

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
"The Heart of Christianity"
Rev. Samuel A Trumbore February 27, 2011

Spoken Meditation

The day before Jesus was to come again, he wept.

He looked into the hearts of the two billion professing Christianity
saddened so few really knew him
and practiced what he preached.

He remembered with horror
Constantine using his cross as a weapon of war,
Crusaders slaying Muslims in his name, and
Fundamentalists using the Bible to foment hate.

He felt embarrassment
as he surveyed the vaults of wealth at the Vatican and
the assets of the religious orders.

His face flushed with rage
learning of priests giving children sacramental wine
then sexually abusing them.

Tempted to throw up his hands and give up,
he glanced over to his friend the Buddha.

The Buddha encouraged him saying,
"Look again."

Jesus looked again and saw
the living saints,
known, yet to be known and never to be known
toiling for the good of humanity.

Jesus' heart warmed to see
the many small acts of kindness, performed daily,
with no expectation of reward.

Jesus was moved by
 Christians trying to get along with Muslims and Jews
 and Buddhists, Hindus and Taoists
 seeking ways to love each other better.

Then Jesus smiled, and said to the Buddha,
 "I'll give them a little more time to get it right."

Reading

The book, *The Heart of Christianity* by Marcus Borg articulates an emerging paradigm of Christianity that resonates with Unitarian and Universalist understandings of Christianity. Listen to some of his words and see what you think (pages 12-13):

The emerging paradigm [of Christianity] has been visible for well over a century...This way of seeing Christianity is widely shared among theological and biblical scholars and increasingly among laity and clergy within mainline denominations...

I here [in this introductory chapter] provide only a compact preview of its vision of the Bible and the Christian life, using five adjectives put into two phrases. The first three adjectives describe a way of seeing the Bible (and the Christian tradition as a whole): historical, metaphorical and sacramental. The last two adjectives describe a way of seeing the Christian life: relational and transformational.

For the emerging paradigm, the Bible is the historical product of two ancient communities, ancient Israel and the early Christian movement. The Bible was not written to us or for us, but for the ancient communities that produced it.

The emerging paradigm sees the Bible metaphorically ... It is not very much concerned with the historical factuality of the Bible stories, but much more with their meanings... It asks, "Whether it happened this way or not, what is the story saying? What meaning does it have for us?"

The emerging paradigm sees the Bible sacramentally, the Bible's ability to meditate the sacred. A sacrament is something visible and physical whereby the Spirit becomes present to us. A sacrament is a means of grace, a vehicle or vessel for the Spirit...

the emerging paradigm sees the Bible as sacred Scripture, but not because it is a divine product. It is sacred in its status and function, but not in its origin...

The emerging paradigm sees the Christian life as a life of relationship and transformation.

Being Christian is not about meeting requirements for a future reward in an afterlife, and not very much about believing. Rather, the Christian life is about a relationship with God that transforms life in the present. To be Christian does not mean believing in Christianity, but a relationship with God lived within the Christian tradition as a metaphor and sacrament of the sacred...

The Christian Life is as simple and challenging as this: to Love God and to love that which God loves.

Sermon

The heart of Christianity is Jesus:

what happened in his presence;

what happened in his memory;

a heart bigger than Christianity that can include us.

Imagine yourself at the foot of a hill in the north end of the Sea of Galilee.

It's hot. The sun beats down on your head.

You are a landless, day laborer wearing dirty, rough clothes. If you get work in the wheat fields or an olive orchard, you'll get enough money to buy a small loaf of bread. If you don't work, you don't eat. You scratch at sores on your skin, the result of malnutrition, that weep and fester. Having any blemish on your skin makes you unclean and unwelcome in the temple. Being landless and poor means you have no hope of ever marrying.

The man standing on your left owns some land, cultivated by his family for generations. If he can't grow enough food, the high Roman, temple and local taxes means he will lose it. The woman on your right worries that her teenage son will be conscripted. If he is, her family will starve. His job in Capernaum, their only source of income, buys their food.

All of you have heard about this unusual Nazarene named Jesus. You've heard he can speak with authority, not like the scribes. You want to know if he is the Messiah. You hunger to know if he is the prophet who will liberate the Jewish people from the Romans.

Suddenly, Jesus climbs up on a large rock on the hillside. The people gathering swarm around him. He opens his mouth and says:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,

for theirs will be the realm of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,

for they shall be comforted.
 Blessed are the meek,
 for they shall inherit the earth.

That man next to you nods in approval. The woman on the other side whispers to her husband, "What is this! A new teaching! He is talking about us!" As you hear his words and see the loving expression on his face and in his eyes, you start feeling like somebody. You start to feel like your life has value and meaning. Suddenly, your heart burns with a new kind of love you've never felt before. You ask, "Who is this man who can move me this way?"

Almost 2000 years later, we're still asking that question. I doubt an eye-witness hearing the Sermon on the Mount would have a better answer to that question than we do today. We have the advantage of an enormous amount of scholarship to figure out who Jesus was and what he was trying to do. Jesus scholar Marcus Borg thinks that scholarship can help us draw a rough outline of who Jesus was. He sketches five ways to see Jesus.

The first and foremost way recognizes Jesus as a mystic. Jesus had vivid and frequent experiences of contact with God, with the immanent and transcendent dimension of existence. His 40 days in the wilderness opened that connection. Through fasting, visions and long hours of prayer, he maintained that connection, making it the center of his life and ministry.

Second, Jesus demonstrated a profound ability to heal. Given the frequent healing stories in the Gospels, this was an important part of what he did and how he gained people's respect. Yet, he didn't take personal credit for this ability. Most healing stories end with Jesus saying, "By your faith, you are healed."

Third, Jesus taught the way of wisdom. He taught a "narrow way," a way less traveled, different from the "broad way" of the conventional Judaism of his day. Borg identifies the core of that way as the process of death and rebirth, understood metaphorically as an internal psychological-spiritual process. That new reborn identity centers on Jesus' mystical experience of the divine.

Fourth, Jesus prophesied, following in the footsteps of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Micah before him. All of them were God-intoxicated voices of protest against injustice and domination of the oppressed. Jesus described the world he envisioned to replace this domination and oppression as, the Realm of God. The Realm of God would be the kind of world we'd have with God in charge and the kings and emperors deposed. Jesus harshly criticized the status quo. That status quo heavily taxed almost everybody and showered wealth on just a few.

Finally, Jesus initiated a movement. Jesus didn't disappear in the shifting sands of history. He chose and taught disciples to spread his message. These disciples projected a deeply Jewish vision. The movement subverted social boundaries through a wide inclusiveness. Jesus ate with the marginalized and the outcasts. And when he came to Jerusalem, he engaged in political theater. He rode on a lowly donkey into the city, but he held himself like a king. And they laid palms before him and shouted praises. Only when Jesus entered the temple and raged at the money changers did his movement become a threat to the empire, and led to his death.

But the heart of the Jesus movement didn't die when his physical heart stopped on the cross.

I invite you now, to imagine yourself walking home with a friend from Jerusalem. Days before, you witnessed the agony of the crucifixion of Jesus beside two thieves. Your friend sighs and says to you, "I thought Jesus was the Messiah. He was supposed to be our savior. Now he's dead. His followers scattered. There's no hope for us."

Suddenly a man joins you and asks, "What you're talking about?" Surprised, your friend says, "Where have you been buddy! Haven't you heard about all that has happened in Jerusalem! Jesus was crucified three days ago, buried and now his body has vanished." Glumly he adds, "And ... we thought he was the Messiah."

The stranger shrugs off your friend's response saying, "Don't be foolish. Listen to your heart. Remember what the prophets have spoken." Then the stranger begins to talk about the prophets. Beginning with Moses, he teaches you.

As you get to your destination, the sun sets. You insist that the stranger come in to your home. He agrees to come in and sits with you at your table. A freshly baked loaf of bread sits in the middle of the table. The odor of yeast still scents the air. The stranger takes and lifts up the bread, blesses it and breaks it. In the act, suddenly, you think you recognize the stranger. You turn to look at your friend. Has he seen what you have seen? When you look back, the stranger is gone.

Your friend says in amazement, "Didn't our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?"
Something like that ... just happened ... to me.

Almost two weeks ago, about four hundred Unitarian Universalist ministers gathered at the Asilomar conference center. Asilomar sits right on the Pacific Coast, just south of Monterey, California. The ministers gathered for a week of worship, continuing education, networking, and fellowship. I registered very early so I could get into a special preaching seminar by the

Disciples of Christ minister, the Rev. Dr. Kay Northcutt. Dr. Northcutt's national reputation attracted me. Her focus for the class attracted me even more. She promised to teach us how to preach effectively to people in their 20's and 30's. She didn't disappoint.

The Rev. Jane Rzepka, herself, one of our finest preachers gave the first sermon Monday night. She poked fun at the promise of the week: to Transform our ministry (with a capital "T"). She encouraged us to set our sites a little lower. "Settle for a small 't' transformation," she said. "Fine with me," I thought. I arrived hoping, maybe, I'd learn a few new preaching tricks, catch up with a few beloved colleagues and meet some new ones.

Dr. Northcutt gave the sermon at our first morning worship, before our class started. With notebook and pen at the ready, I focused my attention on her like a laser beam. In the first minutes of her delivery my jaw dropped. My heart quickened with excitement as I scribbled notes furiously. When she finished, I held my breath a moment, drinking in her skill and her message. Later, she told us that she had honed and crafted that sermon for a year. Then, she distilled it, to just five minutes. I think that was the densest five minutes of preaching I've ever heard ... and the most penetrating ... right to the heart.

It burned.

In the class, Dr. Northcutt led us behind the curtain to show us what she was doing. She cajoled us into "slicing and dicing" the two sermons we brought with us. She taught us how we could be more vivid, visual and sensory with our words. She introduced us to a way of preaching that many of us found very exciting.

But there was more than learning a new technique going on for me.

Dr. Northcutt was diagnosed with myasthenia gravis, an autoimmune neuro-muscular disease, in 2009. She used a wireless microphone so we could hear her. She carefully conserved her energy, asking for our help when she tired. Yet, the loving way she attended to us, and responded to us ... moved me deeply.

When someone complained about the difficulty of the change she was asking us to consider, she stopped. She paused for what seemed like an eternity. Then she said, "Know ... that to get here ... I had to receive two transfusions and three plasmapheresis treatments. This may be ... the last time ... I teach this material. I need you to strive to understand what I'm teaching."

Her preaching, teaching, and presence had an effect on me that surprised me. Unexpectedly, I started falling in love. Not a romantic kind of love. She awoke in me a kind of love I first

felt thirty years ago. The love I felt after playing a special game of chess, that began my ministry. This love reminded me of the devotional love I experienced with the Sufis, chanting the name of Allah in the Mendocino redwoods. This love resonated with listening to the Kol Nidre while fasting on Yom Kippur. This love felt very similar to the loving-kindness, or metta, that grew inside me while I silently watched my breath and emptied my mind at a Buddhist meditation retreat. Not “my” love but a love that connected me to the “more” beyond me.

A love that burned in my heart.

In the first images of her sermon, Dr. Northcutt remembered trying to sneak out the back door of their house on a school day morning, along with her little sister. They were very quiet so their mother wouldn't hear them. But, invariably, she would hear the squeak of the boards on the back porch. She would call out, “Girls! Girls!” They would cringe for what was coming next.

“Girls, go find your greatness.”

Dr. Northcutt had come to call out to us;
to those in our class, to the ministers at our retreat,
“Unitarian Universalists, go find your greatness.”
“You have a life saving inclusive religion.
You have a religious greatness to live out.
I believe in you.
I'm willing to put my life on the line
to teach you how to preach that greatness.

Go ... find your greatness ...
and take my love, my heart with you,
and ... the heart of Jesus,
the heart of Christianity.

I'm ready to rise to her challenge.
I've received her love and encouragement.
I'll take Jesus with me, the heart of Christianity ...
along with the heart of Buddha,
the heart of Mohammed, the heart of Moses -
and all the sources of light and love we cherish.
I'm committed to finding and preaching
the greatness of the heart of Unitarian Universalism.

What about you?

Benediction

Borg writes:

The Bible as metaphor is a way of seeing the whole:

a way of seeing God, ourselves,
the divine-human relationship,
and the divine-world relationship.

The point is not to "believe" in a metaphor -
but to "see" with it.

May we approach Christianity in this metaphorical spirit.

May we use the Bible as a lens

to see ourselves and
to see the human condition more clearly.

And through the endeavor,

may we find a bigger love and
grow a bigger, more inclusive heart.