

Jesus the Prophet
Sunday, March 31, 2024
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

Reading: From “Stark Raving Normal” by Rev. Kit Howell

“I met Isaiah when I was 10 or so. I grew up Unitarian, having gone to the same Dallas church all my life. My family went to that church and I thought of myself as a Unitarian. So you can imagine my surprise when my father announced one Sunday that we were going to a small Episcopal church. Papa said he had met a saint- a prophet.

“Sounded scary to me. Besides I didn’t put much stock in saints – or even ministers or priests. Everyone versed in the usual cultural stereotypes knew that ministers were at best, well-meaning fools- and at worst, destructive hypocrites who knew you were fallen and were anxious to prove it to you. I liked my church where at least people pretty much left you alone.

“But Papa said that there just weren’t that many saints in the world, regardless of their religion, and when you found one, you needed to pay attention. So off we went to the Episcopal church. Papa made us sit through the service, to be close to this saint. He was a Latin American. His name was Father Vega. He was the one who was Isaiah.

“I didn’t listen to what he said, because what 10-year-old does? No, nothing happened to me until people came down for communion. I didn’t receive communion, but I did kneel down at the railing. Father Vega came by and he blessed me. I had never been blessed before. I felt it from the top of my head to my toes. It was wonderful, as if some unearthly energy swept through me, some strange joy.

“For six months I came back to be blessed. And I always wondered, how did he do it? *Where did this blessing come from?* One day, after church, I understood it all.

“We had been waiting in the car for Papa after church and my mother finally sent me in to get him. I went into the sanctuary. Papa wasn’t there. But Father Vega was there with this big, red, beefy parishioner. He was standing over Father Vega, jabbing his finger at him and saying, ‘Father, there are people in this congregation, important people-you know who they are-and they want an air conditioner. I tell you, Father, if this air conditioner issue isn’t resolved, there’s going to be big trouble!’

“And Father Vega just stood there, his face serene and unchanging. It was one of those moments where everything seemed to freeze, and everyone stood just so, so you could see beyond them. You could see the world they lived in. I looked at the big, red, beefy guy and I could tell that his world was full of air conditioners, and power, and cars and church politics. And I looked at Father Vega and through him I saw another world- a huge and terrifying world where love was

real and, like seraphim and angels and Jesus, love walked and talked. I saw a world where spirit guided the flesh, where there was mercy and not sacrifice, where there was justice, where forgiveness and compassion and love were not abstractions, but were real and concrete and there, in the eyes of Father Vega.

“This was the first time I had any inkling of this other world. Through Father Vega I could see the reality of a world of saving grace, peopled by those like Jesus, Schweitzer, Francis, Hildegard, Catherine, Job, Teresa, Martin, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, Father Vega and who knows how many other ministers of that *other world* that is yet this world all encrusted with air conditioners and other separating talismans of power.

“So what happened? Father Vega blessed the big red beefy guy. He touched him on the arm, and he said, ‘Bless you.’ And then after a moment Father Vega walked on, leaving the big red beefy guy stunned and infected with grace. But the big red beefy guy shook it off and went on his way. That’s when I understood where blessings come from. They come from that other world-Father Vega’s world- the world that is the giving heart of *this* world.

“They fired Father Vega a few months later. I dare say Isaiah has probably been fired many times over the years. Father Vega was sent to serve in New Mexico, and we went back to the UU church.

“Even so, Father Vega’s world has haunted me over the years. It is so much easier to forget and fill my world with meetings and air conditioners. But then late at night as I lay there feeling the abyss under the bed, the memory of Father Vega will find me and I will pick it up.... You see one of the secrets of life is that we are *all* ministers. We *all* have the ability to bless each other. It’s true. We all have the ability to keep one foot in Father Vega’s world.”

Reading: “The Roman authorities who executed Rabbi Yeshua bar-Yusef were not mistaken in regarding him as a dangerous subversive. Despite his radical commitment to nonviolence, Jesus represented an ongoing threat to the security of every established order. I believe he still does. “Jesus carried forward the Jewish prophetic tradition that finds the essence of religion in doing justice. For him, as for Amos and Isaiah, religious observance without social justice was a blasphemous mockery. Jesus repeatedly antagonized the powerful by reminding them that every society will be judged according to its treatment of the poor and defenseless.

“Of course, no society then or since has lived up to the Hebrew prophets’ ideal of justice. There are always compromises. But, if you once let Jesus’ voice into your consciousness, you will never again be at ease with compromises.

“Injustice results less often from malice than from willed inattention. In Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite did no active harm to the wounded man on the highway. They just passed by on the opposite side of the road, distancing themselves from the uncomfortable sight. Relentlessly, Jesus keeps bringing the oppressed back into our field of vision.

Guy C. Quinlan, The Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York, NY

When I was a child I was afraid that Jesus was going to come back right after I had had a fight with my brother or my sister and before I had asked for forgiveness, and I would be in big trouble doomed by my bad timing. That childhood fear did not turn me from all Christian ideas, but many Unitarian Universalists who were raised Christian today seem antagonistic to Christian ideas not just for themselves but also in others. We proclaim ourselves to be a non-creedal faith tradition, but those most often least welcomed are those who retain Christian ideas that some of the rest of us have rejected.

This should not be so. The only traditional Christian idea that goes against our Unitarian Universalist principles is that Christianity is the only way to God. But then I doubt if a Christian who retained that particular belief would come looking to be a part of a spiritual community that very explicitly was open to people of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs. Often we Unitarian Universalists promote ourselves as a good spiritual home for mixed religious couples, saying that each partner can retain his/her/their own beliefs but worship together and be in a place where their children will be taught to respect both their faiths. Somehow I doubt that the Christian spouse of a Hindu, Jew, Buddhist, atheist or Muslim believes their partner in life is condemned. Still there are good reasons for rejecting Jesus. Dr. Leonore Tiefer in an older pamphlet which includes a variety of UU views on Jesus including the one shared at the beginning of this sermon as a reading says, "It has been a circuitous journey to Unitarian Universalism for this New York Jew, but for the past eighteen years I have found at The Community Church of New York a congenial religious community of support and inspiration. Reciting our affirmation on Sundays, I am comfortable stating that we recognize "in all prophets a harmony [and] in all scriptures a unity." But when someone asks me point blank how I feel about Jesus, dark clouds fill my vision. I hear a dialogue in my imagination:

"Q. Who can disagree with a message that has offered such consolation and inspired such sacrifice and commitment?"

"A. Who can support a message that has been used for such oppression?"

"The bottom line is that I cannot and will not separate the message or the person of Jesus from the history of oppressive acts undertaken in the name of Christianity...."

Unitarian Universalism has Christian roots. We began in the late seventeen hundreds in America as two Protestant Christian denominations, the Universalists who did not believe that a loving God was going to send anyone to hell for eternity and the Unitarians who were Christians who did not believe in the Trinity. Those early forebears of ours wrestled with who Jesus was for them. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was briefly a Unitarian minister, when he spoke to the graduating class of the Harvard Divinity School in 1838 said, "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. ... One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates (God)self in (us), and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of (God's) world. He said, in

this jubilee of sublime emotion, `I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.” Theodore Parker in 1841 a couple of years later preached a sermon which he titled, “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity.” He said, “To turn away from the disputes of the Catholics and the Protestants, of the Unitarian and the Trinitarian, of Old School and New School, and come to the plain words of Jesus of Nazareth, Christianity is a simple thing; very simple. It is absolute, pure Morality; absolute, pure Religion; the love of (hu)man(ity); the love of God acting without let or hindrance. . . . The only form it demands is a divine life....”

We have not changed that much from some of those nineteenth century ideas. For us religion is still more about how we live than what we believe. In the mid twentieth century Universalist minister Kenneth Patton said, (Hu)mankind has always been but one humanity. We still are. It may even be prophesied that we probably always will be. Our great problem is and has been for ages, how to live with each other, with our fellow human beings. Religion in its core is what Jesus and Buddha and Lao Tzu and all the other sages have declared it to be: loving one another.” Or as Rev. Howell put it in our reading earlier to live in Father Vega’s world.

So today on this Easter Sunday when we as Unitarian Universalists consider Jesus we are not terribly exercised over whether we should consider him as God or human, of one nature or of two, born of a virgin or born just like anyone else with a human mother and human father. Those who consider him God can sit next to those who consider him human in our congregations. What matters for all of us is whether what he taught can still guide us in our living and whether we can get past the use of his name in crusades and inquisitions.

I remember something I was taught about Jesus’ ministry in my New Testament class way back in seminary. New Testament scholar Norman Perrin said that first century Palestinian Judaism divided people into three groups of sinners; 1) Jews who could turn to their Heavenly (Parent) in penitence and hope of forgiveness; 2) Gentiles for whom hope was dubious but not impossible, and 3) Jews who made themselves like Gentiles for whom penitence was at least near to if not impossible. Perrin said that Palestinian Judaism was confronted by a crisis in Jesus’ proclaiming forgiveness to this third group. That he ate with Jews who collected taxes for the Roman oppressors, with prostitutes and with other sinners was an acted parable. This aspect of Jesus’ ministry, says Perrin, was most meaningful to his followers and most offensive to his critics. Perrin writes, “The central feature of the message of Jesus is, then, the challenge of the forgiveness of sins and the offer of the possibility of a new kind of relationship with God and with one’s fellow (humans). This was symbolized by.... a table fellowship of such gladness that it survived the crucifixion and provided the focal point for the community life of the early Christians....” In other words, Jesus taught that everyone can be loved. No one can ever do anything to make it impossible for anyone to love them ever again.

A few years back on a Sunday on my way to the UU Fellowship in Newport News I had the radio program “On Being” playing. Krista Tippett was interviewing Nikki Giovanni.

Something Giovanni said reminded me of what Perrin said about the teaching of Jesus. Giovanni said we can't really get justice. We can get revenge, but that doesn't really do us much good. We can't undo a rape or a murder, but somehow raped and rapist, those whose loved one was murdered and the murderer all have to find some way to go on with life. Going on with life is not justice, but it is something.

I was reminded of the story of Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel. Israel killed Mary Johnson's son. "Johnson lived with the pain and hatred for over a decade as Israel sat in prison in Stillwater. Johnson said of Israel, 'He was an animal to me and I felt he was where he needed to be. He needed to be caged.'

"But after 17 ½ years in prison for Israel and just months after his release, (Johnson and Israel were) more than friends. Johnson said, 'He's like my son.'" Together they began to work to try to bring not justice but healing to the families of victims and the families of perpetrators. http://archive.kare11.com/news/news_article.aspx?storyid=868961

In the reading Guy Quinlan says, "Jesus carried forward the Jewish prophetic tradition that finds the essence of religion in doing justice. For him, as for Amos and Isaiah, religious observance without social justice was a blasphemous mockery. Jesus repeatedly antagonized the powerful by reminding them that every society will be judged according to its treatment of the poor and defenseless."

But I just said I agreed with Giovanni that really there cannot be justice. What I really think is that there cannot be justice in the sense that once someone has been oppressed that oppression can be undone. But, the world can be changed. We can create laws that make slavery illegal. We can change societal ideas about marriage so that men do not think it okay to use women as property. We can begin to think about ways that economic systems can be changed so that two percent of the people don't hold most of the wealth while others starve. Justice is not about making things right between two people after one has harmed the other. Even if I pay you back what I stole from you, and I believe I should, I cannot undo the sense of dis-ease in your own home or skin I caused by robbing or mugging you. Justice is about more than the relationship between two people. Healing can happen between people but not justice. Justice is about changing the way the whole society works.

Can you imagine a world where no one has to prostitute themselves in order to survive? Can you imagine a world where no young man is so lost that he takes to carrying a gun around ready to use it? Can you imagine a world where no one is so dependent on an illegal drug for the ease of their physical or emotional pain that they will sell their soul in whatever way necessary to get it? I am not sure how to get there, but I can imagine it, and that is the first step.

In a pamphlet entitled "The Faith of a Unitarian Universalist Christian" the present day Unitarian Universalist minister Stephen Kendrick writes, "Many Unitarian Universalists choose to turn away from our Christian roots because of experiences we are very uneasy with or

troubled by. While this reaction is understandable, it strikes me that it is not ultimately healthy for a religious movement or for any of us as individual searchers. Why? Ignoring Jesus' teaching and influence distorts our own past and heritage, which is deeply steeped in Christian origins. Furthermore, as Unitarian Universalists, we seek to build a religion based not on nay saying or rejection but rather on a positive, life-affirming message. And finally, Jesus is still worth hearing out....

Kendrick says, "The reality is that no matter what religious source or tradition is most precious to us, it should not overwhelm the great freedom and invitation that Unitarian Universalism offers us. I do not want Unitarian Universalism to 'become more Christian.' My hope is that our faith, which we love, becomes as healthy, strong, and vibrant as it can be, and that we remain open and sensitive to the role that Jesus' message has played and can play in our becoming who we would be as Unitarian Universalists.

"When Jesus was asked how best to follow him, he did not offer guidelines for creedal acceptance or ask for signatures on the dotted line. Rather, he asked, did you feed the hungry? Visit the widows? Go see the prisoners? If you did, you served him in the highest sense. These are still good questions, and how we answer tells us more about our relationship to Jesus today than any coffee-hour discussion or theological quarrel.

"Mystery writer and journalist G. K. Chesterton was once asked what he thought about Christianity. He answered, 'I think it would be a good idea.'

Kendrick continues, "Truth is, I may not be a Unitarian Universalist Christian.

"But if I work at it, someday I might be. The kinds of questions Jesus asked take a lifetime to answer." <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/who-we-are/beliefs/christianity/uu-christian>

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh begins his book, Living Buddha, Living Christ this way, "Twenty years ago at a conference I attended of theologians and professors of religion, an Indian Christian friend told the assembly, 'We are going to hear about the beauties of several traditions, but that does not mean that we are going to make fruit salad.' When it came my turn to speak, I said, 'Fruit salad can be delicious! I have shared the Eucharist with Father Berrigan, and our worship became possible because of the sufferings we Vietnamese and Americans shared over many years.' Some of the Buddhists present were shocked to hear I had participated in the Eucharist, and many Christians seemed truly horrified. To me, religious life is life. I do not see any reason to spend one's whole life tasting just one kind of fruit. We human beings can be nourished by the best values of many traditions."

I like that Berrigan and Thich Nhat Hanh engaged in a table fellowship scandalous to many of their fellow religionists. It reminds me of Jesus' table fellowship. And it reminds me of the fellowship of a Unitarian Universalist community. We may choose one fruit or many fruits to nourish our souls, one religious or nonreligious tradition or many. What is the place of Jesus

in Unitarian Universalism? The place of any prophet or religious figure among us. One we may choose to learn from, to follow, or to reject, honoring always the different choices of those around us.

Prayer: "Being the Resurrection" by Rev. Victoria Weinstein

"The stone has got to be rolled back from the tomb again and again every year.
Roll up your sleeves.

"He is not coming back, you know.
He is not coming back unless it is we who rise for him
We who lay healing hands on the reviled and rejected like he did
on his behalf --
We who rage for righteousness in his insistent voice
We who love the sinner, even knowing that "the sinner" is no farther off than our own heartbeat

"He will not be back to join us at the table
To share God's extravagant banquet
God's love feast, *all are invited, come as you are*
And so it is you and I who must feast for him
Must say the grace and break the bread and pass it to the left
and dish up the broiled fish (or pour the wine) and pass it to the right.
And treat each one so tenderly
as though just this morning (that person) made the personal effort
to make it back from heaven, or from hell
but certainly from death
to be by our side.

"Because if by some miracle (and why not a miracle?)
He did come back
Wouldn't he want to see us like this?
Wouldn't it be a miracle to live for just one day
So that if he did, by some amazing feat
come riding into town
He could take a look around and say
'This is what I meant!'

"And we could say
it took us a long time...
but we finally figured it out.

"Oh, let us live to make it so.

"You are the resurrection and the life."

