

"A Place for Jesus?"

A lay-led service given on March 8, 2009

With sharings by

Stephen Merino and Lois Durran

Opening words by Stephen Merino

In a *UU World* article last year, Doug Muder described the uncomfortable relationship many of us have with Christianity:

"Most of us, I think, live in some kind of tension with Christianity. Some of us miss it. Some are running away from it. Some feel alienated from it or oppressed by it. And some, like me, feel all those things at the same time. But like a dysfunctional family with a secret, we seem to have an unspoken agreement not to bring it up. Say much of anything—positive or negative—about Jesus or the Bible, and many UUs will look at you like you just let out a loud belch."

Muder's description of the complex relationship many of us have with Christianity really resonated with me. We are generally quick to acknowledge Christianity as one of the sources of our faith, Unitarian Universalism, and we credit Jesus as a great teacher and example. But what exactly do we mean when we say all that, and how comfortable are we when doing so? And, more importantly, do we make a place for Jesus on our spiritual path? In this service, we will explore these things together. And, besides, isn't belching considered to be polite in some cultures?

Sharing by Lois Durran

When I first started coming to the Fellowship 12 years ago, it was because I simply could no longer say the creeds or take communion. Most of what I heard in the sermons at my former church was becoming harder and harder for me to sit through. I was going for the music, and I finally realized that I needed to do something different.

I was lucky in my first few years here at the Fellowship to be a part of a group called UU Christians. At the time, I still thought of myself as a Christian. I have since come to a place where I don't call myself that any more, but I still think that Jesus has a lot to teach us.

Our study group, the UU Christians, read and discussed many books by authors like Bishop John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, and John Dominic Crossan. It was incredibly liberating to me to know that these scholars didn't believe all the things that the church was teaching either. I have come to a place where I can read the gospels differently, with an understanding for the historical perspective, and an insight into the mythology that they contain. But I still believe that Jesus had a special message, and it is worth our time to listen to his teachings.

So who was this man Jesus? Well, he was a Jewish teacher. His main message was love. Some of our great stories come from him – the parables, the Sermon on the Mount, the tale of the loaves and fishes. He understood that a

story will be remembered long after a lesson fades. His parables invite us to “see” in a different way. It is entirely possible to read these stories and put yourself into all of the different characters. At one time we have all been the Good Samaritan, but we have also probably been each of the people who passed by, as well as the injured man on the road. We have been the Prodigal Son, but also the father, and the jealous brother. In looking at these stories from different perspectives, we are invited to make decisions about our life paths, and transform the ways we live.

Jesus was a healer. He touched lepers. He ate with women who weren't part of his family – a practice that led those women to be labeled prostitutes. I find it absolutely believable that his total acceptance actually helped people to heal themselves.

He was a social reformer. He refused to conform to the social conventions of his day. And he was executed because of the danger he posed to the Roman authorities.

He preached compassion and acceptance. He lived in a society that was defined by purity laws, which created sharp social boundaries – pure/impure, righteous/sinner, whole/not whole, male/female, rich/poor, Jew/Gentile. But Jesus deliberately replaced the core value of purity with compassion. He spoke of being pure on the inside, and he refused to judge people. He formed a completely inclusive community.

But the most important thing to me is that he preached a one-on-one link to God. He believed that no one needs to go through a priest or a church to approach God. He taught that we are all children of God, and we all have a direct line to our creator. This message speaks to me very powerfully, but that story is for another time.

Jesus was a social prophet, a teacher of wisdom, and a spiritual man. His teachings and his life invite us to choose the best within us. His life and his ministry was very short in terms of time, but his message was so powerful that his followers founded a religion about him. And I think that he has a lot to offer us, even as Unitarian Universalists.

Sharing by Stephen Merino

In his BBC radio talks and subsequent book *Mere Christianity*, the popular Christian apologist C.S. Lewis made an argument that has come to be known as “Lewis's Trilemma.” On the divinity of Jesus, Lewis said:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.”

Is Lewis right? Must we see Jesus as a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord God? Are there no other options? And how many us, while rejecting Lewis's claim, nonetheless see Jesus as irrelevant, or as a thing of the past?

I'll admit, when I was first introduced to Unitarian Universalism, my acceptance of Lewis's trilemma was so deep that I had difficulty accepting Unitarianism's claim to revere Jesus not as God but as prophet and teacher. I had already given up on my image of Jesus as Lord and Savior, but I had nothing to replace it with. Sometime last year I admitted to myself that I did, in fact, have a "Jesus problem." I had no idea what to do with Jesus. Amidst the maze of doctrines and beliefs that make up Christianity, and Mormonism on top of that, Jesus had always been a loving, inviting figure and an example of selfless living. The Jewish carpenter from Galilee still evoked in me admiration, even reverence, while also invoking deep feelings of doubt and frustration. Unable to accept that this man died for my sins and rose from the grave, what was I now to do with Jesus? Was there a place for him on my *new* spiritual path?

One of the things that prompted me to re-evaluate my ideas about and relationship to Jesus was a 2004 article in *UU World* by the Reverend Erik Walker Wikstrom called "Jesus and the Modern Seeker." Wikstrom asks a question that I have asked myself many times:

"I wanted to find out whether there is an option between accepting what I now see as unacceptable—the image of Jesus taught to me as a child—and the only other choice I'd ever known—to reject the whole thing. Is there still another Jesus, one who won't strain my credulity yet who can still command my respect and perhaps even my devotion?"

A fully satisfying answer to that question is beyond the scope of this sharing, and likely beyond my abilities. My purpose today is simply to ask whether there is a place for Jesus on our journey, and what that place might be. The purpose of my sharing today is *not* to explore or discuss scholarly views of the New Testament and Jesus. A wonderfully insightful lay-led service here at the fellowship covered that topic in 2004. It's available for download on the fellowship's website. Suffice it to say that as I've read and studied over the last few months, I have learned that biblical scholarship makes clear that deciphering what Jesus said and didn't say is no easy task. There are good reasons to suspect that much of the New Testament may represent the creation of a religion *about* Jesus, rather than the religious path that he preached and lived on a daily basis. This simple realization actually opened the door for me to see Jesus in a new and refreshing way.

At this point, two comments are in order. First, preparing for this service over the last few months has been an insightful and fulfilling process. Yet it seems to have raised more questions than answers. I am still trying to figure out what I think about Jesus and how to incorporate him into my spiritual life. My remarks today represent just the beginning of that process. Second, I have not gone through this process alone. I have leaned heavily on fellow UUs, both contemporary and historical. My liberal use of quotes will reflect that fact.

As I have pondered what place Jesus might have on my journey, I have come to believe that through finding some way to connect to Jesus and his message we can better connect to our UU roots, our personal roots (for those of us with Christian backgrounds), and to our Christian family members, friends, and neighbors. I'll speak briefly about each of these.

First, our Unitarian Universalist roots. As a new UU, I was eager to dig into our history and religious thought. As I read the writings of important figures like William Emery Channing, Theodore Parker, James Luther Adams, and others, I was struck by how Christian they were. Not all that long ago, Unitarians and Universalists were liberal Christians. I always knew somewhere in my mind that they were Christian, but hearing it from them is somehow different, you know? We now see contemporary Unitarian Universalism's religious pluralism and openness as a source of strength and inspiration, and with good reason. But in our effort to be pluralistic and inclusive, are we too quick to forget our Christian roots? Do we too often leave Jesus' life and message off of our spiritual smorgasbord? In the book *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, Forrest Church discusses our roots in Christianity:

"One question often asked of Unitarian Universalists is, Are you Christian? Our faith does have Christian roots, many of us gather in churches, and some of our members call themselves Christian. But whatever we call ourselves, most of us would agree that the important thing about Jesus is not his supposed miraculous birth or the claim that he was resurrected from death, but rather how he *lived*. The power of his love, the penetrating simplicity of his teachings, and the force of his example of service on behalf of the disenfranchised and downtrodden are what is crucial. The Apostles' Creed and other such statements of dogmatic theology entirely miss the point. They seem to suggest "if you believe in Jesus, you can live forever," not, "if you believe as Jesus, you can live well."

We can connect to our UU roots in liberal Christianity by believing as Jesus that everyone we meet has tremendous worth, that we have the responsibility to care for one another, and that our actions speak louder than words.

Second, our personal roots. Many of us come from a Christian background. Many of us were relieved to leave it behind for a free faith that points our attention more to this life than the next. Yet, I suspect that some of us struggle to make sense of our religious pasts and to know what parts of them to keep along for the journey. The wonderful thing about Unitarian Universalism is that it grants us the freedom to revisit our religious pasts and even reclaim the parts that we still find value in. I can honestly say that if it weren't for Unitarian Universalism, I might not have felt compelled *and* encouraged enough to revisit my Christian past and ask whether there's a place for Jesus on my new path. Another great thing about our chosen faith tradition is that we can embrace a new spiritual source or reclaim one from our past without excluding or discarding other sources we have acquired along the way. As I read the stories of contemporary UUs who had decided to include Jesus on their journeys, I was struck by the fact that they did not do so at the expense of other important spiritual sources in their lives. In revisiting my own religious past in this way, it's been spiritual enriching to realize that I don't have to leave my appreciation for Jesus behind. My Unitarian Universalism allows me, even encourages me to bring that appreciation with me.

Finally, I believe that connecting to Jesus and his message can help connect us better to those around us that have made Jesus the central focus of their lives. Many of us have family, friends, and neighbors who have a deep and abiding belief in Jesus and look to him as a guide, healer, and even Savior. A

healthy respect for and even understanding of Jesus can help us to understand and connect to such people in our lives. Doing this doesn't require us to *believe* the same things that they do about Jesus. But it does require us to love them as Jesus would.

Our current UUA president Reverend Sinkford recently emphasized the importance of this kind of connecting in our interfaith work:

"We need to get over our Christian-phobia. Unitarian Universalists will joyfully chant the Buddhist sutras, delight in midrash of traditional Jewish texts, recite Native American prayers, and sing Gospel hymns. But ask many Unitarian Universalists to join in reciting the Lord's Prayer and you are in big trouble.

This country's dominant faith is Christianity. If you are going to work in the interfaith world, you have to be able to be in the presence of people for whom the Christian message is life-saving Good News. If a Southern Baptist and a Catholic can stand with us to argue for comprehensive sexuality education and birth control, we must be able to respect the Lord's Prayer. Perhaps we simply need to remember that the heart of the Christian Gospel is to love God and "love thy neighbor as thyself."

OK. So I've talked about the benefits of finding a place for Jesus. But how do we do it? How can a religious skeptic and humanist like me incorporate Jesus and his message into my own spiritual path, while maintaining the kind of religious integrity and honesty that I value so dearly and find in Unitarian Universalism? I came across two particularly insightful ideas while preparing for this service. First, in the *UU World* article that I quoted at the beginning of the service, author Doug Muder shares the insights he learned as he dug into our UU past:

"The Unitarian and Universalist founders speak most clearly to me when I don't elevate them to a pantheon, but identify with them as fellow strugglers, the same way I identify with UUs today.

But how they struggled, I think, still has a lot to teach us. Channing, Ballou, and Parker did not take the Christianity of their day as a given and argue for or against it. Each found elements of unspeakable wonder in Christianity, encrusted by doctrines and theologies gone horribly wrong. Channing looked for the "essential" in Christianity, Parker for the "permanent." Reading them, I picture Christianity as a statue they have dredged up from an ancient shipwreck, with only a gleam here or there betraying the promise of what lies beneath. The UU founders did not seek to pass on unchanged the religion of their teachers, but to remove the encrustations without shattering the statue to fragments.

I wish I saw more of that approach to Christianity in UU churches today. On those rare occasions when we do discuss it—on the Internet, in discussion groups, or informally at coffee hour—too often we just debate whether Christianity is good or bad. We talk about it as if it had been defined once and for all by some distant authority, and is not definable or re-definable by us. But if Channing, Ballou, Parker, and their contemporaries had looked at Christianity that way, there would be no Unitarian Universalism."

The message that I get from Muder is that as UUs we have both the privilege and the responsibility to approach Christianity with an open mind and heart. They struggled with Jesus, his life, and his message in order to make them relevant for their time. We can, too.

Second, UU blogger Chris Walton reminded me that what we learn from the Gospels is that Jesus wasn't concerned about what his disciples believed, he was concerned about what they did and how they treated others. In Walton's words:

“Jesus didn't emphasize doctrine. He emphasized receptiveness, neighborliness, healing — ways of regarding other people as responses to God's love. But we have this completely unrealistic, profoundly dangerous notion that certainty is a characteristic of faith. We often think that having the answers is what it means to be faithful. The Christian story is about practice, not perfect. And this opened a door for me: I recognized that I wanted to be an apprentice, that I wanted to live in the Christian story, in spite of the fact that I don't "believe" many of the doctrines or recognize the authority of the church to speak on God's behalf.”

As I prepared for this service, I was prompted to ask myself whether I am a Christian. I would have to answer no. I'm not. I suspect that I will never feel comfortable applying that label to myself. But what this process has helped me to discover is that there *is* a place for Jesus on my journey. I suppose there has always been. I just had to find it.