

SERMON:

Gospel of Thomas: saying 70 p 149

“Jesus said: If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not have that within you, what you do not have within you will kill you.”

Ok, today I am obviously going to talk about Jesus and how the Unitarian Universalist tradition engages the life and teachings of Jesus. Before I do this, I need to get you all warmed up a little. I think sometimes in a UU setting we are challenged to even say “Jesus” or “Christ.” So let’s take the shock value out of this so you can really listen today instead of, perhaps, checking out every time I say “Jesus.” I want to invite you to say out loud, popcorn style, the language you have heard to reference Jesus in other settings. Repetition is OK. Just call it out! [Christ the Healer, the Lord, Son of Man, Son of God, Son of Mary, God Incarnate, the Incarnation, the Messiah...] Take a breath. Today I will use simply “Jesus,” or when quoting material from others, Christ, but I want to be clear that I have respect for these other names for and understandings of this powerful and important spiritual teacher. As many of you have heard me say, I grew up un-churched and found my way to Unitarian Universalism when I was 21. While I certainly visited my share of churches with friends and family, I was always the outsider and a bit mystified by all that took place, sometimes even terrified. Communion, when you have no idea what it supposed to signify, is more than awkward. Shockingly, I attended enough random

church services growing up to know the Lord's prayer by heart. I couldn't have located this in the Bible, as I never learned how to look up passages in the Bible. Obviously, attending an ecumenical Christian seminary changed all that. I suddenly had multiple light bulbs going off in my head--references in literature I never understood before, political arguments on social issues that referenced the Bible, and so much more. But I also began to see the footprint of Jesus and his teachings in the Unitarian Universalist tradition I have embraced.

Today I hope to share a few of the most important connections I've found as a way of honoring the place of Jesus in our tradition and of promoting a shift in how we as UU's approach both Jesus and Christianity, neither of which is monolithic in understanding or practice in our contemporary world. Here we have an opportunity to weigh in on how the Bible might be used and understood in our current context, an opportunity to reclaim our place in liberal religious understandings of the life and teachings of Jesus.

In their book, Saving Paradise, authors Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker research a transition in the practice of Christianity from the early period to the Crusades and show how, as they put it in their title "Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire." Rev. Brock is Director of Faith Voices for the Common Good and a minister in Disciples of Christ tradition. Rev. Parker, is president and professor of theology at the Unitarian Universalist Starr King School for the Ministry and is ordained in both the Methodist and UU

traditions. I had the chance to hear Rev. Parker speak a couple of years ago in Denver, and she explains that she got curious when she and Rev. Brock went on a trip to see early Christian artwork. They realized after awhile that the early images in Christian areas of worship were all of a kind of earthly paradise. The images of crucifixion which we are so inundated with in the contemporary Christian world did not begin to appear until the Crusades took place, and they showed up first where the Crusaders had violently defeated and subjugated communities into proclaiming Christianity as their belief. This shift led them to ask, what were those early images about and how were those early communities different?

For me, the answers they found connect us back to a religious tradition that lies at the foundation of our own values and practices and also explains why we may have buried this connection by “hiding” Jesus. Brock and Parker draw on the work of John Dominic Crossan whose work on the historical Jesus as a social revolutionary and anti-Empire radical also moved me to love and respect the life and teachings of Jesus. A final place of inspiration and connection for me has been the work of Philip Newell, whose book “Christ of the Celts” also points to early Christian values and practices as radically divergent from those we most often find at play in the post-medieval world and even in our own contemporary world.

Here are the versions of Jesus they share with us which we might choose to proclaim and connect with in our own UU tradition:

- Jesus as champion for the poor and disenfranchised
- Jesus as organizer and agent of social change
- Jesus as revolutionary against Empire
- Jesus, proclaiming salvation in this life and a love of the earth and this world as sacred/holy ground
- Jesus' message as a disruption of the status quo--in all of his roles (healer, teacher, spiritual leader)
- Jesus as an example of human capacity for the good of all, for creating salvation in this life

The following theological statements are derived from the principles and purposes of our tradition and are also refined from UU theologian James Luther Adams' 5 Smooth stones of Liberal Theology. Coined first by Rev. Nancy Bowen, we here in the rugged West know these as the 5 jagged rocks of contemporary UU theology: (2 are hanging here in the sanctuary)

1. Courageous Love Can and Will Transform the World
2. Salvation...in this Life
3. All Souls Are Sacred and Worthy
4. There Is a Unity that Makes us One
5. Revelation is neverending, continually unfolding

Paradise, or heaven, is a controversial concept among Unitarians. Our Universalist forebears believed in a loving God that would open paradise to all, leaving no one behind. Authors Brock and Parker point out that while there are paradise themes throughout the Bible, (Hebrew Bible and New Testament), they interpret Jesus' use of the idea of paradise "as

resistance to and critique of the Roman Empire” (28). They point out the way in which Jesus echoes the words of Isaiah in the Gospel of Luke: “The Spirit of the Lord is Upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18-19 and Isa 61:1-2). They say that “in echoing the vision of Isaiah, Jesus says that the Spirit of God in the world assures a flowering of righteousness, a concept we call ‘ethical grace’” and which some UU’s have begun to call “salvation in this life.” (29) They point to the story of the fishes and loaves, which we heard earlier, as a “consummate example of ethical grace” (30). It also an example of Jesus’ revolutionary spirit, for when he prays “to heaven to bless the food, he pays tribute to the divine source of the food” rather than to the Roman Empire and its methods for distributing food and resources (unequally). (30)

The authors point out that one of the shifts that has happened in our contemporary world is a separation of the spiritual and the material, and I would say that for many UU’s it is this separation that causes us to want to turn away from Christianity. When we as a society manage to ignore or to be ignorant of important realities of the material world--such as where our food is grown and the conditions of the workers producing our food (or clothing), or how we have acquired the natural resources we use to profit financially and the affects this has on other people and places-- “we live in self-deception and perpetuate harm we do not intend” (34). But the ancients knew differently, and Jesus taught

otherwise--our material world and our spiritual well-being are intimately connected and therefore tied as well to all other people of the world. The authors note that "Jesus, like the Hebrew prophets, connected paradise--abundant life--to the practical needs of human beings, who require a sustainable and sustaining life, free from economic exploitation and political oppression" (34). Sharing bread in this world view becomes a political act.

Probably the most difficult idea about Jesus for me has been the idea of Jesus as God Incarnate. Brock and Parker suggest that to the ancient world, this did not mean that we should put Jesus on a pedestal and proclaim his worthiness in contrast to our unworthiness. Instead, the ancients may have understood this idea as way to *reclaim* human capacity for making the world a better place, and should convince us we are all made in the image of God, we are all God's children, and have the capacity to love and lead as Jesus did. According to them, early church teachers said Christ...restored humanity to its original glory in Eden" (37). The ancient world wondered "how to negotiate a world of many powers and access the right ones...Freedom of choice gave humanity the capacity to gain wisdom and to embody creative power" but figuring out who and what they would serve was the challenge (38). The Christian Scriptures claimed that the spirit of God--the creativity, wisdom and power of life--dwelled in human beings" (39). Because of this, "Jesus was the sign of this reality. His very name came to signify the power of life lived in the Spirit. To be baptized in his name was to possess the same power" (39). And thus, being baptized

was also a radical act of rebellion from the Roman Empire in those first few centuries, a way of reclaiming individual and communal agency.

“Saving Paradise” names “three dimensions of eternal life” which Jesus promises his followers. These are: “knowing God, receiving the one sent by God to proclaim abundant life for all; and loving each other as he had loved them” (29). In our contemporary UU world, this last dimension is the one we can all connect with, regardless of whether we are theists or Christian in our theological view or atheist and humanist in our view. This refers back to our theological statement that *courageous love can and will transform the world*. It asks us to love from the theology of unity and honoring the sacred possibility of all human beings. Religious humanists may find grounding in their theology directly in this theology of Jesus as a reminder of our *human* capacity for Love with a capital L, our inherent possibility of divine connection and healing that we can offer each other.

In reading Philip Newell’s book, “Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation” I found another version of this idea. He tells us that in Celtic spirituality, “The Garden of Eden is...the deepest dimension of our being from which we live in a type of exile” (2). He reminds us that in Genesis humans are said to be made in the “likeness of God” and that “this is a fundamental truth in our biblical inheritance,” an idea which must be remembered as a “starting point” for how we read anything else said about humans in the Bible (3). Thus he tells us, the “image of God is the essence of our being” (3). This is a theology that has a high

anthropology, or holds humankind in high regard; it is not a theology of original sin or the inherent sinfulness in humans. Newell goes on to explain that we have become separated from our true natures, our authentic core. We have become disconnected through loss and conflict and consumerism, through the many ways in which we have stopped loving ourselves and each other. In Celtic Spirituality, Christ is meant to be a reminder of our true nature (Newell 9). In Celtic spirituality, nature and grace are not opposing energies, but rather connected; they are both “sacred gifts” (9).

“Grace” is a restoration of our true selves and authentic core. Or as we Unitarian Universalists say it, all souls are sacred and worthy, there is an inherent dignity and worth to all humans. And while we may be criticized for this high anthropology, our theological roots also recognize, as does the theology of the Celtic world, that we are capable of inflicting great pain and sorrow on each other, ourselves and world--as Newell says “the infections within the human soul are chronic. There are diseases of greed and limited self-interest...so much so that we can hardly imagine what the true harmony of the earth sounds like. These are not just superficial infections” (12). For Newell, the good news of the Gospels is that this is not our true nature. He says that “in the midst of our confusions and struggles in our lives, we are being invited to search deeper than the shadows for the Light of our beginnings. It is also the light of our true end” (14). Early Christian writer Pelagius was concerned, says Newell, that the teaching of original sin would allow the church to define “the human soul as essentially sinful” and the

consequences would be great (and they have been): “It would undermine us in our journey toward wholeness, ...pervert how we viewed ourselves, ...and distort the way we approach the people and teachings of other traditions” (19).

Since the Fourth Century, we can begin to see these consequences. I posit that the UU insistence on honoring all world traditions is one way in which we have stayed true to Jesus’ original teaching of open commensality, or an open table and his way of affirming the traditions of those different from him. We see this idea in Luke 14:1-24, Humility and Hospitality, where Jesus tells his followers that “all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted,” and that “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind...and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” The story of the Good Samaritan, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well—these also tell us that Jesus sought to respect and connect people across differences, to connect us to what is sacred and worthy within each of us, for we are all Children of the Light. And in the famous Beatitudes we hear him proclaim: *Blessed are.. (Matthew’s version)*

- ...the poor in spirit: for theirs is the [kingdom of heaven](#). (5:3)
- ...those who mourn: for they will be comforted. (5:4)
- ...the meek: for they will inherit the earth. (5:5)
- ...those who hunger and thirst for righteousness: for they will be satisfied. (5:6)
- ...the [merciful](#): for they will be shown [mercy](#). (5:7)

- ...the pure in heart: for they will see God. ([5:8](#))
- ...the peacemakers: for they will be called children of God. ([5:9](#))
- ...those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ([5:10](#))

Where is Jesus in the Unitarian Universalist tradition? He is hiding in our theology of universal salvation and in our concept of ethical grace; he is the underpinning of our sense of the capacity of humans for healing and wholeness; our interdependent web can be found in Jesus' promise of a paradise in which all are invited to enter and rejoice and in which the oppressed and the marginalized are given voice and power. Our theology of standing on the side of love, our belief in democracy and desire to level the playing field for all can all be traced to the life and teachings of Jesus. In this Christmas season, take a moment to remember this vision of Jesus and this ideal for religious communities: we are the ones we've been waiting for...and Jesus told us this in the beginning...come be fishers of men.