



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Roots Hold Us Close

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I'd like to begin this sermon by asking you a question. Please raise your hand if you grew up in the UU church. Not very many of you! How many of you grew up with no religious influence? How many of you grew up Catholic? How about Jewish? How about a Protestant Christian faith?

For a variety of reasons, we find ourselves in a Unitarian Universalist church this morning. Some of us, as Muder said in the first reading, are here because we want nothing to do with the religions of our past. We would like to build our own theology from scratch. Some of us are here because we hunger for spiritual nourishment, not instead of, but beyond what we've been offered elsewhere, or what we can find by ourselves. We want to build a stronger theology, but we'd like a place to start. All of us want a spiritual home to be part of.

Today I challenge us all to consider that the teachings of Jesus are a brilliant foundation on which to build a dynamic spiritual understanding of life. I am grateful that, having grown up UU, I do not carry an emotional residue of hurts or resentments from other faith traditions. On the other hand, I didn't learn about Jesus until I trained for ministry, while in Seminary. If you've been a UU for any period of time, you know that there ain't a lot of Jesus here. You'll hear about him around twice a year at Christmas and Easter. For this reason, we don't attract many people who subscribe to accepting Jesus as the Christ, as a divine lord and savior. UU ministers, myself included, tend to contextualize Jesus as a prophet, an exceptional human being who had exceptionally wise teachings to offer humanity.

Neighborhood Church is working on ways to help you strengthen your spiritual life. Our challenge is that Unitarian Universalism is better known for being a haven from conventional forms of religion, from traditional theologies of all kinds. This can give the mistaken impression that we don't value traditional forms, when in fact, we do. What newcomers don't hear enough of, on the whole, I want to say now. To be a UU, you don't have to ditch every religious influence of your past. Rather, you are encouraged to discern what was useful, what was good, what was beautiful, fulfilling, inspiring, and important to you, and keep this. And correspondingly, discern what was not helpful, what offended your soul, what may even have hurt you deeply, and, with courage, let go of that. So you keep the good stuff, let go the bad. In essence what this means is that you can keep your favorite mentors and heroes.

I agree with Muder that, more and more, people of all generations, younger especially perhaps, are looking for the heroes and mentors who will help them grow spiritually. I wholeheartedly believe that we all need mentors of the ordinary kind - people in our lives who know more than we do whom we can therefore learn from. And, I return again and again to a deeper truth - we need mentors and heroes of an extraordinary kind, too. We need the wisdom of the ages, passed down to us by the prophets.

Jesus is a fine prophet to begin with, because, he is in fact the hero of our heritage. Without getting into a full-blown UU history lesson, it's enough to say that we have very Christian roots. Both early Unitarians and Universalists felt they were the real Christians, the Christians who embraced the most inclusive, loving, and non-judgmental theology there could be, and the most empowering. There are times I still share this feeling, when UUs embody the teachings of Jesus, and we are radically compassionate: when we stand up for human rights, for the powerless, for any neighbor who suffers.

Next week Jim preaches with a similar sermon title, Deepening Our Roots - it is the theme of this year's canvass to ensure Neighborhood Church's financial wellbeing. The idea behind this theme is that, as we look to the next chapter in the life of the church, after losing our beloved Minister Emeritus in September, we decipher who we want to be. We do this by bringing with us the best parts of our past, our strongest roots. And so today I say if we want to grow spiritually, Jesus is one of our best roots to hold on to.

As I've pointed out from this pulpit in the past, there is no concrete historical evidence that Jesus even existed. But I invite you to consider that that is irrelevant. Whether a hero was real and walked the earth,

or is a mythical composite of wisdom teachings, what matters is what we can learn from the hero about ourselves, and the wisdom that we can apply to our lives. As Karen Armstrong pointed out in her last book, The Case for God, we have lost much by taking religion too literally in the modern era. You either succumb to a fantasy world that doesn't resemble real life, or you throw the baby out with the bathwater by rejecting scripture altogether, because so much of it 'just isn't true.' This is about taking the Joseph Campbell approach to Jesus. Jesus' was a hero's journey, and there is so much we can learn from how he traveled.

What attracts me to Jesus are the teachings attributed to him. These teachings remain, regardless of what historical accuracy we can decipher about the teacher. If you're willing to take on Jesus as a mentor, just be forewarned: you have to be willing to wade through swamps until you come upon valleys where the good stuff grows. Or think of Jesus as a cosmic Santa Claus who has left behind many presents. Only some of them are truly gifts. There are many presents that once unwrapped and unpacked are not worth keeping around. A disappointing present is easy to spot and there are lots of them in the Gospels. Once we clear away the clutter, what's left?

Once you open yourself to all the potential meanings in the story, there is a lot left. This is key to understand when we think about Jesus. Since next to nothing is grounded in historical fact, you have to be willing to engage the art of learning from parables.

In the past, scholars concluded that the parables are allegorical, which means they are example stories for how one should behave in order to please God. An allegory means that the main characters of the story are symbols of something else, such as the father is God, or the son is the sinner. But now scholars don't think it's that simple. Biblical scholars today think of parables as far more complex than just stories of symbolism. Parables are like riddles; they are perplexing stories designed to challenge our most basic assumptions about what we think we know is true about life. Parables put our most dearly prized notions of justice on its head. What we thought we knew for sure, Jesus says think again. If Jesus is saying that the very foundation we live our lives on is one that is false and mistaken, that's an enticing challenge. How often do we really question our most basic assumptions about life?

Take the Good Samaritan. During the time this parable was told, Jews hated Samaritans. There was no such thing as a good Samaritan because they were considered to be untouchable. Yet in this parable it is a Samaritan who saves a beaten up Jew on the side of the road. What's being turned on its head here are our ideas about where help can come from. We want help to come from our own people, the people we think are good and we think we can trust. But this parable says no - we don't find what we need most in the safety of familiarity. We will receive our most precious gifts from the places we least expect, from sources we have long dismissed as unworthy of us. To find the divine we have to venture beyond our comfort zones, we have to be open to the unknown, to be open to what we don't understand. This takes courage and a radically open heart. And it is a matter of free will - we have to decide for ourselves whether or not to be open to foreign possibilities, to possibilities that frighten us.

A lot of us think we have right and wrong figured out. We are secure in our beliefs about justice. But again, Jesus offers teachings that can turn these beliefs inside out. One challenge that is laced throughout his parables is the notion of radical forgiveness. Stephen Mitchell is the author of my favorite book about Jesus, The Gospel According to Jesus, and he says that in each person Jesus meets, he can see the image of God in which they were created. "They are all perfect," he writes, "when he looks at them from the Sabbath mind. From another, complementary, viewpoint, they are all imperfect, even the most righteous of them, even he himself, because nothing is perfect but the One. He understands that being human *means* making mistakes. When we acknowledge this in all humility, without wanting anything else, we can forgive ourselves, and we can begin correcting our mistakes. And once we forgive ourselves, we can forgive anyone."¹

¹ The Gospel According to Jesus by Stephen Mitchell, p.16.

The notions of 'loving your enemies' and 'turning the other cheek' don't appeal to most modern sensibilities of justice. I don't think most of us seek revenge when opportunities present themselves, but nor do we pass up opportunities to prove that we are "right," to say, "I told you so."

Personal conflicts are a part of life - they come up with the people we work with, they especially come up with the people we love, with our daughters and sons, with our siblings, with our mates.

The parable that probably most exemplifies the notion of radical forgiveness is the Prodigal Son. The father in that story didn't have to think for a split second whether or not he would forgive his son. It was a given. Stephen Mitchell says this parable is "the heart of Jesus' teaching, and one of the most beautiful stories ever told. The final, overjoyed statement by the father - 'For this son of mine was dead, and he has come back to life; he was lost, and is found' - is the only kind of resurrection that Jesus ever spoke about."²

There is so much that can be mined from The Prodigal Son, that we don't have time to do that work here. But I have good news! In mid-February I'm offering my Parables of Jesus class, a four-week course in which I'll introduce a four-step method to interpreting parables that I learned from a German feminist theologian while in Seminary.

Studying the parables of Jesus is a spiritual practice that is completely worthwhile. Jesus said, "For this teaching which I give you today is not hidden from you, and is not far away. It is not in heaven, for you to say, 'Who will go up to heaven and bring it down to us, so that we can hear it and do it?' . . . But the teaching is very near you: it is in your mouth and in your heart, that you can do it.

I don't think we leaders of liberal religion expound on this immediacy enough. While it's true that spiritual practices take effort and discipline, the wisdom is quite accessible once we are open to it, once we decide to 'show up' with open hands. We religious liberals value the intellect so much that we assume you have to work really hard for a long time before you can earn an ounce of knowledge. The teachings of Jesus are nothing like that. Mitchell says, "God's compassion embraces all people. There are no pre-conditions for it, nothing we need to do first, nothing we have to believe. When we are ready to receive it, it is there. And the more we live in its presence, the more effortlessly it flows through us, until we find that we no longer need external rules or Bibles or Messiahs."³

We engage in spiritual practices in order to engage the sacred, in order to clear away the clutter that may impede the sacred from entering our hearts. Some call the sacred God, for some God is simply the higher wisdom of love and compassion that we aspire to make manifest in our lives. If we compare this sacred wisdom to sunlight, we can say that the heart is like a window, and spiritual practices are the window-washers. Cravings, aversions, fixed judgments, concepts, beliefs - all forms of selfishness or self-protection - are, when we cling to them, like dirt on the windowpane. Sometimes the dirt gets so thick no light can enter at all. We are wise to take time, to prioritize, doing what it takes to keep our windows working, so the pure light of wisdom can enter our hearts.⁴

Mitchell says people can feel Jesus' radiance in proportion to their own openness. "There is a deep sense of peace in his presence, and a sense of respect for him that far exceeds what they have felt for any other human being . . . he is like a mirror for us all, showing us who we essentially are."⁵

Like with any mentor, we have to be open to being mentored. We have to be willing to be told that we're wrong, our weaknesses have to be called out, and we have to listen to *how* we can grow stronger. Rather

² Same, p. 223.

³ Same, p. 15.

⁴ This metaphor was borrowed from Mitchell as well, from pp, 13 - 14.

⁵ P. 14

than it being about sunlight, it may take us to some dark and hard places, where we realize what grounds our lives isn't as solid as we thought. It takes humility and it takes a willingness to dig deep, to touch and grab hold of the very foundations of our soul. Are you game for the hero's journey of Jesus?

Whether it's Jesus or not, find your mentors, find the hero that will help you become a hero in your own life. Become conscious of what grounds you, what roots are holding you up - get to know these roots so they hold you well. Let go of the roots that have never supported you in becoming your best self.

I'll conclude with a final comparison where spiritual practice is concerned, offered by Mitchell. He says that to grow spiritually is to grow like a tree:

"The tree doesn't try to wrench its roots out of the earth and plant itself in the sky, nor does it reach its leaves downward into the dirt. It needs both ground and sunlight, and knows the direction of each. Only because it digs into the dark earth with its roots is it able to hold its leaves out to receive the sunlight."⁶

Roots hold us close, so that wings may set us free.

⁶ P. 14