

“The Kingdom of God is Upon Us”
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The First Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hunterdon County
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A reading from the book of Mark:

“The scribes said to Jesus, ‘you are right, teacher, you have truly said that God is one, and besides him there is no other, and to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is much more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.’

When Jesus saw that the man answered wisely, he said, ‘you are not far from the Kingdom of God.’”

Today, in honor of Easter Sunday, I want to propose something perhaps a little bit radical for a Unitarian Universalist congregation: I want to invite us, this hour, to let the Jesus of the Gospels live in our hearts.

I’m not asking you to believe all the Bible miracles are literally true. Unitarians from Thomas Jefferson on have had their doubts about this. I’m not asking you to discard all the historical scholarship that says there were many Gospels and the words of Jesus came from multiple sources and who knows who the historical Jesus was anyway, if he even existed. And I think most of you know I am not of the opinion that one religion is right and the rest are wrong, nor do I personally think you need to believe a particular dogma to get to Heaven. Whatever Heaven is, whatever numinous mystery surrounds us and holds us in its arms, I don’t believe it is anything like a twelve-year-old’s clubhouse, requiring the right secret knock or secret handshake to get in. In the words of Paul Simon, I have reason to believe we all shall be received at Graceland.”

Which brings us back to Jesus. I’m not asking you to close your mind, I’m asking you to open your heart. I am asking you to consider whether there is something about Jesus and his message that can still capture our attention, that might speak to us two thousand years later. I believe there is. I am, I happily confess, a bit of a Jesus freak. I study the Gospels with interest, and not having to believe every word is literally true frees me to consider Jesus’ impact on my life. Now, I must admit, I don’t always like the guy. Nor do I always agree with him. Well, “he walks with me and he talks with me”, as the saying goes, and anybody who talks with me long enough is going to get into an intellectual argument.

That's just the way I am. But in my defense, Jesus is not always such an easy guy to agree with. Nowadays, we make him out to be a kind of genial flower child, talking about peace and love and understanding, but when I actually read the Gospels, Jesus is saying things like, "Give all your possessions to the poor, if you would follow me". and "Deny your family," and "it's best to become a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven" and "If your eye offends thee, pluck it out." Now, I guess some of these sayings must be metaphorical, because you know, I don't see a lot of penniless, self-orphaned, eunuch, eyeless Christians walking about. But that's the point: Jesus is not a straightforward kind of teacher. He's not very dogmatic at all. The message of Jesus is one that invites us to question, to ponder, even to doubt.

Much of what Jesus says is controversial. Some is contradictory. The Jesus of the Gospels a non-literal thinker who never gives a straight answer where he could tell a parable instead. He talks in stories. *Where* and *how* he tells these stories is as interesting as *what* he says. Jesus rarely speaks from a pulpit, and he never writes anything down. He's there with crowds in a far-flung corner of Galilee, he's hanging out with children, widows, unmarried women; he's parading into the great city of Jerusalem on a measly donkey. It's enough to make you wonder where the Jesus of the Gospels would be in today's world. Not on the talk shows, I bet, nor in the great cathedrals. He'd be at the projects, I like to think, hanging out with the people just scraping together enough of a living to get to the next day. He'd be at the bar, talking to desperate drunks who had just about given up on life. He wouldn't just be *at* the gay pride rally, he'd be celebrating on a parade flat with the people of his neighborhood. If Christ was here now, She – because I'm sure we can get it into our imaginations that the Christ-figure could be a She – she would surprise us by hanging out with soldiers at the army base. Then she'd travel to the Pentagon building riding on a Tricycle.

Jesus is just about everywhere in the Gospels, and never where you expect him to be. He's saying some pretty outrageous things, too. He's a religious Jew who says it's fine to work on the Sabbath, and *who cares* about washing your hands before meals. The outside of our hands doesn't matter, he says, it's the inside of our hearts that matters. From the perspective of his society, the man is unhinged. Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, and he says it is "at hand" – coming right here, right now, so close we might even be able to touch it. *Egizzo* is the Greek word he uses, which is a geographical term – it means, "to approach somewhere." But sometimes the tense Jesus uses says that the kingdom is *already* here. He is a street preacher, only instead of saying the end of the world is nigh, he's saying "can you taste it?" Never mind this pie in the sky when you die, can you hear the choir invisible? The kingdom of heaven is right in front of you, its right before your eyes, you just need to get closer, love your neighbor, love the

spirit, with all your heart and all your might, and everything in this world will change for you.

The kingdom of heaven, he proclaims, is like a mustard seed placed in fertile ground – just a small amount of it will lead to abundance – not in some future time but right here, in the place of harvest. In another image, he says the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman mixes in with flour – just a small amount of it will transform the world.

What is this yeast, this seed, that will transform the world? Jesus says it's a mystery, a mystery that we have not received the answer to but those of us with "ears to hear" have to figure out for ourselves. Some argue that they have figured it out for us – namely that belief that Jesus is the son of God is somehow that transforming power, and will lead to heaven, but only after we die. With all due respect, I personally just can't buy that all the power and mystery of this figure Jesus can be reduced to such a lifeless formula as "believe the right creed and you're in the club, otherwise, you're out in the cold." It seems to me to be the exact opposite of what Jesus was actually talking about.

Jesus condemns the Pharisees at every turn, because they were so focused on the letter of the law, and not on the spirit, which goes beyond all dogma and creed. While it's dangerous to succumb to the temptation to think you alone know the "real" Jesus, I can't help but imagine some of the things that Jesus might say about the organized religion of our day. Like what he would say about so much of the Christian church's obsession with condemning homosexuality. He'd be about ready to knock the Temple walls over on that one. "Purity laws? You bunch of Pharisees, you're *still* going on about purity laws? The kingdom of heaven is at hand, and you're worrying about who your neighbors are sleeping with? Your holy temple can go to Hell. Don't bother worshipping me, you brood of hateful vipers, you'll find me with the people who are actually living their life, not in this mausoleum for the dead."

Maybe it's just me – but I am pretty confident the Jesus of the gospels would know exactly what to make of this unhealthy obsession with other people's sexuality. But lest you think we religious liberals get off easy, think of what he might say to us. "You think because you do a good deed every now and then, you can lie on your comfortable couches and relax? Don't you know this is *important!* The kingdom of God is at hand! Come on people, don't think a few coins out of your vast purse, a few kind thoughts out of all your evil and sluggish inclinations, is going to get you to the Promised Land. You need to get to the kingdom of heaven! The train is at the station!"

Now, I'm not going to repeat the mistake of so many clergymen through the centuries and reduce the wonderful, mysterious message of Jesus to a lifeless creed that can be printed on the back of the order of service. Such creeds, whether conservative or liberal, take away from the poetry of the Gospels. They suit the dead, not the living. The letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

What I will do instead is repeat this mysterious question that the Jesus of the gospels asks in his stories again and again: what would the world be like, if heaven were right on the brink of our reality? What if the dead were still with us, part of "the choir invisible", and their deeds and their words lived in pulses stirred to generosity, and in deeds of daring rectitude? What if amongst us there were a living spirit – not a distant puppet master controlling his puppets with a hidden hand – but a spirit among the people and of the people, a loving spirit that could transform this world in the blink of an eye? What if even death were not the end of us, but if we in some manner that cannot be fully described in words, we were to join "the choir invisible whose music is the gladness of the world?"

The best way I can address such an important question is to tell a story – not a parable, I don't have Jesus' talent for parables, simply a story that happened to me. One year I helped plan a conference. Our aim was to transform the world. We were going to bring representatives from different religions together, talk about social justice, and help make meaningful change in our world. We were going to shake things up.

Problem was, the week-end that we scheduled our conference for turned out to be a beautiful week-end in late spring. And nobody wanted to attend a stuffy conference when the weather outside was so lovely, so we didn't get the numbers we were hoping for. But a few people did show up though, so it wasn't a total bust.

And I remember sitting at a table with a group of organizers and guests. I don't remember everyone at that table, but two people I remember quite well. One was a woman who was technically homeless – she was staying at a friend's house for the time being, but didn't know how long she'd be there or what she'd do next. She showed up at her conference because she had seen our flyer, and she wanted to come and be with us. She was a religious universalist – she believed there was a grain of truth in every religion (which I warmed to right away, of course). And she was, to put it politely, an unconventional thinker. She said she was on a God-given mission to make a specific change in our society. This change was a kind of sideways hug, two or more people linked at the hip with the arm around each other, so they could each look in the same direction, and not have to feel awkward about hugging if they didn't know each other very well. This woman demonstrated her sideways hug with everyone at the table. She was eager to

spread her message for, she believed, this would help bring peace between people and peace between nations.

The other person I remember at the table was a young man who was sharp as a tack. He had read many more theologians than I had – and I was at divinity school at the time – and he had also read many social scientists, economists, and historians. This young man was a committed Christian. His faith had led him to lead a very unconventional life. He lived in a commune, sharing everything with those in his building, he wore second-hand clothes, he rode a bicycle to save energy. He was working to change the economic system to give more to the poor. And he was at this conference because he felt it was the sort of place where Jesus called him to be.

And sitting at that table, engaged in a sideways hug with people of that caliber, whose faith had transformed them, it was not hard for me to believe that the kingdom of God really was at hand. I even felt that the spirit of Jesus was alive at the table. It may have been in him and it may have been in her, but it was there, that's for sure. And for all there unconventionality, between the three of us, I don't know who was the most crazy! If the greatness of the kingdom of God is that close to us, if love really does have the power to transform, why wouldn't we all be living transformed lives?

I invite the message of Jesus to live in our hearts. It is up to you to discover what this means for you, but I still hold on to that glimpse that the poor shall taste heaven right now here on earth, that those who mourn shall be comforted, that those who seek justice shall find it. Each Easter I am convinced by faith *and* by the evidence I have witnessed in my own life that even death is no obstacle to love and justice, that the greatness of the world is *at hand*, it's right here, if we only look for it. This spring, on this day of Easter, may we find ourselves present to life's grandeur, and our spirits resurrected, in the midst of the Promised Land.

May it be so,

AMEN