

RENASCENCE: transformation after tragedy
Rev. Kit Ketcham, Easter 07

Sing with me if you remember this old Sunday School song:

Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong,
They are weak, but he is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
The Bible tells me so.

We don't teach that song in our UU Sunday Schools like they did in the Sunday Schools of our childhood, because it just doesn't seem to fit with our Unitarian Universalist ways of looking at the world. And yet this little ditty, with its simple words and message, portrays a Jesus who is very much in tune with our belief that Jesus was human, that he had the human capacity to love and to protect children, to welcome them into his arms, respecting and cherishing them, and being strong in their behalf.

As I started working on this Easter sermon, I ran over in my mind all the various things I think of when I think about Easter: bunnies, eggs, vernal equinox, Passover, death, resurrection, flowers, springtime, Jesus.

And I realized that what I really wanted to speak about today is Jesus. Jesus the human being. Jesus the loving presence, whose teachings have inspired a mixed response in today's religious world, with some interpreting his words in ways that hurt others and some seeing to the heart of love and commitment that was, in my view, the true message of Jesus the man.

Because when I was a little kid, I truly could feel that Jesus would love me if he were alive. I frankly could never fathom the idea that he was alive in actuality; it felt like a story to me and stories can do anything. I could feel his strength-----he had courage and fortitude and the will to complete his purpose in life, no matter what. I liked that about the man.

He seemed like many of the adult men I knew in my dad's church: Bob Mayberry, the post office guy, whose kindness and protectiveness covered all the children in his Sunday School classes; Kohler Betts, the taciturn rancher who was my father's friend and gave us some of the venison every time he went hunting; Henry Barrett, who loaned me my first horse plus the tack, feed, and pasture to take care of it. And my Dad who was the strongest, kindest, loving man I knew----like Jesus.

Jesus seemed to me a lot like the strong, kind, loving men of the First Baptist Church of Athena, Oregon. He was no pushover, either, and neither were they. He knew what was right and he stood up for it. He clearly felt a relationship with the Divine, whom he called Abba, Father, Dad, and went to that father for advice, just like I might go to my Dad for advice.

Jesus still seems to me to portray the best in human masculinity: courageous, determined, wise, kind, honest, loving. Every year I would listen to the ancient story of Jesus' life, his miracles, his interactions with his disciples, his determination to help people see what he meant by his proclamation that the Kingdom of God is within us and among us, and, most of all, his incredible courage at sticking to his message even though he knew he was going to be caught and killed.

My childish mind couldn't quite grasp the notion that the Kingdom of God was inside of me, but I was willing to trust Jesus, because I was pretty sure he didn't lie. I couldn't see how he could be perfect, because what is perfection, anyhow, but I knew what I saw in his life and I was content.

As I grew older and realized that many, many human beings have died for immense causes, that Jesus was not the only man to die in the quest for freedom for others, I began to re-interpret what I had learned about Jesus the man, the son of God and the son of humans, and apply it to myself and to others around me.

Questions arose in my mind: what does it mean when someone is willing to die for a cause? what does it mean when someone is willing to die for another person? what does it mean when someone is killed for someone else's sake? what does it mean when someone is sent to kill others? what does it mean to send someone to be in harm's way and possibly killed?

These questions, of course, can be and are being asked in our time. What cause am I willing to die for? Who would I be willing to die for? Is it right to kill to prevent harm to someone else? Is it right to send someone to kill or possibly be killed? What does this all mean about being human? And what cause could possibly be important enough for people to kill and die for?

These are the questions I began to ask myself as I considered the story of Jesus' life and death.

One of the great theological questions of human life is “what does my death mean?” This often suggests to some that we should be thinking about what happens after death. I’m guessing that most UUs don’t think much about what happens after death; it’s one of those things we can’t know for sure. What we do know is what happens before we die, what our lives mean in terms of our relationships and our commitments.

What did Jesus’s life mean to us modern-day Unitarian Universalists? Our spiritual ancestor, Thomas Jefferson, once took a copy of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, cut out the parts that he thought truly represented the teachings of Jesus and created a small testament that we now call the Jefferson Bible.

In his edited version of the Gospels, Jefferson puts forth a picture of the man Jesus who taught that the world’s values were all upside down, in relation to the kingdom of God.

What did the man Jesus teach? It’s a fairly short list:

- Be just; justice comes from virtue, which comes from the heart.
- Treat people the way we want them to treat us.
- Always work for peaceful resolutions, offering compassion instead of violence.
- Know that the things that are truly valuable have no material value.
- Do not judge others.
- Do not bear grudges.
- Be modest and unpretentious.
- Give out of true generosity, not because we expect to be repaid.

As I look at this list, I am struck by how it undergirds and aligns with our UU principles and purposes. And yet we UUs are often leery of Jesus, feeling perhaps that he has been misquoted, misrepresented, misunderstood and therefore is to be mistrusted.

If Jesus' values are similar to UU values, we ought not write Jesus out of our religious life. We need to consider what the teachings of Jesus mean to us today and how they bring meaning to this Easter season.

In the story of Jesus' resurrection as portrayed in the gospels, Jesus reappears to his followers in the flesh, about three days after the crucifixion. There are several different descriptions of this event in the gospels, which lead many skeptics to dismiss the whole thing.

A physical resurrection from the dead is so unlikely to most rational minds that most of us don't give it a second thought. We write off the idea of a bodily resurrection and thereby may write off the spiritual resurrection that is a true event in human living.

In her poem "Renaissance", Edna St. Vincent Millay lyrically describes her own spiritual resurrection beginning with her sense of oneness with the earth, her awareness of the great pain in the world and her part in it. She wants to die, the pain is so great, and finds herself in a dream state melding with the earth, with a sense of dying and being buried in the earth. Lying there below the ground, she feels her pain roll away and experiences great relief.

And then the rain begins to fall and as she listens to it, she begins to regret her dreaming death, begins to remember how joyous life can be, and cries out that God might give her new birth, that God might let the rain wash away the confining earth of her grave.

As the rain sluices off the confining earth, she hears the breeze, smells the fragrance of the earth and flowers, and feels her soul reborn. She arises from her tomb transformed in spirit.

Many of us, though not poets, may have had a similar spiritual awakening to life. If we look at the Easter story through the lens of a skeptic, we will not see the true story, a story of transformation and rebirth, not to physical life but to spiritual life.

Many of us, rational, skeptical, a little cynical perhaps, are inclined to see little if any value in a spiritual life. We are so matter of fact, so shielded, so defended against vulnerability, that we cannot let ourselves be transformed. We work so hard to be perfect, to anticipate every problem, to respond to it logically and purposefully, to be self-sufficient, not needy, not pitiable. We're uncomfortable letting others see our vulnerabilities, afraid even to admit them to ourselves.

And when trouble comes, we often feel shy about letting others know, about asking for help. We may feel despairing, depressed, discouraged, and yet not want to share those feelings with others, lest others judge us weak and defenseless.

What a sad place to be! How painful it is to feel so defended, so insulated; even as we experience and hate it, we may resist letting our defenses relax, fearing too much vulnerability, too much revealing of the tender spirit. And yet we may know that we are missing something.

This can be the moment of hope and transformation. Out of the depths of despair at Jesus' death, out of the grief at losing the beloved companion and teacher, out of the misery of persecution and ridicule began to grow a tiny seed. And his friends who understood that the seed would grow experienced hope and rebirth as they gave that seed room to flourish in their lives.

I remember a teacher I once worked with in a Colorado junior high school. He was so tough on the kids that they all cringed when they saw his name as their algebra teacher. He was quick with cutting remarks, critical when a child missed class because of illness or family concerns, and resentful of the idea that any child should get sympathy because of domestic violence or divorce or other family crisis.

One day he did not come to school in the morning. Inexplicably he was out for two weeks; the principal knew why but wasn't telling the staff. Eventually he returned and he was a changed man. His wife had finally gotten fed up with his attitude and had filed for divorce and moved out. He was devastated. He had never considered how hard he might be to live with. The difference in him because of this sudden end to his marriage was stunning. For him, transformation had emerged from tragedy as he struggled to change old ways of being.

Crisis and failure lay us low periodically, as individuals, as groups, as societies. We are often despairing about the world's problems: war, poverty, destruction of nature, corporate greed, social blindness to justice, political dishonesty. Yet these very dire, very real problems contain also the seeds of transformation and rebirth.

Under the threat of Roman punishment and death, Jesus urged his Jewish friends and neighbors to evolve in their thinking, away from the rigidity of laws which did not show compassion and mercy, away from the rote repetition of words and rituals which had become meaningless, away from the threat of death and punishment and into a new day of faithful living.

Jesus called his friends and neighbors into lives of justice, kindness, compassion, mercy, understanding, humility, and generosity. He promised them that living this kind of life would bring women and men into the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, where material things have little worth.

And his teachings promise this same thing to us, that if we will live in these ways, we will find peace and joy. We will learn that our greatest treasure is not gold or property, but a sense of connection with all things, with each other, with our own souls, and with the universe in which we move and live and have our being.

So on this Easter Sunday afternoon, I invite us to listen again to the last few lines of *Renascence*, finding its meaning for our own lives.

*The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky, —
No higher than the soul is high.
The heart can push the sea and land
Farther away on either hand;
The soul can split the sky in two,
And let the face of God shine through.
But East and West will pinch the heart
That can not keep them pushed apart;
And he whose soul is flat—the sky
Will cave in on him by and by.*

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Hymn #61: "Lo the Earth Awakes Again"

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, open to the transformation that surrendering to our deepest values can bring. May we embrace the lessons of the teachers who have gone before us, recognizing in these mentors the universality of their wisdom. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.

POSTLUDE (CHOIR)

EASTER PARADE AROUND THE SANCTUARY TO THE SOCIAL HALL.