UUs, like preceding generations, needs to grapple with what it means to be UU today, and because many of our members emerge from Christian churches, we need to explore together the meaning of faith. Growing out of an interest in exploring our UU Christian roots, interested UUFA members will begin meeting on January 24. Several members are thinking long and hard about how to weave together the richness of their Christian roots and their commitment to UUism. Brad Findell is one UU who has taken on the challenge to explore his beliefs as a person of faith living in this time and place. I appreciate his willingness to share some of his struggle with how to engage faith and belief in our current cultural and political ethos.

BRAD

One of the struggles for many UUs today is how to create a container of that that does indeed honor Jesus' great commandment along with other faith perspectives. It is

often easier for us to honor the teachings of other world religions than it is to explore the teachings of Jesus. I certainly agree with Brad that it is time for us to understand Jewish and Christian texts, especially Christian texts, so that we can be both culturally literate and can understand some of the distortions of Christian texts by many so-called theologians. We need to reconnect, to honor our origins as many of us seek within our UU faith to honor our Christian roots. I agree with Brad that we need to grapple with the texts and with translations. For instance, I would want to unravel the meaning of the texts Brad mentioned from John and challenge some of the more traditional Greek translations that interpret Jesus' words proclaiming him as the only Way as well as question some of the patriarchal language that the early Aramaic language does not embrace.

It is time for us to more intensely explore what we believe rather than reacting to belief systems we find in our culture. I say this knowing that many of you here may come out of or currently claim a belief system in which Christianity has little or no meaning. Yet an important question for all UUs in this generation is what do we do with Jesus? He is not going to go away. Though I consider all of us UUs to be humanists because we believe in the unfailing struggle of the human spirit to overcome oppressions of mind, body, and spirit, I do believe that we as a community and as a faith must honor both our roots in the teachings of Jesus and the needs of many of our members to explore their own roots of faith. So here we are with some fascinating work to do together.

Our Fellowship is large enough for us to create covenant and affinity groups that would focus on a variety of theological perspectives. So, just as Christian UUs will be gathering in January, I encourage folks interested in exploring other paths of belief or to explore the moral issues of our day to let a board member or me know that you want a group with whom to explore your faith path and let us find more avenues for exploration. We certainly hold within our fellowship people who would define God, or the G word for the atheists in our midst, using all the definitions Brad shared and probably a few more definitions edited for political correctness. It is time for us all to explore what WE believe (for now) and how we wish to want to live out our beliefs in the world. And I agree that our exploration needs to take place with great humility. Part of our work together is to learn how to explore our various beliefs in a way that respects our various

paths of faith and honors the search of others, that respects that each of us is searching for life answers in a way that comes out of *our* history and heritage. And the reality is that to bear witness in the world to our unique approach to faith we must continue to explore our understandings of the person of Jesus and how our understanding of Christianity shapes our lives, our faith and our nation.