

Who Was Jesus?

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Pacific Unitarian Church

I was raised on the kind and warm Jesus portrayed in Unitarian Sunday schools that loved and welcomed birds and little children. The Jesus I knew as a kid cared for living things, taught us to care for our friends and performed some really neat tricks with bread, fish and wine. As a teenager I went to the rock opera “Jesus Christ Superstar” and I can remember when King Herod taunted the quiet man, “show me you’re no fool, walk across my swimming pool.” Later I satirized Jesus with the country song, “Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz, my friends all have Porsches, I must make amends.” As a young adult, finished now with at least the drugs and rock & roll, I wandered into the American Baptist Church and I can remember the preacher railing on about the economics of sin, in short St. Paul’s theory that Jesus was sent down to buy back the sins of humanity and invite all of us only to believe in Him and be saved. The preacher leaned across the pulpit and spoke with guttural condemnation “And we didn’t buy in.” Thus Jesus died without nearly the number of subscribers his boss wanted him to bring back.

So which Jesus am I left with today, in middle age, as a minister of the Gospel? Well, none of the above. Because I have come to believe in what the theologian Marcus Borg (see *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*) calls the Pre-Easter Jesus, the man, the one who proclaimed the Golden Rule and the one who spoke of the end of time, imploring us to do right unto others. I have firmly rejected the Post-Easter Jesus of Paul, the one who died for our sins. And I say, with no offense intended, I find excusing his death on the cross as some kind of deal as, well, kind of sick. I love the Resurrection story for its hope, but I accept and understand that it is a story like so many others.

I begin my exploration today with the few facts we have about Jesus, aware, as Rudolf Bultman once observed, that “seeking the historical Jesus is like looking down a deep well and all we see is our own reflection.” Prophet, healer, magician, radical, cynic, philosopher, Jew, demi-god, or as some would say myth, Jesus of Nazareth is an enigma, a mystery, a symbol, an idol and a dream. Who was this guy anyway? We actually do know a few things about him. Modern scholarship, using secondary sources, have determined that he was born about the year 4 BCE, in Northern Israel, a little backwater of Nazareth. His mother, who was not a virgin, was, we believe, much younger than his father. The Greek word for maiden, young woman, has been mistakenly translated to

virgin. His father Joseph was by all account a techatron, Greek for laborer, not carpenter. We know nothing of his younger life.

Nothing. There are a lot of stories of course, about him showing up the elders in the temple, and making clay pigeons come to life, but they are legend. He probably spoke some of three languages: his native tongue Aramaic, Hebrew and some Greek. The Near East was Greek-speaking thanks to the conquests of Alexander the Great, much like English is the international language of commerce today. Of the four gospels in the bible, Mark is the earliest, written some 35 years after he died and written primarily for the Jewish population of which Jesus was a part. Matthew and Luke are much later renditions, in which the virgin birth story was added; and John was written around the year 100.

What we do know of his life is mostly from Mark and other outside sources. Jesus was a follower of the radical prophet John the Baptist, who proclaimed that the end of the world was near and that Jews should prepare themselves with a ritual purification. John and his followers were probably a group known as the Essenes, separatists who had left the cities and were living in small tent communities in the wilderness preparing for the end of the world. The Dead Sea Scrolls are the documents of such a community. It is likely that above all else, Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet. That is, he believed that the end of the world was at hand and that we must

prepare our hearts by giving away our wealth to the poor and suffering the indignities of the powerful in preparation for that end. Now this won't be the warm and fuzzy Jesus of your Sunday school coloring books. This Jesus believed in the world being turned on its head, "the first shall be last and the last shall be first" is a saying attested in each Gospel and in other Essean literature. This was not a blond, blue-eyed guy like the man who is hugging little children. This was a wild-eyed revolutionary who believed that the end of the world was upon us. We might not like the image, and I know of very few Christians that live by that image, but there you are. Of this most serious scholars agree. His language was abrupt and crude; not the flowery King James "verily I say unto you" but the more street wise Aramaic in which he told his disciples to "shut up and sit down".

The facts of his life are these: he lived, he taught a radical message, and he died a horrible death, most likely without a trial at all for his massive disturbance of the peace. Almost everything else we know about the man is myth. But while his essential message may not be what we want to hear, the myth and the lessons he taught us hold tremendous treasure. It is in those lessons that I find the power of the man.

Who was Jesus beyond the man? Some say, with rather convincing evidence, that he was another in a long series of “spirit people”, demi-god like figures like the Greek God Dionysus and the Egyptian God Osiris, who came to earth to bring completion and wholeness to humanity. The so-called Gnostics believed that the end of the world Jesus spoke of was only a death unto the suffering of life; they believed that Jesus was part of a complicated myth of redemption. A myth in which the “Abba” (Jesus’ Aramaic word for God which means “Daddy”) had sent him as a spiritual bridegroom to resurrect the marriage between the Goddess earth and the God father sky in the guise of love for humanity. The cross references between the language of the gospels and the imagery of Greek, Egyptian and Near Eastern religions is startling. Some of the symbols such as the chalice, used for the Last Supper, come right out of the goddess cults of Canaanite Mesopotamia two thousand years before Jesus was born. The essential message of this myth is that Jesus was himself a Jewish version of the mythological “savior” which pagan religions had recognized for thousands of years, and that he came to symbolize the initiation and transformation of the sinful into a cult of love. A myth which claims that Jesus never really died, because he never really lived. And that his relationships to the marginal in his society and to women was meant to deepen the spiritual understandings of

patriarchal Judaism. Somehow say these folks, the early church took this story and tried to make history out of it, and in so doing missed the boat entirely, creating some twisted and sick commercial deal: One dead Jesus for our eternal salvation.

Others have claimed that the disappearance of his body on Easter morning only meant that he didn't die on the cross and in fact he traveled to southern France where there have been found early writings attesting to his presence in the middle of first century. And then, of course, there is the traditionally sanctioned answer, that Jesus was somehow both man and God, sent down from heaven to redeem us for our sins.

For me all of these explanations miss the point. The point is not to "discover" the true Jesus, but rather to find the message which has the most meaning for you. While I do believe that there really was a man named Jesus who had tremendous charisma and power, I really don't care if he lived or died, or even if he ate his Wheaties each morning. What I care about is what he means to me and to you and to millions of others who are looking for a hero, a symbol to give their life meaning. Here I think that catchy phrase that was popular a few years back has some punch to it: "What would Jesus do?" What would Jesus do if he were in your shoes facing a terminal illness, a dying parent, bankruptcy, divorce, an unfaithful

spouse, a child we can't seem to reach, the poor and the downtrodden who face us each day? The answer must be in that Jesus which has power for your life to move towards change. Whichever Jesus you choose to believe in, you can't go wrong in finding help. Even if you don't believe that Jesus has any meaning in your life, I hope that what I am about to suggest will help you understand the power of Jesus for others in their lives.

Who was Jesus? Perhaps he was the healer. The one who defied expectations and laws to simply touch and heal those in need. One of my favorite stories is when he healed the blind man on the Sabbath, or the chronically menstruating woman on the Sabbath, or the lepers all on the Sabbath. Why? Because compassion for those who are suffering knows no conditions. Beyond the laws, the customs, the prejudices, and the national hatreds, Jesus represents the Buddha heart of love: "Just do it! Just love." Jesus as healer holds great meaning for me personally. I'm reminded of him each time I give a wino five bucks. I know he will spend it on drink - so what? For a moment there is peace.

Who was Jesus? Perhaps he is the redeemer, not for our depraved nature but for our brokenness, which is really all the word sin means. We are all broken. All in need of forgiveness. Jesus taught us though, that we need not follow the laws and make a submission

to some “higher power,” but simply believe that we are worthy in and of ourselves and that no fault, no mistake, is so great that it cannot be forgiven. He called it faith. A faith that we can always be made whole again. And yes, while he called for a reversal of the world order, was he not also calling for a reversal of the human condition. Even the richest amongst us suffer, how can they find forgiveness? The real power of Holy Week is for me, not in the orthodox sense of payment for guilt, but in the transformation from triumphant life, to falling down, to even the death of my ego, and the grace which gives me life again. I have fallen, you have fallen, we all stumble. But a new day will come and we will start again.

Who was Jesus? The one who suffered. We spiritual liberals like to poo-poo the symbol of the cross as barbaric, and in many ways it is; the Roman cross was the most barbaric form of death imaginable. But its symbolism is powerful to those who ARE suffering. Not because they have good company in Jesus, but because they understand that God suffers with them. The shortest line in the entire bible is in Luke: “He wept.” Here was a man who understood what the Buddha had understood. Life does hurt. There is pain. But there is a way beyond that pain. Here the feminine side to the mysteries of Jesus come through in shining glory. Jesus was the first world prophet to EVER welcome women into his community. Why? Because women understood the essential nature

of suffering as something we go through not around. The feminine archetype of Jesus, claimed the great Carl Jung, was in his acceptance of suffering, not in resignation, but in recognition. Yes, we suffer and we must stand by those who are suffering, for only in common understanding does it pass. One of my favorite Country ballads comes from Bonnie Raitt when she sings: 'I want someone to hold me, not some fool to ask me why.'

Who was Jesus? He was a peaceful warrior. The power and mystery of non-violent resistance and loving thy enemy has been shown to be the most sustainable and effective agent of change on earth. South Africa, India, our own civil rights movement. What would Jesus do with Sept. 11th? Hold the suffering, speak out in love? Who can say? The most courageous billboard I saw after the 11th was at a little Christian church down the street from our house. It read: "Jesus said 'Love thy enemies'."

Who was Jesus? For me above all else, he was a great teacher. Not just in such niceties as the Golden Rule, but in the harder lessons in life. Lessons such as: nothing is gained without sacrifice, the domain of the Spirit is at hand and already within you, that with eyes to see and open heart you too can know that you are loved and redeemed, as you are.

I met Sister Mary Alice almost 20 years ago working for a credit union. She had come in to take out a personal line of credit to help someone with their medical bills. Part of my job was to ask her why she needed this money. I mean, didn't they have other means. She had one of those truly brilliant faces, she smiled and her eyes twinkled. It was the first time I have heard what has become a rallying cry for universal health care "Without insurance, life turns out differently." This was her insurance for this man. "This man" was an elderly gentleman that had no family and who she had met only recently. He had diabetes and she was paying for dialysis so that he might live a few more years. I was a little more arrogant then. "But sister" I asked, "why risk this money for a man who might not live for long anyway?" Still smiling, she touched my hand. "Because young man, Jesus would want me to do it, I am called to do it." I shook my head and approved the loan.

Only recently have I come to understand which Jesus she was speaking of in this story. It's not about reason or certainty, it's about faith. And faith, a faith in life and life's promise, is what Jesus is really about. Amen.