

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield
Faith of a UU Christian
December 16, 2012
Rev. Maddie Sifantus

MEDITATION IN WORD AND SILENCE

There are no words this weekend to express our sadness and alarm on hearing of the tragedy in Connecticut this Friday. We can only pray with our whole beings that there can be some sort of comfort for all those most closely affected by this tragedy and senseless loss. We cannot understand how tragedies such as this one—and the other ones brought into our homes on the media and those countless other ones which don't make the news but with which people struggle, even in this season of tinsel and jingle bells...perhaps most especially in this season. We reach out with our whole beings—to embrace those who need embracing—and for ourselves—who need embracing. We meditate in whatever quiet time we may find to know how we can respond, each one of us, to what is senseless in our world. We take this time quiet now to find that place within ourselves where we can reflect on lives lost, trust and security interrupted and how all these things may call us to bring healing how we may, share peace in small and large ways and bring justice to a hurting world. Please join me in a longer silence this morning which I will end with a ringing of our meditation bell. May that which is greater than us and which we may find in community together bring us peace this morning and in the days ahead.

SERMON The Faith of a UU Christian

I have to admit that it feels difficult to sing about “joy” this morning when we are all coming to terms with the latest tragedies this week. It does not feel particularly gladsome or particularly peaceful. We are reeling with images and feelings. Those of us with children and grandchildren want to draw them close. All

of us want to hold each other however we might. We want to be with others in community and we want times of quiet to sustain ourselves. We want to know that when “life turns hard” that we may “find in love our stay and guard,” as we sang in our Opening Hymn.¹ And we look for meaning. We look for meaning, even when that meaning is hard to find.

It is that search for meaning that brings us together in this community week after week. It has brought people here year after year. For many of us, it has resulted in our exploring of this liberal faith, this Unitarian Universalism, which drew us through these doors or ones like them. And so it is that I am exploring what I am calling the Faiths of Unitarian Universalism this year, not as some sort of intellectual exercise but rather to consider how faith helps us make meaning in our lives. And because we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being, I have been talking about faiths with an “s” since there are many different versions of ways to the holy or paths up the mountain that we talk about here. So far we have reflected on Judaism during the High Holidays, earth based theologies on the Day of the Dead, Humanism and Theism. Still to come is Buddhism, Feminism and a service based on a new book named *Faithiest* by Chris Stedman, which purports to tell how an atheist found common ground with the religious.

When I was planning the church year in July, it seemed to me that exploring the Faith of a UU Christian in December would be a good fit, especially since we as UUs seem at least slightly more comfortable with the Nativity Story—the raising of taxes, the birth of a baby, wise men traveling to seek truth and shepherds tending their flocks. We are more comfortable with those images than we are with the tragic end of the life a prophet and teacher, the rolling back of a stone to find an

¹ SLT 228, Once in Royal David’s City

empty tomb and a mother crying at its door, losing her son to an act of violence. Perhaps I should have been doing this sermon on Easter *this* year.

But here we are anyway, picking up the pieces—or trying to think about how to start—and bringing love to those we love. We hope that the candles we light and the faith that calls us “gives love; gives hope.” And we are called to “bring love; bring hope” even in the hard times. So we will continue with the carols and the stories of the season...and I will continue with my topic of the Faith of a UU Christian, a faith which has brought love and hope to uncounted numbers of people for two millennia, whatever our particular experience has been.

But the Faith of a UU Christian feels like the trickiest of all my topics for the year. I am aware that many among you would rather that I had skipped this one. Or that I talked about the Faith of a Rastafarian or the Faith of a Shaman or pretty much any other kind of faith. Some of you may remember that when I first came to you in January 2009, one of my first sermons was an examination of our Universalist heritage and the history of this congregation which was born as the First Universal Society of South Reading. The reading I used that morning in February, which, it seems to me, also speaks to us this morning was by Universalist minister Richard Trudeau, and it said this in part, in his own words:²

“Let me (Richard Trudeau) tell my own story. I was raised in a mainstream Christian denomination in which--I say in retrospect--I was religiously violated. When I discovered UUism it was with a tremendous sense of relief and homecoming.”

“Over the better part of a decade I fashioned a new UU faith for myself out of bits and pieces drawn from many sources, including humanism, Judaism,

² Trudeau, Richard. <http://www.nmuc.org/WhatOffr.htm>

Taoism, Buddhism, and the study of nature. But one day I started asking myself, ‘Richard, if your new faith is so inclusive, why does it include nothing of Christianity? Richard, if you’re so tolerant, why are you so intolerant of Christianity? Richard, why are you so *angry*?’ Logic told me that Christianity couldn’t be *all* bad. And so I embarked on the delicate and exasperating process of taking my childhood religion apart--of separating all the toxic things from the few things that still felt good, of separating all the things I thought were silly from the few that still made good theological sense.”

On that day in February 2009 I was new among you, just getting to know folks. I can remember chatting with our beloved member Serena Murley, who we lost last year, who was very concerned that the Universalist cross seemed to be missing and wasn’t even to be seen during Christmas! So it was that I went rooting around in the little room off the chancel that we call the Vestry and found the Universalist cross tucked in the back of a file drawer. I was told that this Universalist Off-Center Cross sat on our altar for many, many years. The Off-Center Cross was the symbol of Universalism in the years before the merger in 1961. Albert Ziegler, one of the ministers who was there for the invention of the off-center cross, described it this way: “The circle is drawn to represent the all-inclusive faith of universalism which shuts no one out. In that circle is placed the cross, symbolizing the beloved faith out of which our wider insight has grown. We feel that universalism is not the product of any one cultural or religious tradition, but is in fact implicit in all the great faiths...we consider ourselves to be ‘Universalists of Christian descent.’”

So this symbol was designed to shut no one out...but still included its Christian piece. To me, it was quite symbolic that our historic Universalist cross was hidden away in a file drawer. It seemed to me to be not so much an archaic

artifact—something we have outgrown but not gotten rid of—but rather something that points to something we don't want to think about. Something that many of us are allergic to, just like Richard Trudeau was...and I was.

Our “cross in the file drawer” is not unusual at all for many of our UU congregations today. There are many stories about the “cross in the closet” which has been the trend in UUism for decades. We have what Duke Grey has called “cross cringe.” Grey, who at the time was minister of the First Unitarian Church of Chicago, once wrote an article which he titled, “Was Dracula a Unitarian?” He pointed out an interesting coincidence. In the 1600s, Unitarianism flourished in a section of Europe known as Transylvania. Transylvania is best known these days as the legendary home of the vampire Dracula, except to many of our neighbors who have partner congregations there. Gray reminds us in his article that the legend of Dracula includes this curious fact: Dracula was frightened of crosses. In the presence of a cross, Dracula would lose his power, cringe in fear, and run away. Duke suggested that Unitarians today, like Dracula, suffer from an ailment he has called “cross cringe.” We are afraid of them, he said, and when we are around them, our feelings range from mild discomfort to rigid antagonism.³

One of the things that happen in seminary is that a student has to reexamine all of her influences and upbringing. The good, the bad, and the ugly. You have to go back and dust off old memories and practices and take a hard look at the very path that took you away from the faith of your childhood, if that is what happened—in my case the religious inheritance from a Baptist father and an Episcopalian mother. And then all the exploring I did after I decided that the Nicene and Apostles creeds did not speak to me. You look at all these things in the

³ Adapted from a sermon by Bruce Clear, *The Christian in Me*.

light of Systematic Theology, the History of Christianity, World Religions, Ethics and more. If we are not too allergic—if we can get outside of ourselves and out of our own way—we have a laboratory in which to take Jesus seriously. Just as we take Buddha, the Tao, and Chief Seattle. Gary Smith, the recently retired, long-time minister of our congregation in Concord has said, “Taking Jesus seriously has always meant for me a kind of personal surrender, but that says way more about me than it does about Jesus. Somewhere in my spiritual odyssey, I moved into that dichotomy that either Jesus is the exclusive way to God or he isn’t. . . . To hear someone claim his or her faith with the words ‘we see the light and you don’t’ only pushed me away.”⁴

So that’s part of what gets in the way for us—this experience many of us have in someone or some institution telling us that theirs is the “one way.” And then there are all those so-called miracles, virgin births and things that modern, rational people, especially UUs just don’t buy. But I, and an increasing number of my colleagues, say, hold on—let’s not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Books are being written like Scotty McLennan’s 2009 book, *Jesus Was a Liberal: Reclaiming Christianity for All*. You may know that McLennan used to serve as Chaplain at Tufts University. He was one of my mentors in community ministry when he was in the area, before he left to be dean for religious life at Stanford University. In an interview with a writer in the *Boston Globe*, he tells of a Jesus that “represented a progressive vision—first of all, tolerance. He was wide open to people, and not only of the same religious position. He welcomed to his table “sinners” like prostitutes, the socially excluded like lepers and tax-collectors, and foreigners like Roman soldiers. Jesus always challenged the religious and secular authority of his day in the name of justice and love.”⁵

⁴ Wikstrom, Erik (2004). *Teacher, Guide, Companion: Rediscovering Jesus in a Secular World*. Skinner House, xii.

⁵ *Boston Globe*, G section, 8-22-09, 3.

This is the Jesus that our heritage as Unitarians and Universalists embraced. This is a Christianity that is about the teaching of Jesus, not a worship of Jesus that developed later, especially through the writings of the Apostle Paul. When McLennan is asked, “What is a liberal Christian, to you?” he answers, “Liberal Christians follow in Jesus’ footsteps and try to be committed to Jesus as their lord and savior; by that I mean their teacher, the person who gives primary meaning and purpose to their lives. But we do so in a way that takes seriously modern science and logic and rationality. We don’t read the Bible literally, and we see love as the primary Christian value, whereas Conservatives say that truth is the primary value. We have a notion of there being many roads up the spiritual mountain; Christianity is just one of them.”⁶

So UU Christianity is “the religion of Jesus” (the religion that Jesus taught) rather than “the religion about Jesus” (the religion that centers on who Jesus was—the Messiah, the Christ). And it has very deep roots in our history. It has been a long journey for Unitarianism from the Reformation to our modern era. Four hundred years ago, all Unitarians considered themselves to be Christian. And yes, Unitarianism does go that far back. More than that, they considered themselves—as every Christian group from liberal to conservative considers itself—to be the most genuine form of Christianity. Of course, the rest of Christendom had a difficult time recognizing it.

So, for those of us who don’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, Christianity is about what Jesus was pointing to during his time on earth, as much as we can know and understand that. There are those who search for who the historical Jesus might actually have been and there has been lots of interesting

⁶ Ibid.

work come out of what's called the Jesus Seminar with such folks as John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. I myself taught a workshop at my home church years ago on *From Jesus to Christ*, using the PBS series of the same name. How did the man Jesus who was born a baby in Bethlehem become the Christ? How do we know what we know about him...and isn't it really all about what he said and did, not what others said about him decades later when the Gospels were written, or most especially what Paul wrote to the budding far flung Christian colonies?

When I was a little girl, my Grandmother MacNeill, my father's mother, gave me a Bible. Perhaps you have one like it. It has the Four Gospels and the Letters from Paul—what we call the New Testament—and the Psalms, that section from the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament. But what is most particular about this slim volume is that it has what scholars at the time thought Jesus actually said in red ink—a red letter testament. I guess I could say that my Baptist and Church of Canada Grandmother actually planted the seeds of a Unitarian Christian in me! Because, if you examine only the words of Jesus—that is, the teachings of Jesus—you will find nothing remotely resembling a Trinitarian formula which asks us to worship him as if he were a god. Nothing. All such talk came from those who lived after Jesus did. And what he did say gives us our marching orders of how to live a moral, ethical and compassionate life.

My colleague Bruce Clear in delivering a sermon he named “The Christian in Me” said, “The religion that Jesus taught was primarily ethical—how to live rightly, how to treat others. When Jesus was asked, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” he did not answer with a creed to be believed. He answered by saying, “You must love God, and you must love your neighbor as yourself.” That is all you are required to do. And he then illustrated that love by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan—which, you will recall—is a story about ethics, not about

dogma. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was mentioned about believing some creedal statement concerning the nature of the Godhead. The religion that Jesus taught was thoroughly ethical; it was not theological.

If you wish to know the religion of Jesus, don't dwell upon the edicts and proclamations of churches through the ages. Our forbears were on the losing end of those battles anyway. Look to the red lettered words. Take, for example, the Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus offers ethical advice: "So whatever you wish others would do to you, do so to them" This has been received through the ages as "The Golden Rule." Seek reconciliation with those whom you are in conflict with—in fact, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you. He offers advice on moral humility: 'Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? First, take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.'

He offers comfort to those who are troubled: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth...Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted..." He advises spiritual humility, telling people not to pray in public, like the hypocrites, but practice your piety, your prayer, your spirituality, in private. And he offers hope and aspiration: "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world...Let your light shine so that others may see your good works."

These are the red letter bits that are foundational for me still today, for all my explorations in Buddhism and other world religions. This is the place that I do ministry from—Jesus the teacher and prophet turning over the money tables in the temple and sitting with the outcasts of society. My understanding of religion Jesus taught has to do with loving your enemies, caring for those needy among us—and

not just in the holiday season—bringing truth to power, saying the difficult things that need to be said in order to seek justice here on the earthly plain. It is about “feeding the hungry multitude” which is the UU Christian Fellowship’s current slogan as they “freely follow Jesus.” This call given more than two millennia ago still calls me and others today and frames the work and ministry which spurs me to action and to contemplation. Because only each one of us can decide who this man Jesus was and is to us.

Jesus said, according to my red letter print, “[I have come] to preach good news to the poor...proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” Elsewhere, he said, “I have come that you may have life, and have it more abundantly.”

Ultimately, each of us make our own decisions about our faith and sometimes those decisions may change. I have always said that ministry—for me—is about companioning people wherever they may be on their spiritual path, praying the folks may have life and have it more abundantly...even when we are each beset by the various tragedies and difficulties that lives bring. But ultimately we each need to make our own personal understanding—or dare I say relationship—of who Jesus was—prophet and teacher, wise man, and victim of the worst violence of his time.

I end this morning with one of our member’s personal reflections, Veronica Barnett:

What would Jesus do if he walked down the Main Street of your town at Christmas time?

Would he smile with understanding at the bright lights and decorated trees, knowing these displays were for everyone young, old, rich, not rich and that they cheered even the poorest tired soul?

What did he think when he passed the clothing store showing expensive coats and boots (did anyone notice the stranger was barefoot?)

He passed the jewelry stores, its baubles sparkling enticingly. The busy liquor store, the candy store with the chocolate Santas. Did he smile at this?

Did he see the young mother looking longingly at the store window filled with toys while she cuddled her baby tucked snugly in her arms to protect it from the lightly falling snow?

He passed the interfaith food pantry. He saw lines of people waiting for donations of food to feed their families for a few more days.

He saw the people of your town dressed in their Christmas finery waiting in line for their dinner reservations at the best restaurant in town.

He glanced back to the line at the food pantry.

The Stranger walked to the end of your Main Street.

Then he paused.

What did Jesus do?

He cried.