

I was raised Baptist, one of those three-times-a-week-in-church Baptists, so you might guess that as a Unitarian Universalist minister I have a unique approach to Jesus. I had left my church for much the same reason as the Reverend Viola Abbitt—a perceived gap between doctrine and behavior. When I was 24, I sought the approval of the UU Ministerial Fellowship Committee to be recognized as a UU minister, and one of that august number was a rather stiff, severe older minister who disparaged Buddhism, Humanism, and Nonviolence as my central influences. He angrily proposed Christianity as the basis for all good ministry, but the committee had already approved me. Today, I speak to him.

This is Easter and it is time to deal with Jesus. The four Gospels of the New Testament of the Christian Bible were written decades after the events they portray, and do not always agree with each other. The Gospel stories suffer from problems of distant, distorted memory. Further, some events are fantastic and defy rationality. Much of Christianity has become bogged down in tedious rituals and pale reflections of intense events. Today, I will consider the man Pastor Jef called Rabbi Jesus.

First, the social context into which Jesus was born was one where “the “downtrodden,” the “persecuted,” and the “captives,” . . . were the overwhelming majority of the population in Palestine—the crowds or multitudes of the gospels. The middle class was very small and the upper classes even smaller.” (Albert Nolan, JESUS BEFORE CHRISTIANITY, pp.26-7) The elite were chief priests, teachers, and commentators who interpreted the laws in the scriptures.

Second, “the [main] suffering of the poor, then as now, was shame and disgrace. . . the really poor man who is dependent upon others and has no one dependent on him is at the bottom of the social ladder. He has no prestige and no honour. He is hardly human.” (This is from research by Albert Nolan, a Jesuit priest.)(Nolan, JESUS BEFORE CHRISTIANITY, pg.22) Shame has a social context and the structural shame of Jesus’ time had a purpose. Sex workers, thieves, shepherds, the sick and disabled, and the financially poor were uneducated in the law and were blamed for their misfortune because they had ignorantly sinned or some ancestor (up to ten generations before) had sinned by not respecting laws such as those against work or healing on the Sabbath, touching the wounded or ill, and socializing with outcasts. Unlike chief priests and elders of the temple, the rabble could not study the scriptures because they were poor and ignorantly, “inevitably lawless and immoral.” This is a business model whereby the oppressed are deeply shamed by a social structure that provides no path for a good life. Because there was not at that time a distinction between natural and supernatural events, fatalism was enforced by the upper classes through portraying God as punishing violations of the law with misfortune, ill health, or poverty. The poor were

trapped like the Untouchables of India because it was forbidden for righteous Jews to associate with or touch such people. The occupying Roman soldiers further oppressed the people as they put down sporadic rebellions by brutal extermination, which many interpreted as a general punishment of Israel for betraying God.

Jesus was born into the small middle class, between the tiny upper class and a vast sea of uneducated, poor, and oppressed people. He was unique; he chose to identify with the oppressed. Jesus' core message was compassion. Given oppression of almost the entire population, compassion was a radical viewpoint, and something that he repeatedly said to people directly, and through stories, and demonstrated in his lifestyle. The miracles in which he healed the dead or physically or mentally ill contradicted the view that ill physical and mental health were God's punishment. The story goes that he was crucified, like thousands of Jewish rebels, but arose from the dead three days later. He could be resurrected because he was "God's only begotten son." Today, we'd see that as fantasy or science fiction, but let's avoid literalism and simply see these stories as powerful metaphors conveying a message of empathy to the original intended audience of uneducated, simple people.

The real resurrection is not a resuscitation of Jesus but what he stood for. When he was alive he had compassion for the poor of every kind and claimed that God forgives the faithful their shameful sins. He taught compassion directly through prophecy, the story of the Good Samaritan, and compassionate healing.

Jesus' prophecy attacked structural shame:

'How blest are you who are in need; the kingdom of God is yours.

'How blest are you who now go hungry; your hunger shall be satisfied.

'How blest are you who weep now; you shall laugh.

'How blest are you when men hate you, when they outlaw you and insult you, and ban your very name as infamous, because of the Son of Man.

(Luke 6:20-26)

Jesus ends with the admonition to "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you . . . Treat others as you would like them to treat you." (Luke 6:28-31)

Soon after, a lawyer asks: Who is the "neighbor" he should treat as he would like to be treated? Jesus describes a man who is robbed and beaten badly, left in a ditch. Two members of the elite, priestly caste passed by—avoided touching him—but a Samaritan—a member of a group considered polluted because an ancestor may have married a non-Jew and they therefore were social outcasts—bandaged the wounded

man and paid for his recovery at an inn. Jesus asked: “Who was this man’s neighbor? The lawyer answered: “The one who showed him kindness.” (Luke 10:25-37) Perhaps the most durable of Jesus’ stories, this is about compassion across racial and ethnic lines. Likewise, we live in a society that claims people can rise according to their abilities—which implies fairness in the distribution of status--but randomly murders Black people and still limits the housing, health, and educational opportunities by racial, ethnic, and class markers. American meritocracy? Then why is it, that--by international comparison--America is highly unequal, with low social mobility? (Wilkinson, Richard and Pickett, Kate, THE INNER LEVEL, pg.151-53). As in Jesus’ time, we struggle with structural shame in a society where the meritocracy game is rigged.

Jesus refused all demands from members of the elite to prove his authenticity by doing a miracle. Jesus was traveling and a woman who had hemorrhaged for twelve years touched his robe and was healed. He asked who had touched him. She admitted it and he responded: “My daughter, your faith has cured you.” (Mark 5: 25-34) This woman would have been considered (in her time) as unclean and untouchable. But Jesus recognized that she had empowered herself by daring to touch him, and healed, which contradicts shame. Just as Jesus repeatedly ate and drank with the Untouchables of his society, he speaks to her affectionately, with familiarity. He then went to a house where a girl had “died” but Jesus said she was merely sleeping. He took her hand--thereby touching a dead body and becoming unclean--and she awoke and walked around. Very publicly, Jesus broke with the discrimination of his time to express compassion.

What can we in 2022 take from this? Two examples:

My counseling center has a weekly case conference at which each staff member presents a case where identifying data has been scrubbed out in order to respect confidentiality so problems can be clear and questions answered about therapeutic dynamics. A few weeks ago, I presented a case in which the man had behaved very destructively. Staff members expressed revulsion and anger. Each one stridently demanded to know how I could sit in the same room with him. Why don’t I throw him out of therapy? They are not usually an angry, critical bunch. While I understood these were very human reactions, I was so shocked I burst out with: “I am not the prophet of a punitive God!” They fell silent. They reconsidered. That was not very compassionate of me, either, and at every case conference since then one of my friends for thirty years will tease me, that I am “the prophet of a loving God.” I can live with that reputation, but I am sorry for my implicit blaming. I could have empathized with their distress.

Another example, I was working late one day and went to a nearby diner at 5:00 p.m. to get dinner before more work. As I reviewed the menu, a very old couple came in, holding each other up, and tottered over to the counter near where I sat. The waiter came over, and asked:

“Would you like scrambled eggs?” (He clearly knew them.)

“What?” the man replied.

Again, loudly but gently, the waiter said: “Would you like SCRAMBLED EGGS?”

“What?”

Once again, more loudly but kindly: “WOULD YOU LIKE SCRAMBED EGGS?”

“Yes.”

“What would you like with them?”

“What?”

I have fondly remembered that waiter’s compassion.

When the National Council of Churches was forming, in the late 1940’s, Unitarians were denied membership because of insufficient Christianity. The Universalists then quit the Council in sympathy. Therefore, I have repeatedly referred to Jesus, not Jesus CHRIST. Unitarian Universalists tend to overwhelmingly believe that Jesus was not THE Messiah, but one of many guides to spiritual health. Jesus never said he was the Messiah, and “do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you” was already in the scriptures of the First Testament, as it is in many religions. He told stories; many prophets told stories. He performed miracles; miracles were expected as legitimizing prophets and the Roman Catholic Church still seeks proof of miracles to grant someone sainthood.

He deserves great respect because he lived the compassion he preached. He touched the Untouchables; he casually ate and drank with outcast sinners repeatedly. He healed people in need, regardless of violating laws about touch and the Sabbath. His compassion makes him exemplary, and worthy of respect. We appreciate Jesus, not because he was a messiah, or because of a bodily resurrection, but because he gave us an example of compassion that—whenever we express it to someone—is our resurrection of Love in a brutally cruel world. Every time we do as he did, whether in His name or not, we resurrect what he stood for. Every time we accept someone disgraced or oppressed; we have repeated the very soul of Easter.

To take Buddhism as one of many world-wide examples, Thich Nhat Hanh said: “Caring for yourself, reestablishing peace in yourself, is the basic condition for helping someone else. . . .to be able to provide help, we have to have a little calm, a little joy, a little compassion for ourselves.” (Thich Nhat Hanh, TRUE LOVE) Affirmation of our FUSW members’ and friends’ essential worth is central to our spiritual mission. It

doesn't take a lot of energy or time, it doesn't mean you have to do a lot, it simply means that when *you* are *here* and you listen or contribute to the candles of joy and concern, sharing time, small group ministry, program groups, coffee hour, etc., you are participating in a ritual of acceptance. You are accepted and accepting. We do not blithely condone everything that our peers might have done, but neither do we condemn one another easily nor say there is no redemption. We *identify* much more than compare with each other

We all make mistakes and cannot prevent ourselves or others from experiencing shame. We can't entirely protect ourselves from low self-esteem. All people feel inadequate and imperfect at times when events threaten our identities, ability to cope, and reliance on others. But compassion towards ourselves and others can help. A social context of acceptance and understanding furthers compassion, because here we learn to treat each other kindly, and accept love into our hearts. It is the embodied place where we see that others have flaws, and they still can treat us with respect and kindness. It is the place where vulnerabilities are not disqualifiers for love but simply part of the struggle to love. Here we can feel inadequate to teach or comfort or listen or hope but we can intend to love.