

*The Jesus Scandal*  
Arlington Street Church  
March 16, 2008

This is a very powerful, moving and intense week for Christian believers. For them, this week marks the time in Jesus' earthly life when he was finally revealed as, and actually became the risen God. These are the seminal, foundational and most meaningful and meaning-filled moments in Christianity.

Today around the world many of our Christian sisters and brothers are celebrating the liturgical feast of Palm Sunday. For them, Palm or Passion Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, during which many observant Christians will attend services on Thursday – Maundy Thursday, marking the night of the last supper and the arrest of Jesus; on Friday - Good Friday, marking the day Jesus was sentenced and put to death by capital punishment; and even on Saturday – Holy Saturday, marking the Easter Vigil where they gather together, in longing, for comfort and hope that is cultivated in prayerful and expectant waiting; and then again, finally and jubilantly - on Easter Sunday

morning, often at sunrise, marking the precise moments when the risen Jesus, unrecognized as such, first appeared to the three women who had gone to his tomb that sunrise to tend to his body - to stave-off its inevitable decay.

For Christian believers, those very first rays of that sacred paschal sunrise mark the very first signs of the unfolding Easter miracle – “the morning hangs a signal”- that is about to reveal itself and it is resurrection!

And as important as that is to Christianity, that is NOT at all what we are going to talk about today. Nor is that why we mark Palm Sunday. Instead, we are looking at the man Jesus and the way he led his life or lived his lessons and ministry. So, rather than considering what makes him divine for Christians, we are going to examine what makes him such a unique and amazing human being to us – why he was such a great man who is worthy of our knowing, studying, and perhaps even emulating. But by far the most important reason we look at the human Jesus today, while so many others are beginning to celebrate what makes him their God, is because Jesus the man is

the very taproot of the Unitarian Universalism that we know and love today; the covenant that we seek to fulfill in our daily lives.

Often it is so very difficult for some of us to even consider Jesus. Maybe that is because so many of the followers of Jesus seem hate-filled and often hateful. These particular followers of Jesus seem to want to make so many of us suffer, or even worse. Those people, however, are not Jesus. This reminds me of something that is going on in our current political world where candidates are having ascribed to them the behaviors, beliefs and statements of groups or individuals who happen to follow or endorse them.

As difficult or as foreign as it may seem, please let us, for just this morning at least, set aside the beliefs and behaviors of many of Jesus' followers and endorsers in order to look at the person himself, Jesus the individual, the very human Jesus, the so-called historic Jesus. As we'll hear a little later, this is the way in which many of our Unitarian forebears viewed and revered Jesus of Nazareth.

Great pleasure and insight can come from this exercise because, I've got to tell you, that Jesus would have been the

consummate – the ultimate -Unitarian Universalist of his day. He could have practiced his Judaism, while sharing its wisdoms and rituals with his other followers, some of whom were Israelites but others who were Samaritans, other tribal members and even possibly some occupying Romans. Jesus taught them and showed them that it was possible for people from such varied and often hostile traditions to join together around one “welcome table,” to share in breaking bread, sharing wine and breaking down the social and spiritual barriers that fracture the lives of all who live under those barriers.

With Jesus himself, it is absolutely clear that no person, regardless of gender, origin, class, or occupation, no matter how sinful, how ritually impure, how demonically-possessed, and no matter what nationality, what belief, oppressor or oppressed, was forbidden from Jesus’ table.

Jesus’ posse was a community of people who would never otherwise in a million years would have found themselves at the same worship service, let alone breaking bread at a the same dinner table. Does that sound familiar? Add to that mix all those shiftless seekers – men and women, married and single -

who had left their jobs, families, spouses and places of birth to follow around this illegitimate child and unemployed drifter from a backwater, no-name town. Add to that the fact that he traveled with, tended to and even healed the most marginalized, hated and outcast people of his day.

And even with all of that, he had the audacity to call himself teacher, rabbi; to purport to tell the most powerful, wealthy and complicit religious authorities of his time the HE had the answers, the his values should be the standards by which the community operated.

So very much of what Jesus said and did in his lifetime, is based in what we know today as absolutely and unassailably Unitarian Universalist values and principles. He shares membership in the heretics club. Many in the Israelite religious hierarchy and orthodoxy, defenders of the status quo, labeled Jesus a heretic; a label that we have proudly and vocally claimed for centuries.

Jesus' message and ministry were radical and prophetic. Jesus taught and practiced radical welcome, radical hospitality and radical love. Jesus lived the principle of the inherent worth

and dignity of every individual long before we Unitarian Universalists ever coined that phrase. So this confluence of values and actions in the Jesus of his time, and their similarity with Unitarian Universalism today, is no accident.

What is so remarkable about this liturgical time in western Christianity, and the chain of events that unfold and are marked during Holy Week for us, is that they most powerfully evidence the humanity and human vulnerability of the person Jesus. Aside from any of the theological implications, what the events of Holy Week starkly and irrefutably expose is that Jesus was put to death – by the state authorities using the form of capital punishment reserved for traitors and the most heinous criminals - because he was as much as a political prisoner and threat to the imperial, occupying forces of the Roman Empire as he was guilty of violating any commands or customs of the Israelite hierarchy. After all, history proves that Jesus was a far greater threat to the Romans than he ever was to the Israelites of his day.

Examining and even celebrating the life and ministry of the historical Jesus, the man Jesus of Nazareth, who lived at the

time of the dawn of the Common Era, is a premise and pillar on which this very church was built and is dedicated. It is also no accident that this Jesus is so powerfully and breathtakingly depicted in the windows that illumine our worship space. To be certain Jesus is not the divine or even a deity for us; he is one of our most powerful and influential role models for whom we are as Unitarian Universalists today, and what we can become as Unitarian Universalists tomorrow (or even later this afternoon).

In the words of Rev. Dr. Edward Frost, “For us, such remarkable human beings as Jesus of Nazareth were not models of supernatural perfection but are models of human possibility. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarians in America argued that Jesus did not “save” us by dying as god, but saves us, transforms us, by being a powerful example of human possibility. Jesus did not come to be worshipped, (Ralph Waldo) Emerson, and (Theodore) Parker and (William Ellery) Channing said, but to be emulated. We are not saved by his death... but by the example of his life.”<sup>1</sup>

And it is true that we do follow the example of his life rather than the meaning or impact of his death. Jesus was

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon by Rev Dr. Edward Frost, *Amazing Grace*, delivered at Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta,. <http://www.uuca.org/sermon.php?id=6>.

emphatic and unequivocal when he declared the greatest commandments – overriding all others – were “love the lord your god with all your might ... love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”<sup>2</sup> This vision that Jesus promulgates is not just his own creation. Indeed, the great Rabbi Hillel said of the Torah that “what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the Torah. All the rest is commentary.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus declared without equivocation that humanity was not made for the Sabbath but that the Sabbath was made for humanity, and in the process tended to human suffering thereby showing us that human suffering requires more attention than adherence to rules or traditions that in any way perpetuate suffering or oppression. Who would Jesus oppress? Upon whom would Jesus inflict suffering? No one. Absolutely no one.

Jesus interacted with, touched and “healed” many of these most powerless and marginalized people of his time and he

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22.

<sup>3</sup> Sermon by Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, *The Greatest Liberal of the All*, delivered at All Souls Church.

ministered to them with respect and love, recognizing their basic human dignity. Jesus took what little power and status he had, and conferred it upon – shared it – with whoever he came in contact with, whoever needed it, or yet another chance to get it right. And by doing that, he moved beyond patterns of behavior and belief that did not allow for many-cultured, or religiously diverse, communities to live as communities of equals or as allies.

In the words of the late William Sloane Coffin, chaplain of Yale University and minister of Riverside Church in New York,

Jesus subverted the conventional religious wisdom in his time. We have to do the same. The answer to bad evangelism is not no evangelism but good evangelism. Good evangelism is not proselytizing but witnessing, bearing witness to “the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”; bearing witness to the prophet’s cry: Let justice roll down like mighty waters,” and to the prophetic insight that we all belong one to another....<sup>4</sup>

Jesus, himself, offered - and in fact was - a shared fabric of belief in the entire human quilt to all who affirm wonder and

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<sup>4</sup> Gomes, Peter. *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*. Harpur Collins, New York. 2007. Page 206.

gratitude for creation and for each other, and for all of the family of creation. Jesus said love Creation and the Creator, which also means loving each other. It's like two circles of love coming together and overlapping some in the middle; and right there where the circles come together they form a third circle, where the chalice light of love for all creation glows. That light saves **all** of creation in its glow, without regard to any part that might be messed-up or rendered impure or that somebody else says should not be saved.

That circle, that light, is where we seek to be. That circle, that light, is where the man Jesus lived. It's where he created it – at the intersection of the goodness of creation and the creator. Yes, this is in stark contrast to many of his most vocal followers but Jesus the man is most clearly at this place of common humanity, common love, commonweal and common ground for all. As we enter into this Holy Week may we too seek to live in that circle, that light.