

Growing up, I lived in a typical NYC middle class borough neighborhood. A mix of Irish and Italian Catholic, as well as Jewish families. We all went to school and played together. When I was young, my parents, embracing the melting pot that was New York, shared the Winter holidays with friends who were Catholic. So at the age of five years old, I had my first interaction with the Christian world. This simple act even as a child, or perhaps because I was a child, showed me that we were more alike than different and has stayed with me forever. I was too innocent to understand that there were differences in our religion. Looking back on it, this set the foundation for my beliefs of interacting with people...not to judge them based on their labels, but rather based on how they acted.

I remember the first time I entered a church...I remember it as if it were yesterday. I was ten years old. My childhood friend I had spoke of earlier with whom I had shared the winter holiday season had invited me to go to something called "mass". Now first I have to tell you I had no idea what church was. But I was truly ignorant of what other religions believed or what their prayer service were like. I went not of any rebelliousness just the first manifestation of my exploratory nature To me this was one of the first of my great adventures. Even having said that, to this day, I remember the palpable fear I felt upon entering the church. Would I burn upon entering...Then I saw this large statue of a man hanging on a cross. Then the real fear set in At the time not knowing the story of who Jesus was I was confused...., Is this what they do to non believers, I thought? If I had known at the time he was a Jewish rabbi, I would have really freaked out....but my friend assured me everything would be all right, that he was the image of the god they believed in. Of course growing up with the 10 commandments, which said to make no images of God, I took pause.

This experience made me think of the UU Religious Education program I taught many years ago called "Neighboring Faiths" The class went to visit various other religions' worship services and compared it Unitarian Universalism. It was enlightening to the children and to myself as well. Each and every one of the congregations we visited were appreciative of our interest and willingness to share our time with them. Instead of fear through ignorance, such as I experienced as a youth, I think that understanding and learning each other's different and in many ways similar underlying beliefs is one avenue that will lead to peace and cooperation in the future.

Unitarian Universalism has a long history and some of its formative thoughts stem from an early Christianity and Christian writings that were not accepted as the eventual orthodox view of Christianity. So non orthodox views were considered heresy. The etymology of the word heresy is "to choose" We choose to believe something and not merely follow by rote what we are given. If that is heresy, I am proud to be a heretic. And I am glad that they do not burn heretics anymore. I think these early heretical ideas such as the unity of God versus the Trinity, and the question of the humanity of Jesus was always a suppressed undercurrent of Christianity over time.

These views once again saw the light of day in wake of the Protestant Reformation starting in the sixteenth century and have evolved over the past half century and continue to evolve. The question is how are the Christian Writings about events that happened approximately 2,000 years ago relevant today to us, in our culture to give us hope for a better future..

My quest to explore this question took hold at the onset of my seminary experience, I took a number of classes on the Christian Scriptures. These were taught with a historical critical approach. Meaning, what did these writings mean to the people at the time they were written. I had what I considered one distinct advantage in comparison with the other students.

I was the only one who had never read the Christian Scriptures prior to class. Therefore, I had no preconceived notions as to their interpretation. . I engaged the writings with an open heart and open mind. I was the one who always asked "why do you come to such a conclusion" or "do you really believe that happened". Whenever I would start to ask a question, I would often see other students roll their eyes, wondering what the Unitarian was going to ask and sometimes drop their jaws after I asked my question. The Christian Scriptures include the four gospel accounts of Jesus, the writings attributed to Paul (one of Jesus most ardent followers) as well as numerous other epistles.

For today, I will look at the gospel stories from a very big picture perspective and see some of the larger themes focused on within them and by modern day Christianity and how it could relate to us as Unitarians

It is clear Jesus was a Jewish teacher. Much of the writings of the gospels involve his teaching his disciples about the Jewish Law and how to apply it in their day to day lives. Just as there are various interpretations of the law today, there were sharp divisions within Judaism in the day of Jesus. From other writings around this time period we know that there were three major groups of Judaism, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes.

In addition there were many Jews who had assimilated into the Greek/Roman culture as well. Ironically, although the Pharisees are portrayed in the gospels as the enemy of Jesus, they were probably the most liberal and progressive of the three sects. There are some scholars who believe that Jesus was actually a Pharisee and had parted ways with them which is what caused animosity between them. Most scholars though believe Jesus was an Essene. The Essenes were an ascetic messianic sect that followed the Jewish laws of the Torah quite strictly.

But Jesus doesn't fit into any category quite so easily. In some instances in the Gospels his teachings are much more strict than the Jewish law,

Such as his stance on divorce and in particular his stance that it is not enough to keep the law with ritual, but that the law must be written upon ones heart. In some instances he is much more liberal than the Jewish law, specifically regarding inclusiveness of worship and eating with oppressed...In Judaism, what is now considered Orthodox, In the Jewish Scriptures there are 613 laws to follow. Jesus kept it simple, to help it make it easier for all people to follow. It states in Matthew 22 when Jesus is asked:

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”<sup>37</sup> He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

<sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” I think that is interesting that to love your neighbor is equivalent to loving God.

I think the point of this is to show that Jesus reexamined the religion of his birth and found his own truth from within. He intuitively understood for his culture in his context, which laws were important and which were not. He did not force his truth on others, but offered it freely and openly to all who would listen. Many saw the genuineness and inclusiveness of the man and his message, and followed him.

I do not think Jesus meant for us 2,000 years later to do the same things that he did in his lifetime, but to be like him, to follow his example and study and discern what the important religious truths are for our times. So 2,000 years later we read stories about how Jesus performed miracles of healing and feeding people and we say, how can this be true. I think it is important that we re-consider what we consider a miracle. When we don't know exactly how things happen, or why things are the way they are we consider their existence and actions miracles or other-worldly. I think we take so many things for granted in our life.

I think of modern medicine we have today, organ transplants, dna testing, cures for diseases that once ravaged populations, to me, these are miracles. The fact that the sun rises and sets every day is a miracle to me. Life itself is a miracle. I guess its our perspective on things. I think that is what Jesus was trying to remind us. There are miracles around us every day in every part of our every day life, we just have to be aware of them. We don't need to take the miracle stories literally, they can have meaning metaphorically. Maybe the miracle in the story of the feeding of the thousands is that Jesus convinced people who had an abundance of food to care about those who did not have food to share with others. Some times in this day and age, with our ability to produce and distribute food, and with our abundance of food, why is it that people still go hungry?. Would we consider it a miracle today if no one ever had to go hungry?

And in regard to the healing miracles, I think we need to expand our understanding of the meaning of healing. Having worked the as a chaplain in a hospital, I can tell you most healing is

not as simple as a mechanic running a diagnostic report and changing a sparkplug. Although to be honest with you I have not idea if changing a sparkplug is simple or not....My point is, the human body is a complex organism including our mental and spiritual capacity to impact our healing. I see part of the role in healing is helping people realize this. I also find the concept of reconciliation as a powerful concept in healing. To think about this, we use the phrase reconciliation all the time when we talk about the healing of society or healing of a relationship. We need to bring our body mind and spirit into reconciliation with each other, to assist with the internal healing process of our heart as a way to find inner peace.

The next theme I would like to speak to is the story of Jesus dieing on the cross. Now I could have just avoided this part of the story and focused on the areas of Johns Gospel which speaks of light and love, but this issue of the cross is one that I think needs the most attention, the area that we need to redefine the most. Without question the story of Jesus suffering, has been used throughout history to inform people that to suffer is to be like God. This is a dangerous and destructive concept. I think due to this, too often people accept suffering as a way of life. This concept has also been used by leaders as a way to placate suffering people. And I definitively reject this line of thinking.... But there is suffering in the world.

We should be working towards eliminating and alleviating suffering, not making suffering a Godly virtue. So if we start with that premise then how can this story be a meaningful story to us. The story of the cross to me, is the story of what we are willing to do to transform the world and our lives. Jesus took actions in his life and death, to bring about in his and his followers minds, a better future world. So the questions this poses to us, is what are we willing to give of ourselves to make this world a better place for others and for future generations. How are we willing to act individually and as a species to save the planet?. How are we willing to act individually, and as country to make sure that there is justice for all people. What are we willing to do individually and as a religious community to make sure that our families and all families in the greater Quad Cities are cared for. Our world is a complex world full of many choices. Jesus and his followers made some radical choices for their lives with the goal of saving the world. So I ask you: What radical choices are we willing to make to save the world. I encourage you to think deeply about this question.

The last theme I would like to touch on is Jesus' resurrection. I loved to point out to my fellow seminary students that in all the oldest versions of what is considered the oldest of the Gospels, The Gospel of Mark, Jesus was never physically resurrected. His body was just missing from the tomb, The story of the resurrection was added to later versions of Mark so that it would be in concordance with the other Gospel stories. But the resurrection story is still a major part of Christianity today. So how can we redefine this resurrection story. Part of humanity's existential angst has always been our knowledge that our body is going to die. This often causes us to fear death. The fear of death actually leads to the consequence for many people to fear life and to try and protect life from death as long as possible. Often, only when we can accept death as a normal part of the cycle of life can we truly find meaning in our life and thus we are changed forever. When we become self aware and start to live our lives consciously and mindfully, we find renewed purpose and new life. This opportunity for renewal can happen any and every day in our lives based on the choices we make each day. To me this is the message of the resurrection story of Jesus. We can start anew

Unitarian Universalism is not a traditional Christianity – But I believe it is the future evolution of Christianity, I believe it is the future evolution of religion in this world. Within our principles and sources, within our pluralistic welcoming environment is a place where underlying universal religious truths can come together. And these truths **can** be found in the stories of the Christian Scriptures and we should utilize these writings in our ongoing search for truth and meaning. The Jesus of the Gospel was the Jesus that his followers hoped to find. They were looking for someone to give them hope where they did not have any. So we have to ask ourselves, how and where do we find hope. If we look at the Scriptures with an open heart and open mind, and look at

them in context with our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives, just as Jesus looked at his scriptures from the context of his time, I believe we can find the choices that will help us find hope for a better future for everyone. May it be so.