

Sermon The Hopeful Heresy of Our Heritage Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones

My friend the Rev. Cat Cox loves to tell the story of how when she went before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee—that’s the national Unitarian Universalist group that discerns whether student ministers are ready to be ordained—she said in her sermon for them, “Like Jesus, I am called to community ministry.”

“So: you’re comparing yourself to *Jesus*?” the esteemed members of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee asked, as soon as she was finished.

And Cat replied, “Well, why not? It’s not like he was *God* or something ...”¹

It was a good Unitarian Universalist answer. Because that *is* one of our founding Unitarian heresies: the disbelief in, or the lack of emphasis on, Jesus’ Godhood and the emphasis on Jesus *as a human being*. We usually trace this pillar of our faith back to some of the earliest interpretations of Jesus. The fourth-century Egyptian monk Arius is the most famous example; he held that Jesus was not “co-eternal” with God. Now, I’m going to do my own translation of some very old and technical theological language here, but essentially, to say that Jesus was not “co-eternal with God” is to say that Jesus was not *the same as* or *identical with* God, but rather that Jesus was born as a singular human being *infused with* divinity. (As though divinity could be injected into our very veins. ☺)

These interpretations of Jesus were declared “heretical” at the Council of Nicaea in 325. In other words, these “choices”—remember, the root of the Greek word for *heresy* means “choice”—these choices, these interpretations were voted down by the church-in-power at that council. That meant that the majority culture from that time forward could persecute—could silence, punish, hunt down, and sometimes martyr—the people who saw Jesus in these ways: the people who have emphasized Jesus’ humanity, rejecting the three-part God called the Trinity.

[*ad lib*] Let me add here that there are many Christians today who also emphasize Jesus’ humanity over his divinity, and there are many Christians who struggle with the concept of the Trinity. But there are others who feel as

¹ Retold with permission from Rev. Cat Cox.

strongly as those fourth-century church leaders felt that this heresy is unacceptable.

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So, despite the persecution, despite the ostracizing, this choice, this heresy, persisted among our religious ancestors, who continued to call themselves Christians for a long, long time. Today, this is one of the “hopeful heresies of our heritage” that form the basis of *our religious identity*.

I heard this term “the hopeful heresy of our heritage” just this week, from another minister friend of mine, the Rev. Kurt Kuhwald.² The Hopeful Heresy—heresies, really—of Our Heritage. We will talk about more of them in January, but for today, what is *hopeful* about this emphasis on Jesus as a human being? And why should we be spending time on it now?

I love the way Carlos Fuentes puts it in our reading today: “Of all the heresies revolving around the figure of Christ,” he writes, “the one that *attracts* me most is the one that . . . focuses on the man who lived among men [and women] and who offered, here on Earth, the most conclusive and lasting evidence of *what it means to be a human among humans*. Jesus as the *living nucleus of all human possibilities and contradictions* is, for [Fuentes,] the most *appealing and lasting*” Jesus.³ Jesus as the “most conclusive and lasting evidence of *what it means to be a human among humans*,” a person in whom all the possibilities and contradictions of being human come together, all the aspirations *and* the desperations, the gentleness and the fury, the love *and* the exasperation, the radical inclusion *and* the impossibly high standards. And this Jesus comes out of *nowhere*, out of “poverty, humility, and anonymity,” as Fuentes says. If Jesus’ way of living had not inspired the writers of the gospel and the apostle Paul and other followers to keep telling stories about him, and to keep *trying* to embody that same way of life, we wouldn’t know anything about Jesus, just as we don’t know anything about the vast majority of holy men (and women, I’m certain) who were rambling around preaching at about the same time.

² This phrase is borrowed with permission from the Rev. Kurt Kuhwald, from whom I heard it in a homily that opened the New Century Summit preview session, 9 Dec. 2009, at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, Kensington, California.

³ All Carlos Fuentes quotations cited here come from Fuentes’s essay, “Christ,” in *This I Believe: An A to Z of a Life* (New York: Random House, 2006). The italics are mine.

Granted, the record that we do have—the Christian Bible and all the other gospels and writings that didn't make it into the Bible—this record often tells us more about Jesus' *followers* and their agendas—what *they* were worried about, what *they* wanted to accomplish in their communities—than it tells us about *Jesus'* first-person teachings. That's why historical criticism is so important, placing the texts that we've got in the context of their times so that we can tease out *why* they say what they do. We Unitarian Universalists face exactly the same problem today if we want to reclaim Jesus as truly one of the founding figures for our faith—and indeed, historically speaking, Jesus is *the* founding figure of our Unitarian and Universalist faiths: we've got to tease out an “original Jesus” from the teachings of some of today's Christian churches, too, because these teachings, just like the gospels and other writings, are often more about the agendas or the prejudices of some modern-day church leaders and the problems of their communities than they are about the way of life that Jesus tried to model.

Fuentes puts it this way: “the Christian church [is] subject to the ebb and flow of political life, to obligations and exceptions, to betrayals of Christ, to the seduction of the very things that Christ harshly denounced—[such as] the hunger for earthly power—things that transformed the Church into the *industry* of Christ, an industry that takes us further and further away from Christ himself.”

[ad lib, with a big breath, as I looked ahead to what we were about to dive into] Whew, this is hard work. I know it is hard work for many of you, and it is hard work for me, too. *And* it is also good work, necessary work.

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So, let's take an example: in the Gospel of John, Jesus is recorded as making all these “I am” statements: “I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, the truth and the life.” These statements are often used today by *some* conservative Christians as Texts of Terror to say that if we “others” do not believe that Jesus is the *only* way, then we are not worthy, are not “saved,” are not “in.” Such an interpretation, I believe, is a betrayal of Jesus' radical inclusion of all peoples, regardless of their beliefs; it is a betrayal of his emphasis on a way of *living*, not on a way of *believing*. The historical-critical biblical scholars of the Jesus Seminar are convinced that these “I am” statements were written

by the writer of the gospel of John, and that they weren't said by Jesus.⁴ Because if we look at the overall context of the Jesus story, it's pretty clear that Jesus didn't waste his time making big claims for *himself*. He wasn't trying to start a religion, or build a church, or create an institution; he was trying to change the world by realigning people's values, and by helping people to feel better about themselves so that *they* felt empowered to help change the world too. Jesus had way too much to do to be preaching about *himself*. In contrast, the writer of the gospel of John, working some sixty years after Jesus was killed, had a community that he and other church leaders were trying to keep together in the face of oppression. This writer must have felt that he *needed* to say, "Yes, ours *is* the way, in spite of all the persecution you are facing for trying to follow this Way. We're on to something special here; there is hope for us who have had no hope, *in this Way*. Hang in there!" He was also a mystic, this writer, so the "I am" statements are part of his theology, and they can be read, quite beautifully, from that perspective, too.

That's how we Unitarian Universalists can make the most sense of these statements. But without that historical perspective, the "I am" statements get turned (by *some* folks, I'll keep repeating that) into a big stick with which to beat "non-believers"; these statements get turned into a wall that creates an in-group and an out-group, which doesn't seem to have been *Jesus'* way at all.

So, back to our question: what makes our Unitarian Universalist focus on Jesus' humanity a "hopeful heresy" that is foundational for our identity and our faith? Jesus' full-blown humanity makes it possible for *us* to be *him* and *him* to be *us*. Like the Anne-character that Heidi played in our story today,⁵ and like my friend Cat, we can name and claim and step up to *our* Jesus-ness if we will only learn what that means. Jesus' urgency about changing the world right-here-right-now-in-*this*-life tells us that we, like Jesus, can and must change the world, too. How does Fuentes put it, again? "Precisely

⁴ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, "I Am Sayings in the Gospel of John" and the commentaries on the specific passages, in *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus—New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Polebridge, HarperCollins, 1993).

⁵ Our Story for All Ages, scripted by congregant Alec McLean and me and offered by Alec with congregant Heidi Delgros, took Jesus' aphorism about the poor—"blessed are the poor for they shall inherit the kingdom of God" (which we translated in Unitarian Universalist language)—and allowed an imaginary character, "one of Jesus' young followers" (whom our youth spontaneously named "Anne"), to create a radically inclusive community because she was herself embodying Jesus' teachings.

because *he* works within the constraints of time, Jesus encourages *us* to believe in time”—to believe that it matters what we do, it matters *who* we are and *how* we are in relationship, right now.

And here’s the other “hopeful heresy” that comes from Jesus and is rooted in our heritage—and we talk about this one all the time: it is that everyone is worthy, everyone is beloved. *Everyone*, no exceptions. When the third-century theologian Origen first suggested that this *universalism* was what Jesus was all about, he too was declared a heretic, and he received the third-century equivalent of booing, dissing, and discrediting. But the message could not be squashed—partly because it is right there in the teachings and the modeling of Jesus, when we tease it out; and partly because this promise of the inherent worth and dignity of everyone is too powerful to quell. Yes, it is difficult to reconcile this worthiness with the horrible things that we human beings do; that’s why I believe we Unitarian Universalists need to reclaim a concept of sin that draws on our Jewish heritage, the concept of “missing the mark.” But at our root, and at our best, this faith in our universal belovedness infuses and brightens our own lives, and it transforms the ways in which we interact with others. Jesus modeled it; he lived it, loving the prostitute *and* the tax collector, the fisherman who dropped his nets to follow this new Way *and* the rich young man even though the young man couldn’t bring himself to sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor.

Here’s what I think: To be a true Christian, to really *embody* Jesus’ Way, is incredibly hard. And to be a true Unitarian Universalist, to really *embody* the hopeful heresies of our heritage, is *at least* as hard. Because let’s face it: first, we’ve got to know how to translate *from* the religious language that has been drummed into our heads with some particular meaning *to* the language that sings in our hearts. Listen, I have spiritual and theological books that I love and that speak to my core beliefs—but I have only been able to receive their real message after I have literally gone through the first few chapters and crossed out “God,” or “Christ,” or “the Holy Spirit” in the text and written in “Love” with a capital L. Only after I have done that *often enough* can I let the message in. So we’ve got to learn how to translate.

And second, we've got to maintain our quest for truth—that's our *sacrament*.⁶ This means that we are called to set off on a never-ending adventure—a search that goes both inward and outward—to find that in which we can put our trust, for “truth” is related to that word *trust*. And for us Unitarian Universalists, the *searching* is more important than the *finding*. The *quest* is the *sacrament*; the act of seeking is what aligns us with what we hold of highest worth—that's what a *sacrament* means. The quest is our ritual that reminds us of what is most important.

So: to embody Unitarian Universalism, we've got to learn how to translate, we've got to keep seeking, and we've got to embody those hopeful heresies—the humanity of Jesus, working in the here-and-now for the healing of this world and for the empowerment of the disempowered, and the belovedness of all things, no exceptions.

All this has practical implications—from what kind of health care reform we support, to what kind of car we drive (if we have a choice), to whom we talk with at social hour, to whether or not we participate in the Listening Campaign, to ... you fill in the blank.

It's hard work. That's why I believe it behooves us to find all the guides we can, Jesus among them. I'll tell you why Jesus' message remains so important to me and to so many Unitarian Universalists. Because of these words from the Gospel of Matthew that describe who will have the truly fulfilled and actualized life and who will not:

“For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me; ill and you cared for me; in prison and you visited me.”

“When did we give you all this?” his listeners ask him.

And Jesus replies, “[Truly] I say to you, whatever you did for one of [the] least [of these] brothers [and sisters] of mine, you did for me.”⁷

⁶ This congregation uses a version of L. Griswold Williams's covenant as our Affirmation; # 471 in the Unitarian Universalist Association hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). The second line states, “The quest of truth is our sacrament.”

⁷ Cited in Fuentes, “Christ.”

There's not a line in there about what we believe; it's all about what we do, about whom we recognize and attend to, and about the way in which we do it.

By the way, the members of the Jesus Seminar don't think that Jesus actually said those words. But I don't care. I believe he *lived* them.

Let us follow the sound of the bell into silence.