

Reading

Excerpts from *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity* by Theodore Parker

. . . try the whole extent of Christianity so well summed up in the command, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind -- thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;" and is there anything therein that can perish?

The end of Christianity seems to be to make all men one with God as Christ was one with Him; to bring them to such a state of obedience and goodness, that we shall think divine thoughts and feel divine sentiments, and so keep the law of God by living a life of truth and love.

[Christianity] It does not demand all men to *think* alike, but to think uprightly, and get as near as possible to the truth; not all men to *live* alike, but to live holy, and get as near as possible to a life perfectly divine.

. . . for Christianity is not a system of doctrines, but rather a method of attaining oneness with God.

Real Christianity gives men new life . . . It would lead us to take what help we can find . . . it would make us revere the holy words spoken by "godly men of old," but revere still more the word of God spoken through Conscience, Reason, and Faith, as the holiest of all . . . It would lead us to form Christ in the heart, on which Paul laid such stress, and work out our salvation by this. For it is not so much by the Christ who lived so blameless and beautiful eighteen centuries ago, that we are saved directly, but by the Christ we form in our hearts and live out in our daily life, that we save ourselves, God working with us, both to will and to do.

Sermon

People have been working for a long time trying to figure out who Jesus was and what he had to do with Christianity, if anything. Those who do this in a very serious way, usually in colleges and universities, are called scholars. My purpose today is to share with you what scholars have learned about the person called Jesus and the nature of the religion called Christianity as it has flowed like a large, wide river throughout history. We will examine where in this river we find ourselves as Unitarian Universalists, which is important for us to know. I believe it is especially important for our young people to know.

A large number of scholars believe that the image of a single church, forming after the death of Jesus, and continuing for hundreds of years after is not possible. If for no other reason, the city of Jerusalem was invaded by the Romans in the year 70 C.E.¹ A great part of the city was destroyed, including the Jewish temple, and many of the city's residents were scattered

¹ "C.E. stands for "Common Era," replacing A.D., meaning *Anno Domini*, the number of years after Jesus' estimated birth.

One scholar, Burton Mack, whom I read in seminary, suggests that the variety of the gospel accounts, the numerous different writers writing each one, and the hundreds of manuscripts that existed prior to the formation of the four gospels, shows that each of these Christian communities were involved in their own way creating the gospel accounts. Some of these early Christian communities would not have known about many other groups besides their own. Many of these communities did things and believed things that were quite different from the others.

Still, common beliefs and practices did exist. In the early years, the church groups generally viewed Jesus as a teacher or a prophet within the Jewish tradition. The message of Jesus was very much as Rev. Theodore Parker suggested in this morning's reading, essentially, the importance of living a holy life, which would lead to having a closer relationship with God. We have a lot of evidence from what Jesus said, as it is written in the gospels, to suggest that this viewpoint is the correct one, but more about that later.

Sometime after this early period, a new view of Jesus came into being. As I mentioned, Jesus was viewed as a teacher and his followers were called disciples. A disciple means a student. This new view referred to Jesus as the Christ, from a Greek word meaning, "anointed one." In Hebrew, that word is Messiah. Men become kings and women become queens by being anointed for the job by their societies in some fashion. We learn from the book of the Acts in the New Testament in chapter 11, verse 26 that the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch, which is located in modern day Turkey.

So, two images of Jesus emerge. One image is of a rabbi, which is the Jewish word for teacher, who teaches about living a holy life, not according to a strict view of religious traditions, but living by a heart touched by the love and mercy of God. The other image is of a king, who is part man, and part god, and who will magically transform those who accept his divine kingship.

These two images are difficult to maintain together, yet we find both of them in the accounts of the gospels. You may have figured out that in the history of Christianity, the second image of this part-man, part-god divine king is the image that has won out. This is the view in the main stream of the river of Christianity I pointed out at the beginning.

What happened to this first image of Jesus, you may ask? Who among church groups or denominations has kept this Jesus, whose teachings about living a life of love, care, and compassion, as an important understanding? In truth, *all* church denominations or groups have kept it. Sure, it has been a minor view point, a side current in that river, held in quiet corners of churches throughout history. In some cases, though, it figured more prominently in people's understanding of the meaning of Christianity. That would be true for most Unitarians and Universalists until at least the early period of the 20th century. That is why this mural is here behind me.

This understanding about Jesus is important. Teaching about the best way to live has

always been valued in human community. It has been an important function in religion to guide members of those communities.

How do we know this view of Jesus is valid? Let us return to those scholars I mentioned earlier. A particular group of bible scholars from schools and institutions in North America and Europe formed the Jesus Seminar. Their goal was to translate the gospels into modern English from as many primary sources as possible. Their “Scholar’s Version” is called, *The Five Gospels*, which are Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and Thomas. Mark is listed first, because it is the oldest gospel. They include Thomas because it is an independent source of the sayings of Jesus.

After they compiled the gospels, they held an election. A scholar, or a Fellow, as they were called, cast ballots for each of the sayings of Jesus by four different colors:

- Red meant, “I would include this item without a doubt in the collection to determine who Jesus was.” In other words, Jesus said this, or something very much like it.
- Pink meant, “I would include this item with reservations.” In other words, Jesus probably said something like this.
- Gray meant, “I would *not* include this item, but might make use of some its content.” In other words, Jesus did not say this, but it is close in the idea to something of his own.
- Black meant, “I would not include this item.” Jesus did not say this.

The best way to see what Jesus was about, and what was religion as he taught it, is to see what he said. The Scholar’s Version, *The Five Gospels* lets us do that. In fact they rank order the sayings of Jesus from “most likely he said this,” to the “least likely that he said this.” The total is ninety-one sayings, which does not seem like a lot for all of the gospels until we remember that there is a lot of duplication. Many things in Matthew are also in Luke, for example, just slightly different.

So here now are the top ten sayings likely attributed to Jesus. Here we go:

10) “Congratulations, you hungry! You will have a feast.” Luke 6:21.

Now the editors of the Matthew community changed that a little bit to “hunger and thirst after Justice.” The Matthew verse got a pink letter designation.

9) The story of the Good Samaritan, which explains who is our neighbor.

8) “Give to the one [everyone (Luke)] who begs from you.” Matthew 5:42.

7) “Pay the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and God what belongs to God.” Mark 12:17. The key point here is the message to distinguish between the claims of the state and the claims of God. Jesus does not advise the questioners, who were trying to trap him, whether to pay the poll tax or not.

6) “Heaven’s imperial rule [God’s imperial rule (Luke)] is like leaven which a woman took and concealed in fifty pounds of flour until it was all leavened.” Matt 13:33. What a surprising way to talk about baking bread! One doesn’t conceal leaven in the flour! Yeast and flour are mixed to make bread. Leaven was regarded as a symbol of corruption and unleavened bread symbolized that which is holy. Jesus takes conventional religious tradition and turns it upside

down.

- 5) "Love your enemies." That is about as straightforward as it gets. If everyone on this planet loved their enemies as well as their friends, we truly would have heaven on earth. Matt 5:44b, Luke 6:27 & 35.
- 4) "Further, when anyone conscripts you for one mile, go an extra mile." Matt 5:41.
- 3) "Congratulations, you poor! God's domain belongs to you." Luke 6:20 (Matthew - "poor in spirit.") From this verse, I wonder how God's domain will belong to the poor. It isn't entirely clear. It is clear that the rich *may* need to worry just a little bit.
- 2) "When someone takes away your coat, don't prevent that person from taking your shirt along with it." Luke 6:29b. "When someone wants to sue you for your shirt, let that person have your coat along with it." Matt 5:40.
- 1) "When someone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other as well." Luke 6:29a. "Don't react violently against the one who is evil: when someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well." Matt 5:39. In this teaching, Jesus is trying to get us to respond differently to violence.

How's that for a top-ten list? As you can see, almost everything Jesus says from this list is about living a moral life or it is about the immediate presence of God in our world. Almost none of it is about how you get into heaven, or about what terrible people we all are, or even what we are supposed to think or believe.

Some wise person has said, "Unitarian Universalists are more interested in getting heaven into people than they are getting people into heaven." I think that is a good phrase. It has also been said that the religious goal is to realize and establish the kingdom of God on earth. One could argue that it is our job to do that, rather than for God to wave a magic wand, after lots of war and suffering, and make it so. It has also been said of Unitarian Universalists that we are in favor of deeds, not creeds. Creeds are things you have to believe in. Deeds come from a deep place where our values and principles begin.

We, you and I, are not alone in thinking this is the religion as Jesus taught it. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr talked about the Beloved Community from his early days, saying it was the goal of the Montgomery bus boycott. The earliest mention of the term, Beloved Community, was from the American philosophy Josiah Royce, whose writings predate the first World War. Sometimes, he used the term, universal community as well, to mean the same thing. Royce said, "*Since the office of religion is to aim towards the creation on earth of the Beloved Community, the future task of religion is the task of inventing and applying arts which shall win all over to unity and which shall overcome their original hatefulness by the gracious love, not merely of individuality but of communities. Judge every social device, every proposed reform, every national and every local enterprise by one test. Does this help towards the coming of the universal community?*"

This early image of Jesus and the religion he taught has not disappeared. Yet, it is the minority view, a current in the river of Christianity that is off to the side of the main one. It is the tradition, I argue, was the original one, the one Jesus started. We come from that tradition, no matter whether you call it Christianity or not. It is a tradition I think we do well to keep and one we would do well to live.