

November 14, 2004
Worship Service

READINGS *Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time*
Adapted from pp 33-36

Marcus Borg

The historical Jesus was a spirit person, one of those figures in human history with an experiential awareness of the reality of God. The older, semi-technical term is holy man, but spirit person seems better. Spirit persons are known cross-culturally. They are people who have vivid and subjective experiences of another level or dimension of reality. These experiences involve momentary entry into nonordinary states of consciousness and take a number of different forms. Sometimes there is a vivid sense of momentarily seeing into another layer of reality; this is the classic experience of the shaman. Sometimes there is a strong sense of another reality coming upon one, as in the ancient expression, "The Spirit fell upon me." Sometimes the experience is of nature or an object within nature momentarily transfigured by "the sacred" shining through it.

What all persons who have these experiences share is a strong sense of there being more to reality than the tangible world of our ordinary experience. Spirit persons are people who experience the sacred frequently and vividly.

...The modern worldview, derived from the Enlightenment, sees reality in material terms, as constituted by the world of matter and energy within the space-time continuum. The experience of spirit persons suggests that there is more to reality than this – that there is, in addition to the tangible world of our ordinary experience, a nonmaterial level of reality, actual even though nonmaterial, and charged with energy and power.

Moreover, this other reality, it is important to emphasize, is not "somewhere else." Rather it is all around us, and we are in it. ... Jesus was a spirit person.

The Gospel of Matthew, 5:38-48

New Revised Standard Version

'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."
³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."
⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers

and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ^{a 48}Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

These are the sayings of Jesus.

THE SERMON “Jesus Was a Humanist!” Rev. Victoria Weinstein

I was about six, I think, when I went to see “Godspell” on Broadway. My mother’s best friend Phoebe Rizos took me along with her church group. It was totally confusing to me, these clowns jumping around and singing, and all seeming to want to be best friends with one guy with big frizzy red hair and wearing rainbow suspenders and a Superman shirt. I sat attentively through “Day by Day” and “O Bless the Lord My Soul” even though I didn’t understand the lyrics, which were all taken – I now know -- from the gospel of Matthew. I had never heard of the Gospel of Matthew, or anything else from the Bible. I was a little *Unitarian* kid.

I liked the show well enough, although it puzzled me, until the very end when all the clowns took their friend in the rainbow suspenders and hung him up with his arms spread out wide on a chain link fence. They tied his wrists to the fence with red ribbon and he seemed very sad. Things got spooky and very bad very fast. He sang, *Oh God, I’m dying. Oh God I’m dying.*

And his friends sang, *Oh God you’re dying...* And my heart froze. Then he sang, *Oh God, I’m dead*, and they sang, also very sadly, *Oh God you’re dead...*

And there was an organ playing... and he put his head limply down, and I was never so scared in my life. But the friends kept singing. And they began to sing this phrase, as they took him down from the chain link fence and brought

his body up to their shoulders, they sang, "Long live God, long live God, long live God (and they walked with him), long live God."

The music picked up tempo a bit, and some of the men started to sing a phrase that had been the very first words in the show: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" The clowns kept intertwining those two sung phrases as they carried their friend's limp body out over their head and through the doors of the theatre. This was absolutely the most terrible thing I had ever seen in my life.

I still remember the strangeness I felt, wondering what was wrong with me since everyone else in the theatre seemed to be so comfortable, and even expectant. But just then the theatre doors burst back open and the drummer rocked up the tempo, and the actors all danced joyfully onto the stage clapping and crying and rejoicing and singing, "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord." Drums! Tambourines!

"Oh my God!" I thought. "These people are insane! They killed their friend and now they're singing and dancing!" Neither Phoebe Rizos nor several ushers were able to pry my hands off my seat in that theatre for a good long time after it had emptied and the lights were on. I wanted to make sure I was safe from those maniacs. I got a bad case of shakes in the car on the way home, and never talked about it with anyone.

And that was my first introduction to Jesus.

You can imagine why I kept my distance for a good, long time after that. No one in my immediate household had any interest in, or patience with, those stories or *that* religion. When my grandmother came to visit, she would come in to my sister's and my bedroom to kiss us goodnight and to surreptitiously bless us on the forehead with holy water given her by her Russian Orthodox priest.

My father would appear in the doorway. “Anne, stop doing that voodoo to my children,” he would say, and she’d hurriedly tuck the water into her pocket. I never learned until many years later that my Russian Orthodox grandparents had been very unhappy with my mother for becoming engaged to a Jewish man. So my mom and dad had gone to the Unitarian church in Binghamton to get married because my mother’s priest refused to allow such a marriage in his sanctuary.¹

When I visited my grandparents I always spent long moments contemplating the Man of Sorrows they had all over their house. He was on the calendar in the kitchen wearing a crown of thorns. He was on a plaque in the hallway, wearing a flowing white robe and surrounded by children and lambs. He was over the bed, hanging on the Cross, an image I found so upsetting that I took it off the wall when I came to visit. How could I fall asleep under an image like that? I carefully tucked the crucifix away in the nightstand drawer and hoped my Baba wouldn’t notice. The next morning after she made the beds, it would be back on the wall. I would tuck it away again at night. My grandmother never mentioned our little routine.

I still have respect for my childhood reaction to the violence that some versions of Christianity have decided defines the meaning of Jesus’s life and ministry. To this day I cannot walk by an image of the crucifix without being deeply upset and disturbed by it and what it represents. The empty cross is another symbol altogether, which I’ll speak to a bit later, but I wanted to tell you that my favorite image of Jesus today is hanging on the wall in my study at

¹ I said at this point that my father didn’t have a rabbi. But I had forgotten something I learned from my mother just this past year: that my father had been attending the Unitarian church for awhile before he and my mom started dating.

the parsonage. It is called "The Laughing Christ" and it shows a healthy, very much alive, handsome Jesus looking straight at me and laughing with great joy. That's my Jesus. I don't think the real Jesus was quite so hunky and had such perfect teeth, but I love his obvious charisma and joy in life.

I look back now and I realize I have always been drawn to this figure, Jesus, which is why I was very, very angered and disgusted for so many years by most versions of his religion, which I instinctually felt could not have really been true to what he lived and taught. I stayed far away from all things Christian, even tensing up when we sang sacred music in choral groups I belonged to. I was defined as Jewish by others in my community, even though we attended the UU church – and that wasn't a good thing in my town, which was prone to prejudice and anti-Semitism -- and that added to my anger and resentment about so-called Christianity. I bristled at the very mention of it, and reacted with vehement disgust if anyone I met tried to evangelize to me. I thought the whole business idiotic.

I was taken off guard, then, when a Wiccan friend of mine looked at me with some degree of impatience one day and said, "For someone who obviously doesn't know anything about what Jesus really said or did, you sure do have an attitude problem about Christianity!"

She was right. She was pointing out the difference between Jesus and Christianity; a wise thing to do. So we decided to find a book for me that might provide some information, but not from a traditional or conservative perspective. Of course if I'd but known, my own Unitarian Universalist churches could have provided an absolute treasure trove of exactly the kind of resources I was looking for, but it never occurred to me to ask. I never knew almost until I was

considering seminary that the two denominations that merged to form UUism in 1961 were both founded on centuries-old liberal Christian heresies! I discovered those riches later, but the first book I ever read that explained Jesus from a respectful, historical and unorthodox perspective was *For Christ's Sake* by Thomas Harpur. It was published by our own Beacon Press.

Harpur's book changed my life by introducing me to the tenets of liberal Christianity, which I have tried to outline for you here:

(1) Though we will never all agree about Jesus' relative divinity, we see in him a human exemplar, and we treasure his humanness. Those who called him "The Christ" were bestowing upon him an honorific, not claiming him to be co-equal with their God. "The Christ" means "the Anointed." It is an honorary title signifying special calling and blessing. Jesus never said he was God. I agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson and other Unitarian forebears that this orthodox understanding of Jesus is based on a misunderstanding of his message and a misreading of Scripture. When asked who he was he, actually, Jesus most often responded with another question, "Who do *you* say that I am?" He was a Wisdom teacher, a mystic, and a shaman.

(2) Jesus was a prophet of love and inclusivity, of justice and healing. His reforms of Judaism were not an attempt to destroy Judaism but to critique it for being overly legalistic. He was a faithful Jew. He never claimed to found a new religion or to be anything but a faithful Jewish man with an ecstatically intimate relationship to the God of Israel.

(3) Jesus preached an internal religion based on inner honesty and pure love. He wanted to encourage his people to move away from empty, outward forms of piety and observance, and more inward to a spiritual renewal based on the

assurance that all human beings are equal and precious in God's sight. Even them. They had trouble believing this because they were Jews living under imperial Rome and most were living in poverty, totally expendable people. They were all officially second-class citizens of the Roman Empire – (not even citizens!) – and among them there were the lowest of the low, the untouchables. Jesus made it a special point to accept and extend care and healing to those considered ritually unclean by Jewish and Roman purity laws.

(4) We'll never know what the first disciples saw after Jesus's death in the events that are now commemorated at Easter. The point is, whatever they experienced totally transformed their lives. It is not necessary to believe in a physical, miraculous Resurrection to be moved by this fact.

(5) Finally, liberal Christianity is more interested in the religion *of* Jesus than the religion *about* Jesus.

After I read this book, I began reading a lot of books of liberal Christianity. It was as if a veil had been lifted between myself and something I sensed was beautiful and life-giving, but which had been kept from me by generations of ignorance and error. I think I had sensed even as a child that this religion wasn't about death and violence and unbelievable things but it was about life, and about people, and about how to live and how to love each other.

I realized that whatever energy I felt was humming at the center of creation and connecting all living things was not something I would ever be able to define, although by college I was starting to refer to that energy as Goddess and then eventually as "God." More and more over the years, I was drawn to Jesus' definition of that energy, with which he felt a very personal, intimate relationship and which he called "Abba" (tr: Papa or Daddy) or "Father" as well

as “my Lord.” So my question changed from “Does this God exist?” to “How can I behave today in such a way *as though* that God exists; as though justice and healing and forgiveness and radical, inclusive love are the deepest reality within which we live and move and have our being?” How do I live *as though*...?

Most days I don't do very well. I almost never describe myself as a Christian even though I consider myself to be on the Jesus Path, because I think there are probably about three true Christians in the world, and they're Buddhists, probably (I mean, you heard the Gospel of Matthew reading we just had)! I take Jesus' teachings too seriously to claim that title, and I'm not impressed by many today who do (although certainly by some). The *normative* definition of Christianity does not include me and my liberal Christian theology, as it requires affirming certain theological truths I'll never believe and committing to certain prejudices I'll never have. Liberal Christians believe, for instance, that we are each and all responsible for our own sins and failings. One man's death can never redeem all of us. Nor would a loving God require the murder of “his” only son in order to make salvation possible. This seems to us an insult to the most obvious and worship-worthy attribute of ultimate reality, which is divine Love (and that's an old, old Universalist and Unitarian belief).

Also, how can we think that only a certain portion of the world possesses ultimate wisdom through this *one* manifestation of holiness? I don't believe that.

I believe Jesus would be perplexed about the state of Christianity today. No, I didn't put that strongly enough. A character in Woody Allen's film “Hannah and Her Sisters” said it best: “If Jesus Christ came back today and saw all the things that were committed in his name, he would never stop throwing up.” Because really, he was constantly saying that the point of spiritual life is to

transform the heart so that we are strengthened for work in the world – for healing, for feeding, for bringing others back to life when they are cast out, hurt, and dejected. To store up our treasures in heaven and not try to buy a sense of security by collecting things. And what are millions of Christians spending their time doing? Shopping. Judging others, in direct opposition to what Jesus taught. Arguing about the supposedly proper forms of sexuality about which Jesus never said one blessed word. Obsessing about worship practices when Jesus said to get out and love your neighbor, and stop living by the letter of the religious law.

Jesus was a *humanist*. Perhaps this is why Unitarian Universalist humanists are so offended by the perversions of his teachings and life, because in him they recognize one of their own – a mystical one of their own, but one of their own -- and they become angry and grieved to see his basic humanist message so warped and distorted. He lived and taught an essentially humanistic form of religion – a religion which emphasized human relationships, human responsibility, and the human ability to be the hands of divine love for each other.

I hope you will bear with me as I share two final ideas with you. The first is that as I study the Christian Scriptures, I believe more and more that Jesus' intention was to teach us how to appropriately use power; which is to unify people, to heal, to lift up, to serve, to save lives, to bless and dignify *all* people. This is incredibly subversive stuff for Jesus' own Roman setting, which was all about "power over" and superiors imposing their will on subordinates. And this is of course incredibly subversive too for our own culture – and very complicated

-- where even the Ceasars are Christians (and I'm talking about throughout the Western world).

Finally, I would like to say a word about the empty Cross, which evokes the completely opposite feeling in my heart as does the painful image of the Crucifixion, Jesus dying. The Cross is an ancient symbol which far pre-dates Christianity – it is a representation of the cosmic joining of the divine realm and the realm of material existence. To me, it is a symbol of a kind of rebellious joy, a power salute to that subversive power I mentioned a moment ago, and a manifestation of what the old hymn called “blessed assurance.” For me, it says this: If you live your life according to its deepest calling, and if you live that calling with perfect integrity – with your best integrity!-- and you know not only *who* you are but *whose* you are, you can never be a victim. No matter what the powers-that-be choose to do, and no matter what circumstances bring upon you, there is an untouchable reality at your center – an *eternal reality* -- and that reality is love. It is your birthright, and it cannot be ruined by human hands or denied to you by anything that comes to pass in this lifetime. And as the old gospel song goes, “Ain’t that a good news?”

I think it is. And as I struggle to find an appropriate and punchy ending for this sermon, I notice Jesus laughing at me from up on the wall. And he says, “Weinstein...enough thinking and talking! Tell them this: *you shall love one another as I have loved you*, and sing the closing hymn already.”

That’s my Jesus.