



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Liberating Christ,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 15, 2011

Over a year ago I preached a sermon called “Saving Jesus.” I borrowed that title from my seminary professor Carter Heyward, whose book *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right* has had a big influence on me. Back then I said that sermon had a part two, which I’m finally getting around to.

When my daughter asked me, “What are you preaching on?,” and I told her the title was “Liberating Christ,”¹ she responded with one word: “Scary.” For religious liberals, the words Jesus and Christ can evoke images that are scary--hierarchal, patriarchal religion that has been used by some to exclude and oppress.

So if this makes you nervous, please bear with me. My hope today is to show you that there are more expansive, more liberating understandings of Christ than you may be aware of. I’m convinced we need to liberate Christ from interpretations that are oppressive and harmful. And doing this, we may come to understandings of Christ will be liberating for us.

But first, a little background. Do you know what the word Christ means? It comes from the Greek, and it means “anointed one.” Messiah is the same word in Hebrew is. It means basically, “the one we have been waiting for.”

Christ is not Jesus’ last name. If he had a last name, it would be “of Nazareth.” Christ is a title, a claim that gets made about Jesus. Sometimes people say, “Jesus the Christ.” It can be helpful to make a distinction between the two. Jesus was the itinerant preacher and teacher who was killed for threatening the status quo. Jesus became Christ over time, as people made faith claims about him in the generations following his death.

The church I grew up in has a large, full-length portrayal of Jesus at the front, kind of like what we have here. In that church, Jesus is blond-haired and blue-eyed, and he’s wearing a white robe. He’s a lot cleaner than an itinerant preacher from the dusty roads of Galilee ought to be. I love the greens and blues around Jesus in our window, and how, as Sally has observed, he turns from a light-skinned Jesus to a dark-skinned Jesus every evening. Before I ever came here, I heard a story about a visitor here who was surprised to see Jesus front and center. She mentioned this to

¹ I borrowed this sermon title from the book *Liberating Christ*, by Lisa Isherwood.

an usher, who said, “Yes, we have Jesus here, but you’ll notice that his feet are planted firmly on the ground.”

That’s actually a helpful way to think about the difference between Jesus and Christ. One’s earthy, and the other is more ethereal and mystical. Scholars talk about the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Jesus is the human being, the one who walked the earth; Christ is well, more complicated.

In my last year in seminary I had the chance to be a teaching assistant for Carter Heyward’s class in Christology. Just as theology is the study of the nature of God, Christology is the study of the nature of Christ.

In that class, we began by separating those words Jesus and Christ. We looked at our own life experiences and how they had shaped our assumptions and beliefs. We looked critically at how the images of Christ that developed over the centuries were influenced by the culture Christianity grew up in. We explored how different accounts of Jesus portray him in different ways.

You know, don’t you, that those stories in the Bible were shaped and influenced by the people who told them? It’s impossible to separate the development of Christianity from the Graeco-Roman culture it grew up in. That culture was patriarchal--men had most of the power. It was hierarchal--there was a pecking order, with a ruler at the top. It was militaristic--based on the use of force to maintain control and to gain wealth. And it was part of an empire--an expanding political force that was ruled from Rome and used any means necessary to get what it wanted and to crush its enemies.

So is it any wonder that the peasant revolutionary named Jesus got turned into Christ, the head of the church in which only men could be clergy, Christ the one and only, Christ the righteous warrior, Christ the king? These are very different images than Jesus as the good shepherd or the suffering servant, willing to lay down his life rather than betray his friends or his ideals.

Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether says, “Christology has been used as an instrument of oppression and hence needs to be liberated in order to retain its original meaning as a vision and vehicle of redemptive life.” In other words, the original intent was to liberate. Jesus said, “I came that you might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). But what the church has done with Jesus over the past two thousand years has often not been life-giving.

John Dominic Crossan says that Jesus never intended to be at the center of the message he was proclaiming but wanted to help people engage with a liberating God in a more direct way. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to the ragtag group of followers, “You are the light of the world.” He didn’t claim that he was that light. He said, “You are the light.” For much of its history, the church didn’t say that to the people.

Jesus was in touch with and full of the holy spirit, what many of us now would call the spirit of life. He was so full of this spirit that he had the audacity to speak truth to power, criticizing the

oppressive authorities of the day. He befriended those at the margins--women, people with disabilities, tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor. He embodied a spirit that was larger than himself.

If he could speak to us now, I imagine Jesus would look at the way he has been packaged by the church and by popular culture, and would ask, befuddled, "What happened?" Because several hundred years after Jesus was killed, when the early church joined with the Roman empire, it began to turn him into an imperial Christ that looked more like a king than a peasant revolutionary. This Christ became an instrument of oppression to those who fell outside the church's boundaries. Christ was male, so women would not be ordained as clergy. Even though Jesus and the disciples were all Jewish, before long the church was trying to distance itself from Judaism, even blaming the death of Jesus on the Jews. When Christianity became allied with Rome's imperial power, missionaries and armies went forth together to conquer foreign lands and convert the infidels in the name of Christ and emperor.

Some say that because of this history the idea and image of Christ is beyond redemption, and should be discarded. I say we need to reclaim images of Christ that are liberating and redemptive. We could begin this work by liberating our concept of Christ from the person of Jesus. What if we began to understand Christ not as a single being, but rather, as a spirit, a power that is alive and at work in the world? A spirit that was certainly alive in Jesus of Nazareth, but not limited to him.

In words I put at the top of the order of service today, Carter Heyward says, "In worshipping Jesus as the Christ, the Son, the Savior, we close our eyes to the possibility of actually seeing that the sacred liberating Spirit is as incarnate here and now among us as She was in Jesus of Nazareth."

Some UUs are wary of Jesus and Christ because they are presented as the only way, and we know that that isn't right. Some throw the baby out with the bath water--because there are aspects of Christianity they disagree with, or are intimidated or angered by, they reject the whole thing, missing out of what is, even with its problems, a rich and deep and life-affirming tradition. Let's not blame the Spirit for what the church has done.

What if we were open, as Carter says, to the possibility that "the sacred liberating Spirit is as incarnate here and now among us as she was in Jesus of Nazareth"? How might that change us?

What if we saw Christ as not limited to the person of Jesus, but as that Spirit which goes where it will, which exists to bless us and, when necessary, disturb us? Can we imagine new and liberating ways that spirit might be embodied? Then we begin to see that Christ is not a man. Christ is not white. Christ is not straight. Christ is not necessarily found in the church, as much as out in the street with the people. Especially with those the church and society have tended to marginalize. Where any of us are in touch with our own humanity, our own brokenness, that is where we are most likely to encounter that Spirit of love and of justice.

Out of the struggle for liberation have come a host of visions of a more liberating Christ. The oldest is the Black Christ, first proclaimed in Africa as early as 1700. In Central America there is Christ the Liberator, in both male and female forms, who lives among the poorest of the poor.

There is the queer Christ, who stands with those who find themselves outside the sexual mainstream. Feminist theologians offer an image of Sophia, Christ as holy wisdom.

To touch and be touched by this Christic spirit is to be filled with power to help and to heal, to work for liberation--others' and your own. It is to be called into relationship, even with, especially with, people who are different from you, and to see them as sisters and brothers, to see in them the face of God. It is to see yourself as blessing the world, like the poet in our reading² today who rides out

in the falling light
alone, wishing, or praying,
for particular good to particular beings
on one small road in a huge world

You have that power too--to wish or pray that good will come to those you know and those you love and those in need. This is my prayer, that you will know the presence of that Spirit, that it will inspire and empower you to bless and to heal and to help.

"The horse bears me along, like grace," the poet says. What if we sensed the presence of the holy spirit like that--like that horse, strong and gentle, powerful and supportive?

The horse bears me along, like grace
making me better than what I am,
and what I think or say or see
is whole in these moments, is neither
small nor broken.

This is how I experience the body of Christ--as all of us, inspired by the spirit, moving through our days and our lives. All of us, helping and blessing those we encounter, saying "be well, be glad," helping to heal and bless our world.

Be well. Be glad. Be blessed. Be a blessing.

Amen.

² Linda McCarriston, "Riding Out at Evening."