

“The Unitarian Universalist Jesus”

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For the month of December at Pathways, we have been focusing primarily on major World Religions. In the last 20 or 30 years, it seems, many UU congregations have forgotten or have even not taught – especially where its new members are concerned – about our history – where we come from and that we were originally two Christian denominations (the Unitarians and the Universalists) that merged into one organization in the 1960s.

In many ways, the UUA has become over the years, a safe haven for people of all paths – Jews, Christians, Humanists, Buddhists, Pagans, etc. But I think it is very important to know, understand and celebrate our roots – even if it is not what each individual believes. To dismiss the past in many ways invites a dismissal for our present and our future. We are, after all, Unitarian Universalists – a people of a faith that encompasses all paths of belief.

So for the purpose of today’s talk, I would like to speak briefly on the Unitarian Universalist view of Christianity and would like to introduce to you the Unitarian Universalist Jesus.

Historically, Unitarians and Universalists alike did not espouse a Jesus that was divine or did magic tricks. Simply put, as still is true today, there has always been an emphasis on the human Jesus – his words, his teachings, and how such relates to each of us and the world we live in today. Where some in Christendom may interpret the acts of Jesus as divine, many, including most UUs see these acts as metaphorical.

William Ellery Channing, probably one of the more prominent Unitarian clergy and voices of the 19th Century, said, “When I compare the clamorous preaching and passionate declamation, too common in the Christian world, with the composed dignity, the deliberate wisdom, the freedom from all extravagances, which characterized Jesus, I can imagine no greater contrast; and I am sure that the fiery zealot is no representative of Christianity.” Channing was helping to set apart Unitarianism from the rest of the Christian world by identifying that the knowledge of the human Jesus was greater than that proclaimed by evangelists of his day (no different than the evangelists of our day) who were looking to bring everyone into the fold through a method touted as salvation.

And during the period of Transcendentalism in the Unitarian Church, led by such clergy and academic scholars as Ralph Waldo Emerson, a new turn was taken advising the power individuals have in the ability to reason out what one believes based on one’s own history and experience. This even means if one chooses to remain in community with others and dismiss the existence of a God altogether – then one is exercising his or her own truth. And that is supported in the Unitarian principle of merit.

But what of this Jesus that we as Unitarian Universalists believe in? What of this Jesus that even Atheists and Buddhists and Spiritualists can say they can pick apart and find commonalities in? In UU, we can look at the mysterious and little known life that Jesus lived and celebrate the teachings of loving one another despite differences, of giving to the poor, of taking care of one another, of living in true harmony. Those are the basics.

In Unitarian Universalism, we do not get into the intricate matters of salvation or if there is a heaven or a hell as many in the Christian faith may ponder. In Unitarian Universalism, we cling to these teachings that have been handed down to us of a very humanist Jesus who walked this earth and just wanted to teach people that we can all coexist together – even if we are different from one another. All we have to do is turn our attention to the story of the Good Samaritan and see that is the ultimate teaching of Jesus about coexisting with those of differing faiths and religious views.

Jesus, following the law of his people, instructed his followers to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

But then he upped the ante by telling the story of the Good Samaritan — in his society, the Samaritans were the social outcasts. Yet here was a parable in which the social outcast was a better neighbor to a man in need than the community and religious leaders who didn't want to get involved.

The message is simple: Our neighbors are not just the people who look like us, act like us, or enjoy as much (or as little) social prestige as we do.

Two thousand years later, the world has become a global village, and many people find that their neighbors — literally as well as figuratively — include people of different nationalities, different ethnicities, and increasingly of different faiths.

This is a message that lives today. This is a message that is taught in humanism, in Judaism, in Buddhism, in Paganism. It is a message taught in Unitarian Universalism — because we know that the Jesus of our understanding did not wish to create a new religion. He was a Jew who challenged the minds of the old guard and taught that there is a new way of believing. And I believe that is what has happened in Unitarian Universalism. We are continuously being challenged and we are ever evolving in mind, heart and spirit as a people of a unique faith made up of many paths.

When I was a teen, growing up in the Episcopal Church, I met a priest who I am still friends with today. He introduced me to the teachings of Thomas Merton. Merton was a Catholic monk who also co-mingled Zen Buddhism with his Christian beliefs. To many it was an outrage. And to this day, Merton has yet to be canonized a saint in the Catholic faith because he forged two paths of thought into one path for himself. What Merton did for many in the 1950s and 1960s was provide permission that one could still have this believe in Jesus — however mystical, however divine, or however not divine — and also practice the philosophies of Buddhism. Merton was the first voice that showed me a gate to reasoning out that I too can believe in more than one teaching. In many ways, this is what our forefathers and mothers in both Unitarianism and Universalism worked hard to create for us today in my opinion. A faith that can bridge belief with reason — regardless of what belief looks like to you or to me or how we arrive at those particular places.

In his small booklet titled, “100 Questions that Non-Members Ask about Unitarian Universalism,” John Sias answers the following question: *Do Unitarian Universalists believe in Jesus?* Their answer:

We do not believe that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, performed miracles and was resurrected from death. We do admire and respect the way he lived, the power of his love, the force of his example, and his values. Most UUs regard Jesus as one of several important moral and ethical teachers who have shown humans how to live a life of love, service and compassion. Though some may question whether Jesus was an actual historical figure, we believe his teachings are of significant moral value.

So we can agree that many teachings introduced to a small section of the world over 2000 years ago by a Jewish man still hold value today. We may disagree with how different individuals or different groups or churches carry out those messages. We may even argue that some may have twisted the words somewhat for their personal gain. But what I would argue to you as UUs — or those of you thinking of becoming UUs — don't base what you think of Jesus because of your feelings or thoughts or distaste toward particular Christians or particular Christian groups. I would encourage you to understand what it is WE believe about Jesus — this Unitarian Universalist Jesus — whose words are ever present in our 7 Principles, in our 6 Sources, and that which was incorporated in the 5 Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism. I encourage each of you — regardless of your personal path — to embrace your Unitarian Universalism and see that we as a people of faith — a faith that is being recognized now as a world religion — believe in many things, many truths, and celebrate many teachers and figures throughout history.

As we come to a close in our calendar year and as we come to a close of this month's theme, I want to remind each of us here that the name of this congregation is Pathways. The name given to this congregation by the early members was so that we could embrace all unique paths. We come together

every Sunday to celebrate what we refer to as Common Ground. We need to be comfortable with all forms of religious language. It is ok if God or Jesus or Buddha is mentioned in the service. It is ok if we have readings from the Christian Bible, from the Talmud, from a Book of Shadows, or from a Secular Text. It is ok if we sing a song or a hymn that has God language in it. We are people who welcome complexity, who are challenged by belief, and who openly welcome each and every person to the table.

We may have a large gathering of humanists in our congregation – but that is not who we are. We may have a notable presence of Buddhists in our congregation but that is not who we are. We may have a growing community of Spiritualists, Mystics and Pagans in our congregation but that is not who we are.

Who we are is Unitarian Universalists. A faith that welcomes everyone. And by saying such – we each have a responsibility to uphold the value that all of us belong here – even when we may have different beliefs from one another. One person's belief is not more important than another's. No one has the right to dismiss one's personal belief. To do so is to go against the true teachings of Unitarian Universalism.

So I close with these words from the Unitarian Universalist Jesus who said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Respect each person as you would like to be respected. Respect each belief as you would like to have your belief respected. And do so with the 3rd Principle of the UU Faith in mind – which reads "We accept one another and encourage each in spiritual growth in our congregations."

Here everyone is welcome. Here everyone matters. Here everyone's beliefs are valued.
That is *who* we are at Pathways.