

**Jesus and the Unitarians**  
Capital Unitarian Universalist Congregation  
Order of Service – Sunday, October 20, 2013

Welcome: Board member – Rosemary  
Service Coordinator – Jan Greenwood  
Homilist – Peter Scales

Homily blurb: “Jesus and the Unitarians: What lessons do we continue to take from the Galilean carpenter? How did his call for reinvigorated Judaism get turned into a different religion? And is Unitarianism today a safe home for Christians?”

Text:

We know nothing historically solid about the birth of Jesus, except that his family or at least his father was from Nazareth. Everything else – the manger, three wise men from Persia, the virgin birth, and even the date – was written decades after the death of Jesus, to show that his life fit with the traditions of the Hebrew Bible. The writers whose books are called Matthew and Luke composed different stories of the birth of the Messiah, and there is no way to square the two. The last gospel, called John, is silent on the birth of Jesus. The Christmas story, therefore, is a fairy tale that was written to make the adult social justice fighter more magical.

I want to tell you a brief anecdote before I get into the meat of my talk. Many years ago I was privately reading about the Bible, and I happened upon Thomas Paine’s (1737-1809) *The Age of Reason; Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (1794). In *The Age of Reason*, Paine examined each chapter and verse of the Bible and – with no additional sources of information or analysis – dismissed much of the Bible as fables made to scare children. I read this in wonder and amazement, and I wanted to discuss it with someone who was similarly awestruck. And that is when I found the Unitarians in Belleville, Ontario. I’ve been a full-time Unitarian and amazed student of religions since then.

If you critically read a New Testament, or take a look at the Yale University lectures, “New Testament History and Literature” with Dale B. Martin, on YouTube; e.g. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d\\_dOhg-Fpu0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_dOhg-Fpu0), you can learn a lot for yourself. Dr. Martin makes the distinction between the “historical Jesus” and the “theological Jesus”... whereas historians can read the Gospels and tell you that certain things about Jesus are not historically accurate, theologians can read the Gospels and know in their hearts that God was in Jesus, that Jesus was God, etc. On these topics, historians have no opinion. Faith questions and historical questions are radically different. Historians of religion will tend to agree that a man named Jesus of Nazareth existed in time and place. The four Gospels agree that the sign posted on the cross of Jesus said the same thing: INRI (Iesus Nazareth Rex Iudeum). Three of the Gospels agree on how John the Baptist dunked Jesus in the Jordan River, and the fourth Gospel connects Jesus and John; so I think we can agree that someone named Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. One of the messages I like about historical \*and\* theological Jesus is his insistence that it is better to be good to your neighbours than to observe every jot and tittle of kosher laws.

Who is Jesus for the Unitarians? Is Jesus relevant to us today?

The 1853 declaration of the American Unitarian Association deemed Jesus' teachings "infallible" and echoed the New Testament in declaring: "We believe in Jesus Christ, the everlasting Son of God, the express image of the Father, in whom dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and who to us is the Way and the Truth and the Life."

The Unitarian Universalist Principles state that sources the UUA "draws from" include "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves."

There's a "Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship," with 60 U.S. chapters. One congregation in this faction, venerable King's Chapel in Boston, states that it worships "in the love of truth, and the spirit of Jesus Christ."

Some congregations study a book about "rediscovering Jesus" that calls him a "teacher, guide, companion." In a British Unitarian pamphlet offering varied opinions about this question, one contributor explains, "When I look at Jesus I am not, in fact, seeing God. Instead I am seeing a reflection of God — perhaps a perfect reflection — and in this sense I see Jesus as divine. What I deny is the DEITY of Jesus. I don't believe Jesus is God." That's probably so for many who still accept the "Christian" label.

Today I want to exhort you all to take a second look at Jesus, as a prophet to the Unitarians. I hope that the high point of this homily lies in the Sermon on the Mount, which I'll get to in a few minutes.

Who is Jesus for the Unitarians? Is Jesus relevant to us today?

A lot of evil has been done "in the name of Jesus" during that past 2000 years. We know that Christian churches and church leaders bear responsibility for great good and for great destruction. In our examination today of Jesus I don't want us to forget that but I do want to focus on who Jesus is for the Unitarians.

Guy C. Quinlan, a long-time member of The Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York, NY, writes:

"The Roman authorities who executed [Jesus] Rabbi Yeshua bar-Yusef were not mistaken in regarding him as a dangerous subversive. Despite his radical commitment to nonviolence, Jesus represented an ongoing threat to the security of every established order. I believe he still does. Jesus carried forward the Jewish prophetic tradition that finds the essence of religion in doing justice. For him, as for Amos and Isaiah, religious observance without social justice was a blasphemous mockery. Jesus repeatedly antagonized the powerful by reminding them that every society will be judged according to its treatment of the poor and defenseless. Of course, no society then or since has lived up to the Hebrew prophets' ideal of justice. There are always compromises. But, if you once let Jesus' voice into your consciousness, you will never again be at ease with compromises. Injustice results less often from malice than from willed inattention. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite did no active harm to the wounded man on the highway. They just passed by on the opposite side of the road, distancing themselves from the uncomfortable sight. Relentlessly, Jesus keeps bringing the oppressed back into our field of vision."

Let's leave aside the 'miracle' of the Christmas birth story as a non-historical fairy tale, but continue to celebrate the mid-winter return of the light, and the wonder of any child's healthy birth.

Let's leave aside the 'miracle' of Jesus's rebirth three days after he was killed by the Romans, but continue to celebrate the strength of religious belief that propels followers to live lives of dedicated service and care for each other.

As Unitarians let us celebrate that a social justice advocate rose up from the peasant class to teach radical messages of love and tolerance, and to fight the oppressive systems of power that he faced in his day. We still celebrate such people today in Canada and around the world. [example: Malala, who was shot in the head by Taliban in Afghanistan because she advocated schooling for girls. Jesus and Malala are linked]

Jesus was at the heart of Unitarianism and Universalism for hundreds of years, as a Jewish reformer, social justice worker, fighter of oppressive power structures, and even son of God.

Today we Unitarians may regard Jesus as "son of God" just as we might all be sons and daughters of God. We Unitarians see in Jesus' care for the poor and oppressed as his commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of all persons. In his struggle against the Romans and the high priests, we see what it takes to struggle against oil companies and our own government.

I want to exhort you all to take a second look at Jesus, as a prophet to the Unitarians. If we can take his example of radical acceptance and if we can strive to do justice and care for the poor, then our congregation regains its mission in the world. By accepting that the human Jesus – as divine as any of us – lived, preached, was baptized by his brother-in-law (?) John, attended meetings, lost his temper, made his friends laugh, got married in a wine-soaked party at Canaan, ate & drank, and was executed for the crime of sedition, then we make Capital Unitarian Universalist Congregation more of a home for Christians, Jews, Muslims and Unitarians. Amen.