

“Saving Jesus,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on February 28, 2010

My sermon today has a subtitle. The whole thing is “Saving Jesus--From Those who are Right.” I’m borrowing this title from a book by the same name, which was written by Carter Heyward, who taught theology where I went to divinity school.

Though I didn’t meet her until I went there, Carter and I both grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina. Her mother and my grandmother were in the same book club. We discovered that we had gone to the same elementary school. She was one of the first women to be ordained to the Episcopal priesthood. She’s spent her life being a courageous troublemaker for justice. I had the privilege of being her teaching assistant one semester, and I continue to be inspired by her life and work.

Carter says she originally thought of her book *Saving Jesus* as a response to the religious right. She wanted to challenge the ways Christian fundamentalism has distorted Jesus’ message. But she came to see “those who are right” as not only the Religious Right, but “all of us whenever we assume that we know it all or that our way is the only way to think or act.”¹ She sees the ministry of Jesus as a reminder that we are called, not to be right, but to be in right relation with one another. She says that, focusing on being right, the church has actually often gotten Jesus wrong.

This is the first of a two-part sermon series. After “Saving Jesus,” will come one called “Liberating Christ,” which I’ll preach sometime after Easter. I borrowed that from a book title too!

I grew up in a liberal Episcopal church in downtown Charlotte, NC. When I was a teenager the church started a soup kitchen to feed the people who were often hanging around outside its doors. From that church I received a love of singing hymns, and I got to know a bunch of Bible stories, and I learned about the power of community; the power and blessing of being in a place where people know you and love you.

In that church, kind of like here, there is a full-length picture of Jesus up at the center of the chancel. There’s it’s part of the altar. Rather than a window, that one is a mosaic, made of hundreds, if not thousands of little tiles. My children think it’s kind of kitschy.

The funny thing is, I don’t recall us talking about Jesus much in that church. I think we may have been embarrassed by Jesus. In the South in the 60s and 70s, that church,

¹ Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right: Rethinking what it means to be Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

made up of mostly progressive people, had good reason to be troubled by the way Jesus got presented, especially around there. In the South you still can drive down the road and see hand painted signs that read “Jesus Saves.” Back then Jim and Tammy Fae Bakker--remember them?--had their PTL television network in Charlotte. Like many TV evangelists, they liked to call on his name--Ja-hee-sus--but didn't have much to say about how he lived or what he stood for.

I think the progressive Christians in my church were troubled by some of the things that got done in Jesus' name. By how people who were against school desegregation and civil rights, who celebrated capital punishment and fought against the equal rights amendment; how they said they were followers of Jesus and were happy to claim his name. So we quietly did things that we thought Jesus would do, like feeding the hungry at the soup kitchen, and welcoming anyone who came through our doors, but it seemed we were reluctant to talk about Jesus or claim him as our own. And the rituals of the church didn't help--they said more about how he was born (of a virgin) and how and why he died (on the cross for our sins) than about how he lived.

I was shocked one day when an aunt of mine, who sang in the church choir, told me that if she had a problem with Christianity, it was Jesus, that if she wasn't Christian, she'd probably be Buddhist. I thought to myself, “You can say that here?” I think this is true for some of us UUs too. Even though our roots are in the Jewish and Christian traditions, many of us have moved away from those roots, and away from even talking about Jesus. I don't know if we are embarrassed, or angry or simply indifferent, but I do know that we lose something when we push Jesus away. For one, we allow others to define who he was and what he means. And Jesus matters. As the center of what is still the dominant religion in our country, how he gets interpreted has a real impact on our society and on public policy.

Not long before I became a parent, I started attending a UU church. At the time I thought I had pretty much set Christianity aside. In that church I found a vibrant spiritual community where I could wrestle with my questions and practice being more true to who I was. And I thrived there, discovering a spiritual life and a voice I didn't know I had. But the spiritual journey is, if anything, one of surprises. I found myself reading books about religion. Some of the ones I liked best were by progressive Christian authors. It was a process of, as the Jesus scholar Marcus Borg says, “meeting Jesus again for the first time.”

When I hear someone invoke the name of Jesus these days, I want to ask, “Which Jesus are you talking about?” The blonde-haired, blue-eyed one, often robed in white, who's described as a king, a powerful ruler, sitting at the right hand of God? Or the one I imagine when I read the gospels? The one in dusty clothes, the peasant revolutionary who challenged the oppressive authorities of his day? The one who was concerned for those pushed to the margins—children, lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes. The one who saved his harshest words for the Pharisees, those most concerned with rules and regulations and doing religion right.

Thinking about the Christian Right when she wrote *Saving Jesus* about ten years ago, Carter Heyward noticed that they didn't actually talk much about the man from Nazareth. She says in those days they had more to say about Bill Clinton's sex life and whether Tinky Winky, one of the Teletubbies, was gay. Remember those days? She thinks there are two reasons that fundamentalists do this. "First," she says, "it's hard not to read the biblical stories of Jesus as testimonies to the power of God's special love for the poor and outcasts among us." This attention to those at the margins makes them uncomfortable. Second, she says that Jesus, who kept company with sinners and prostitutes and tax collectors, "is kept in the background precisely so that (his image) as Lord and King of all can be fashioned and adored." In other words, they see Jesus one who wanted to be Lord, to be a moralist, to oppose his enemies, and to require obedience. Heyward says you see this in "adversarial posturing of self-absorbed Christian politicians and leaders who teach fear of those different from them, a fear that too often leads to hatred and violence."

This is nowhere more apparent than around the issue of homosexuality. Some people selectively quote a couple of Bible verses out of context to make their case that homosexuality is wrong. But do you know what Jesus had say about homosexuality? According to the texts we have, not one word. His ministry was not about exclusion, but about reaching out to people and welcoming them, especially those marginalized by society: "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you."

I'm not interested in an authoritarian, moralistic Jesus. Nor is that Jesus the one I find in the gospels. If you are inclined to push Jesus away because of what gets done in his name, I encourage you to take another look. Listen to the stories of poor people in Central America, who read their Bibles and started to ask, "What does it mean when Jesus says, 'Blessed are you who are poor'?" In those gospel accounts they saw Jesus standing with the underside of society, with those who are marginalized and oppressed. Out of this came liberation theology, the belief that those at the margins have a clearer view of what is going on; that you are more likely to see God in the face of a homeless person on the street than among the rich and powerful.

If you are inclined to dismiss Jesus, you might want to read Marcus Borg and see what a progressive understanding of Jesus looks like. You may have noticed that I haven't used the word 'Christ' today. Christ is not Jesus' last name, it's a claim that gets made about him, that means literally "anointed one," or "the one we've been waiting for." I'll say more about how we might understand this idea of Christ in that next sermon. For now I'll say that I've never understood those preachers who say things like "Accept Jesus Christ and believe on his name." I don't know what that means. It sounds like they're saying, "If you believe the right thing and say the right words, then you don't need to worry any more about it."

That is not my experience of the religious life at all. If Jesus were with us today, he would ask us to struggle with his teachings, to resist easy answers, to love and serve others, to be open to being changed. In our reading this morning, the Sufi mystic Rumi says Jesus was one who “was teaching in a new way.”² Rumi understood this 750 years ago, but over the last couple of centuries, the church has mostly not gotten this, and has portrayed Jesus in a patriarchal, hierarchical, controlling way. By elevating him, they have also domesticated him--a king on a throne is not one who is going to threaten the status quo.

Rumi says Jesus only has power when humans are tender hearted and open, that he flees from “violence and coldness toward God.” The good news is that we are not called to be right, or perfect, or blameless. We are called to be human, to be openhearted. We are not called to be right, but to be in right relationship with one another.

“Blessed are you who are poor,” Jesus said, “for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh... Judge not, and you will not be judged. Condemn not, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:20-21, 37).

At the start of the gospel of John, a cynic asks about Jesus: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” One of the disciples responds, “Come and see.” Two thousand years later, that is still the invitation. Come and see. Bring an open heart and an open mind, a willingness to be changed and even to be set free. Come and see.

Amen.

² Jalal al-Din Rumi, “What Jesus Runs Away From,” translated by Coleman Barks.