

SAVING JESUS
Rev. Dr. Sheldon W. Bennett
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Reading: Gospel According to Luke, Chapter 4, verses 14 to 30 (NRSV)

Several years ago I was talking with a rabbi and comparing our two religions. The rabbi pointed out that there were more differences between us than I might realize. "But," he chuckled, "like you Unitarian Universalists, we Jews get a little nervous around Jesus."

As Unitarian Universalists we do get nervous around Jesus. One church member recently said to me that whenever I mention Jesus, he "winces." I expect that he is not alone. Why is that? If I were talk about Buddha, you would be interested, at worst puzzled, but I doubt that you would wince

There are a number of possible reasons why we get nervous around Jesus. Today is a good day to take a look at this. Today is Palm Sunday in Christian tradition, the day that Jesus is said to have entered Jerusalem with his little religious-political-social action drama, on the back of a donkey with his band of followers shouting "Hosanna" and waving palms. Over the next days he would confront the religious authorities with his radical message. He would hold his famous last supper with his disciples in observance of Passover. Late that night he would go out to the garden of Gethsemane where he would be arrested. On Friday, he would be crucified, taken down, and buried. Then would come the remarkable and history changing event or events that happened among his followers, the spiritual phenomenon which they called the resurrection, which is celebrated next Sunday. This is one of the great stories in world religions. Unitarian Universalists love Christmas, but we are not so sure about Easter. For some of us, Easter is important, but many of us are happier simply to celebrate the spring and be done with it.

Why is this? We say we seek the wisdom in all religious. Why do we get so nervous around Jesus? There are several reasons, I think. In the first place, as faithful children of the Enlightenment, we are suspicious of mythology and legends. We cannot accept certain of the doctrines that are preached about Jesus. Such doctrines as original guilt, salvation, and Jesus dying for our sins we find contrary to reason, opposed to experience, and are so often used to justify militarism, domestic violence, racism, and other forms of social oppression, including gender and sexual oppression. Historically, Unitarians have questioned the doctrine of the trinity and the deity of Jesus. We have instead emphasized the humanity of Jesus and the moral force of his teachings as inspirational for the formation of character and social reform. Universalists have rejected the doctrine of eternal damnation. We have emphasized instead the universal love that is at the heart of all being that calls us to love one another and to work for social reform.

At the psychological level, some of us may have had bad experiences as children within a particular Christian church, of whatever denomination. Perhaps there were issues with parents or church authority figures which got mixed up with teachings about damnation and hell. Talk about Jesus understandably triggers old and unpleasant associations. Saving Jesus from our psychological allergies may be an important step to spiritual recovery and healing.

Most of us are made really nervous by the conduct of certain Christians with their proselytizing slogans of “Jesus Saves,” their certainty of salvation, their emotional fervor, and their hostility and intolerance towards alternative religious views, not to mention their political efforts to impose their particular social and moral agenda on everyone else by the force of law.

But Jesus is too important to leave to the religious conservatives. Jesus is too powerful a religious symbol to allow it to be distorted and appropriated for the intolerant, unjust, uncompassionate and self-serving political agendas of the religious and political right. We cannot allow Jesus to be hijacked by the forces of partisan politics, militarism, and social oppression. At the same time, we would challenge modern secularism as to its own intolerance and dogmatic hostility to consideration of Jesus even as a positive symbol for spiritual health and social well being.

It’s no wonder that so many of us as religious liberals feel uneasy to speak publicly about Jesus. Like those synagogue folks in Luke’s story, we may get so nervous around Jesus that we, too, would want to hustle him right out and hurl him off a cliff, albeit for different reasons. More to Luke’s point, I suspect that some of us for whom Jesus is important are fearful that it may be ourselves who would be hustled out, or at least be viewed askance, by some of our fellow church members.

But, you see, the truth that Jesus lived is too important for us to shy away from Jesus as a symbol of this truth. Jesus as a symbol is too powerful to leave to the religious right. What we need to be doing as Unitarian Universalists is to be liberating Jesus from all these forces of distortion and self-serving appropriation and also from the closed mindedness of secular denial. We need to be reclaiming the image of Jesus so that it is an image that evokes the truth which Jesus so powerfully lived, the truth of universal compassion and the imperative for justice for the poor and liberation for the oppressed, so that this truth can live more powerfully in our lives and in the world.

What we need to be doing, what Unitarians and Universalists have always been doing, is to be “saving Jesus” from the religious and political forces that would co-opt Jesus for whatever their self serving agendas. Even more, we would be saving Jesus from our own timidity and theological politeness, and from our own sometimes dogmatic skepticism and intellectual arrogance. (Now, give me a few more moments before you hustle me out to the cliff.) There are many of us I know, for whom, as Unitarian Universalists, Jesus is important personally as a source of inspiration and spiritual guidance. But whether or not Jesus is meaningful to you personally, if we are true to our covenant to seek the wisdom in all religions, we would save Jesus from whatever our spiritual prejudice and let ourselves be encountered by the truth his image embodies so powerfully.

What is this truth? Luke’ story is important here. It comes right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. In a few short words it sets the stage for the entire gospel story all the way to Jerusalem, death and resurrection. Now the first thing we want to remember is that the Gospel accounts are not history or biography as we understand biography and history. They are religious texts. They are poetic narratives that point to a different, transcendent order of reality.

We know very little about the historical Jesus. Scholars have been working hard for more than a hundred years to recover the man who lived in history, what he actually said and did. All that we know for sure is that Jesus did live. He was Jewish, he taught,

he healed in some way, he was provocative and disturbed the ruling order, he was crucified. The truth he lived powerfully impacted people's lives. He broke through social conventions and associated with people at all levels of society, especially those who were despised and outcast. He proclaimed the reality in which the poor and the marginalized are first within the spiritual scheme of things. He gave the Roman rulers and their Jerusalem puppets good cause to suspect that some sort of social movement was underway which could upset the established order of things. That's about all that we know for sure about the historical Jesus.

But we also know that after his death, some of his followers awoke to an inner spiritual reality so powerful that it so radically changed their lives that, despite extreme persecution, they changed the course of world history. They associated this lived experience with Jesus, whom they claimed to be resurrected. I'll say more about this next Sunday.

How do we know this? What we have are the texts themselves. These texts are in themselves historical facts. Luke's Gospel is one of these texts. It is how one particular writer near the end of first century understood what Jesus was all about. His account was widely shared among many Christian communities. It spoke well to their own lived experience and thus became part of tradition.

The scene in the synagogue is dramatic. Jesus has come home to Nazareth and goes to the synagogue for the Sabbath worship. The folks there have been hearing about all that he had been doing around Galilee. They think he may be a prophet, which would make their synagogue famous. (You know, "Synagogue of the Prophet." Maybe they envisioned a future tomb in the basement.) In any case, they hand him the scroll of Isaiah to read. He chooses the passage where the prophet proclaims that the spirit of the Lord is upon him, and that he brings good news to the poor, that he is sent to proclaim release for the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for all who are oppressed. The text he chooses proclaims liberation! It declares a new divine ordering for the world.

Jesus reads the passage and sits down. All eyes are upon him, and he announces that today in their hearing the prophecy is fulfilled. Now things get really interesting. Of course, everyone present knows the words. They are familiar. These good religious people see Jesus as perhaps a new Isaiah, but they want to co-opt him for their own purposes. They want him to be their resident famous person as it were. They want him to do the same amazing things they had heard he was doing around Galilee, but they don't want him to change anything, actually.

Jesus refuses to be caught in their social conventions. He reminds them of how the great prophets Elijah and Elisha had not brought healing to their own people, but to certain others – to the widow in Sidon and to Naaman, a military general in Syria. It seems that what he is saying is that compassion and liberation for the oppressed are not to be co-opted and domesticated. The truth is universal. The truth is to be lived. The truth demands a radical change of heart and mind that these good people are not ready to make.

The folks in the synagogue are outraged. They hustle him out to the edge of a cliff and are about to hurl him off. Imagine the scene, the shouting, the pushing and shoving. Amazingly, Jesus passes right through them and goes on his way. This story, right at the beginning of Luke, works as a trailer for what happens at the end of the Gospel in Jerusalem – the triumphal entry, preaching truth, the betrayal, the arrest, the crucifixion,

and then the resurrection. Jesus passes through them all, escaping even the clutches of death, to go on his way, until even today.

Things haven't changed so much. There are new empires to oppress the poor and to torture captives without due process of law. There are new religious forces who want to co-opt Jesus for their political purposes, but to suppress the truth he lived. Philip Gailey, of the Scripps Howard News Service, in a recent column about separation of church and state (Patriot Ledger, 3/10/05) wrote that the ACLU need not fear that America is any danger of becoming a Christian nation. He wrote, "If Jesus were around today, preaching charity, love, tolerance and peace, the religious right would pummel him as a dangerous liberal who wants to redistribute our wealth, raise our taxes and study war no more. You can bet he wouldn't be invited to deliver the keynote address at the Republican National Convention and that Fox News' Sean Hannity would flog him on prime time." (I would add the Democratic National Convention, but for opposite reasons, and the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, too, for that matter.) In short, if Jesus were to show up in most any church in America today, he would most likely be hustled off to the edge of cliff yet once again. Most Unitarian Universalists would get at least a little nervous, but to our credit, we would try hard to remain politely tolerant.

The truth which Isaiah and the other prophets proclaimed is the universal love and the bend towards justice which are at the very heart of the cosmos. This is the truth that I believe lived so powerfully in Jesus. These two realities are at the core of our faith as Unitarian Universalists today. . But we need concrete symbols to show what these realities look like in action. Jesus is one such symbol. Not the only one. There are courageous men and women in every age and today who show by their lives what these truths look like. They were there at Selma 40 years ago these past two weeks. But Jesus is a symbol that has gathered especially great power for integrating the human psyche and making society whole. But because it is so powerful a symbol, there are so many forces at work that would co-opt the symbol, distort it, domesticate it, or deny it, or use it to promote their own agendas. There are so many forces that would drive him out to hurl him from a cliff. What we need to be doing, as Unitarian Universalists, is "saving Jesus" from all these, not only for the universal truth he lived, but even more, we need to be saving Jesus as an important spiritual symbol to inspire the truth that we ourselves would live for the wholeness of our own lives and for the restoration of our world.