

“Following Jesus?”

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At our church auction last fall, Jon Gatlin was the winning bidder on the right to choose a topic for today’s service. Jon gave me quite a wonderful challenge when he asked me to preach on how the life of Jesus relates to our church today, and how closely connected we are today to the Christian tradition. What a great question! After all, here we are in this gathering which we call a church. That’s a pretty Christian term. Yet this *church* is famous for welcoming atheists, Jews, Wiccans, Buddhists, Hindus, and seekers of all stripes as members of the community. Some of us identify as Christians in our personal spiritual lives, but by no means all or even a majority.

For many years, the Unitarian Universalist movement has had quite a conflicted relationship with Christianity. When I first became a Unitarian Universalist, I remember my mom asked me how UUs celebrated Easter. I had to reply, “Ambivalently!” My old congregation back in Boston generally did it with Easter lilies and a sermon on the life of the Buddha. Christianity is definitely part of our history; that we know; but what about today? Are we still part of the Christian tradition?

To start with the obvious, probably most Christians would say Unitarian Universalists aren’t Christian, because we don’t affirm Jesus was uniquely divine in some special way that no one else could ever be. In my experience, most UUs think of Jesus as a great religious leader, one of the greatest who ever lived,

an extraordinary teacher and an extraordinarily brave man who has a whole lot to teach us still.

It's often said that UUs try to follow the religion *of* Jesus rather than the religion *about* Jesus.

We try to love our neighbor and take care of the vulnerable folks in our society, just as he taught.

But most of us don't believe Jesus was God, or that he was literally brought back to life from the dead.

In the minds of many contemporary Christians, that definitely puts us in the "not" category.

On the other hand, not all Christians believed those things in the first couple of hundred years of Christianity either!

Up until the Council of Nicea in the year 325,

Christians were free to believe, and many *did* believe, that Jesus was simply a man who was radically open to God and tried to teach other people how to be like he was.¹

Our view of Jesus is not new. It's very ancient, though for over a thousand years it was suppressed as heresy.

This is a very long story, but let me just say for today, in my somewhat learned opinion, our beliefs about who Jesus was are not enough to cast us out of the Christian fold if we should care to claim a place inside it.

In fact, except for our take on who Jesus was, we have so much in common with Protestant Christianity.

Look at the way we organize ourselves.

Just like the Lutherans, or the Methodists, or the Episcopalians, Unitarian Universalism is organized around local congregations just like this one—

groups of people who worship together on Sunday morning.

The order of service we follow is an absolutely classic Protestant form.

Like those other congregations, we study together.

We try to teach our kids what we believe is important.

¹ See Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Knopf, 1994), pp. 81–83, and Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003).

We've decided it's important to have these people called ministers to serve our congregations.

We have fun together. We hang out at coffee hour together.

We comfort each other when times are hard.

In all these practices,

we are just about exactly like our Christian neighbors.

On the other hand, as a movement, going back at least to Emerson and the Transcendentalists of the 19th century,

the Christian tradition alone has proved to be far too narrow to contain all our seeking.

We have found so much truth and meaning and sacred wisdom in other religious traditions—

among them, the religions of Asia, earth-centered traditions,

Judaism and Islam, and of course the tradition of religious humanism.

We've always told people they have a right and a *duty*

to follow their own conscience and their own spiritual yearnings.

Like the poet Walt Whitman, we have claimed the right

and the responsibility to explore different paths,

trusting that all roads lead “to that which is endless,”²

trusting that other religious paths have something to teach us

that we need to learn.

Some individual UUs continue to find a whole lot of inspiration in the teachings of Jesus, in the story of his life,

and in all the amazing traditions and teachings and heroes

of the Christian tradition that grew up after he died.

Other UUs, as they say, not so much.

Your spiritual home base may be somewhere else. And that's OK.

For individuals in our movement, Christianity is just one

of many spiritual sources we're free to draw on.

This spiritual freedom is what I love best about our faith.

But, in practice, it has a down-side too.

We're all about embracing world religions—

² Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road.”

all except the one our ancestors called home.
In recent years, we've often been pretty quick to reject any beliefs
or teachings or vocabulary that feel too obviously Christian to us.
God forbid we should say the Lord's Prayer in church
or sing one of those old hymns like "O God, Our Help in Ages Past"
(which actually is in our hymnal—
it's #281 for those of you keeping score!)
I'm right there too. But it's something I wonder about.
Let me share with you some words of wisdom
from another 19th-century guy, the great Mark Twain:

When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly
stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was
astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.

Well, our movement has gone through its teenage years, too,
metaphorically speaking.
We as a movement have been through a time
when we needed to separate ourselves from the Christian tradition,
to define ourselves by the ways we *aren't* Christian,
just as teenagers have to define themselves
by all the ways they *aren't* like their parents.
As we get older, if we're lucky,
we develop a more mature relationship with our parents.
If we're lucky, we come to appreciate them for who they are
and the good things they passed on to us.
We figure out how to deal with the not-so-good.
And we figure out who *we* are going to be into the future,
freed from that need to define ourselves so rigidly
in opposition to our parents.

Likewise, I think our movement is growing more mature,
more comfortable with relating to our *spiritual* parent,
Protestant Christianity.
We don't have to *be* 100% Christian—of course we don't—
that's not who we are—but I think we are getting better at claiming

those parts of the tradition that continue to speak to us,
that nourish us, that have made us who we are today.

Speaking from my own experience,
I've found the easiest point of entry or maybe *re*-entry
into the Christian tradition, for seekers who want to explore it,
is the life of Jesus himself—
or rather, the stories about Jesus told in the Gospels.
Obviously we don't have direct access to what he actually did and said.
But what we do have is the stories people told about him after he died.
It's the closest we can get. And in this tradition
we are free to figure out for ourselves what they mean,
what we think they say about this extraordinary figure called Jesus.
I strongly encourage you to go read the Gospels in the Bible,
as well as the Gnostic gospels that have been rediscovered,
the ones that didn't make it into the Bible,
and see what you make of them.

One of my spiritual practices is to sit down each morning
and read a little bit of a sacred text.
I'm rereading Mark right now, a little each morning.
Each time I go back to the Gospels, I see new things in them.
Or, rather, it's probably that I'm *ready* to see new things in them.
There's so much I could say, but let me tell you about two things
that are leaping out at me about Jesus this time around.

The first thing, trying to read with an open mind,
is that he does some really weird stuff.
The Gospel stories are full of supernatural healings and exorcisms,
Jesus driving out demons and healing illnesses with a touch,
and the truth is I have no idea what to make of this.
The Unitarian side of our tradition has tended to downplay
the miracles in the Gospels. Thomas Jefferson published a version of
the Gospels with all the miracles completely edited out.
He thought they were just nonsense.

These days, the group of liberal Bible scholars called the Jesus Seminar rejects the miracles too as “inauthentic” made-up stories. This time through the Gospels, I find myself wondering. We have no way to know for sure “what literally happened.” All we have is the tradition of stories that were and continue to be meaningful to people.

I’m not sure it matters, really, whether Jesus had these special powers. Miraculous healings are great for those who receive them, but does it make his teachings any more or less true? I don’t think so. Still, it’s a challenge to me. Part of the reason I chose the story of Jesus tempted by the devil is that it evokes that side of him which seems very strange to us, the side that talks to the devil and casts out demons and performs miracle healings and brings people back from the dead. This is Jesus too, or at least this is how people saw him. And this is a part of the Christian tradition I really wrestle with. Jesus isn’t just a sweet guy with a liberal political platform who liked to have little children sit in his lap. He’s a very complicated figure who will not fit our every image of an ideal religious teacher.

But he still has so much to teach us! The second thing about the Gospels striking me this time around is this: I absolutely love the way Jesus is in love with his own religious tradition, *and* he’s not afraid to reinterpret it to care for human needs. What a model for us all. Jesus is Jewish—we all know this—and he is *very* well-versed in the Jewish tradition. He knows the scriptures backwards and forwards. His own spirituality is so deeply formed by the Jewish prophetic tradition which tells us to love our neighbor, to do justice and love mercy, to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. Those words which are so precious to us were precious to him too.

But he knows the books of laws as well,
all the commandments about what Jews are supposed to do
and not do. The second reason I chose today to tell the story
of Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by the devil,
is that I love how he is so well-versed in his own tradition
that he can't get messed up by the devil
“quoting scripture for his own purposes.”
He's very solid; he doesn't get swayed by dicey arguments
because he knows what the core of his tradition is.

But, even though he's very grounded in his Jewishness,
over and over again we see Jesus claiming the liberty
to reinterpret his tradition in the service of human needs.
The first reading today was two stories about Jesus doing just that—
gathering food with his disciples on the sabbath so they could eat,
and curing the man with the withered hand, even though Jewish law
said he shouldn't have done that on the sabbath.
Both times we hear Jesus saying,
it's good to observe the sabbath, but not if it means
letting the people who are right in front of you suffer.
He's looking past the literal words of the law,
the literal language of the tradition, to the spirit behind it.

I see this as a wonderful model for us as Unitarian Universalists,
an invitation for us to really know our own tradition
and embrace what's good about our Christian roots
and all the spiritual traditions that feed us,
and to continually claim the freedom to reinvent the tradition
in the service of love and justice.

As a faith tradition, Christianity is where we come from—
that's a fact of history—
and, as I said, I think right now we are in the middle of developing
a more mature relationship with our Christian roots,
figuring out how to honor what the tradition has given us
even as we chart our own path into the future.

This is where we are right now, and I think it's a very exciting time, though also a confusing time.

I often think back to the days of the very early Christian church, in the very first generations after Jesus, when everybody was making up this new religion as they went along. They didn't know how it was going to turn out. They only knew the old ways of being religious were no longer as compelling as this new thing that was happening, and they needed to be a part of the new thing even though they didn't have it figured out perfectly yet.

That's where I think we are as Unitarian Universalists right now. There's something new coming together among us, a new story emerging, radically inclusive of spiritual wisdom from all over the planet, but with a center that holds it all together. That center is love.

As my colleague Liz Stevens has put it so beautifully, "the 'glowing coal' at our center is radically inclusive love and...we are called from that center to the work of building the global beloved community."³

We *are* a church that follows Jesus...
and Buddha...and Muhammad...
and the Hebrew prophets...
and the teachings of earth-centered religions...
and the wisdom of every culture that teaches us to love more fully,
to think more clearly,
to praise what is holy,
as we build that beloved community of love and justice,
not just for ourselves, but for every being on this earth.

As the great Jewish teachers taught us to pray:
So may it be. Amen.

³ Liz Stevens, email posting to UUMA-Chat, July 2, 2009. Quoted with permission.