

What A Lot of Christians Don't Know About Jesus

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Last June, I accepted an invitation to preach at the Metropolitan Community Church. The MCC church was founded as a Christian Church with a special mission of inclusion for gay and lesbian Christian families. I was pleased to receive the invitation: our church and theirs have a cordial relationship from long ago, when they got their start here in Omaha. We lent them space thirty years ago when they were getting organized. We renewed that friendship more recently when we have been involved in working together over the past two years on the Community Meals program which serves meals to those in our neighborhood who could use a good meal, mid-day, on Saturday. Still, I was flattered a bit to be asked because we are different theologically and it is rare that a Christian group is willing to invite a heretic like me. I have never been the main speaker at a Sunday service in a Christian Church before. I've preached in some interfaith venues, once in a prison, but never as a part of regular worship. It is true we are both considered marginal by the orthodox and the fundamentalists, but it is not that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. I think their pastor felt more confident that a heretic like me would embrace his congregation than he felt confident in many of his Christian brothers and sisters.

Frankly, I'm not much of a Jesus person. In fact the Jesus I read about in seminary wasn't very interesting to me. Fortunately, recent scholarship on the historical Jesus suggests a different take on Jesus, one that is far more friendly to my theological take on things and to the views of many of us. In preparing to talk to the Christians at MCC, I thought both about our differences and the things we have in common and I started with the odd fact

that despite our theological differences, all over the country UU's supported and befriended MCC congregations getting their start. In fact the very first UU congregation I served, in Augusta, Georgia in 1980, was home to a small group trying to start an MCC congregation. A few years ago at our UUA General Assembly we had a nice thank you from an MCC national leader for the friendship over the years. I started my sermon to the church by talking a bit about those things and then I said to them:

“One thing we have in common is that we are not always welcome in faith gatherings. We find ourselves rejected and on the margins. I never quite thought about the strangeness of that before. Since I began in ministry 30 years ago, our UU churches have had a pretty good relationship with the gay and lesbian community and, as time went on, the transgender community. Even then, I had gay and lesbian colleagues in ministry. So, in some ways I never thought about the fact that we, MCC and UU's, have had a friendly relationship during the last 3 decades. But then, when I was about to come and talk to you, I realized how odd it was—not so much that we were friends with you but that given you are Jesus people, how come the other Jesus people were not being your best friends? How come all these many Christians who say their aim is to follow Jesus were casting us out? At one level we know why. Lots of Christian churches aren't too happy about people who aren't Christians and they are not willing to welcome GLBT folks fully. And I have taken for granted for a long time that that is how the Christian churches are. That, in fact, is one reason I became a Unitarian Universalist as an adult. When I was in my 20's and looking for a church that was loving and accepting of me on an equal basis with everyone else. Back then in the 1970's, the only religious groups I knew that

accepted women on an equal basis with men, at least in theory, were the Quakers and the Unitarian Universalists.

I tried the Quakers and found I couldn't sit in quiet meditation for an hour, so the only thing left was Unitarian Universalists. Women were trying to seek ordination in other denominations, but at that time the liberal Episcopalians were biting the hands of women priests who offered them communion and certainly wouldn't invite them as pastors, the Dutch Reformed, whose bylaws invited all persons who met certain criteria to apply for ordination, had long debates as to whether women could be considered persons, the Catholics preferred then, as they still do, to hang on to the middle eastern customs of the time of Jesus of having women separate and unequal, than to look at how Jesus flouted those customs and invited women to the table. So that may be something else I have in common with you. I looked for a church in which I would not be a second class person, a lesser person, or a person who was considered morally inferior due to the way God created me in my case, female. We all know that one of the most segregated hours of the week, racially, is Sunday Morning. I have an acquaintance who is African American and whose wife is of Bohemian ethnicity. He told me they had to search a pretty long time to find a Christian church that they both felt accepted in as an interracial couple. As I said, although I didn't like that narrowness, I had got so used to it. I took it for granted that many of you, me, my friend and his wife, and all kinds of other people didn't feel we could be welcome in most Christian churches simply because of who we are. I am used to taking it for granted, but then when I thought about it and when I thought about what I might say in a church where you are all about following Jesus, I thought: What's up with

that? I am not an expert or anything, but I have read a lot about Jesus, I have studied religion extensively, and I am absolutely certain that rejecting me, and you, and interracial couples, and immigrants, and all the people who are not part of our religion, is not at all what Jesus was about. It's the opposite of what Jesus was about. Indeed, it reminds me of the line in the movie *Hannah and Her Sisters* when a character says, "If Jesus came back and saw what's going on in his name, he'd never stop throwing up..."

Somehow, somewhere, most Christians stopped following Jesus and started following the Pharisees. It is hard for someone who really believes in the teachings of Jesus to find a place in most Christian churches. I like what Jesus taught. I think he had most things right. But I think too many of those who followed him, in fact most who followed him, got his message screwed up. I think we know that, but I want to remind us all of what he taught that was a part of his revolutionary religious thought.

The gospels, which tell stories of Jesus, were not, as you know, written as histories. Many of the words attributed to him are later additions to the story. Each gospel has a different take on Jesus. Some of the stories are historically true and others are not. They contradict each other. Some talk about the Christ of faith, how people thought about Jesus after he died, and others are stories about an historical human being, a man who was trying to start a revolution within the Jewish religion of his day. Rabbi Jesus some of us call him. It is this second Jesus, the historical man who was challenging the religious ideas of his day, and still challenges us today. I want to talk to you this morning about his most important challenge to Judaism then and to all of us now.

In first century Palestinian Judaism, purity was very important. In the religion of that time you did not go to the temple without taking part in certain purification rituals. If you touched a person considered unclean: a leper, a woman who was having her period, a dead person, members of certain professions such as tax collectors or prostitutes, those living in poverty, you yourself would become unclean. Scholar Marcus Borg tells us that some of purity was determined at birth. Some of us were considered to be at birth purer than others. And there were degrees of purity: The Levites and priests were the purest, then came those others who were Jewish by birth, then came converts to Judaism.

Toward the bottom of the list were “bastards,” and eunuchs. Whom you could have sex with and even the time of the month you could have sex was a part of the purity system. Homosexuality and sex with menstruating women was considered impure. One of the reasons in the story of the good Samaritan that no one helped the man who was lying at the side of the road is that they thought he was a dead and therefore unclean. Touching a dead body that would require them to ritually purify themselves and they didn’t have the time.

You can get a bit of a sense of what the purity system was like if you think of the caste system of India or if you think of how some of the more rigid Middle Eastern cultures regard women and keep them separated. This may seem odd to us, but perhaps if you think of it as a culture trying to survive you can understand it. The Jewish culture saw the culture around them, particularly the Romans, as being unholy while trying to follow the Biblical injunction to “Be holy as God is Holy!” A lot of the things that the Romans were up to are things we all might not want to have influencing our family life today, so

we can understand how they might make customs and rituals to set themselves a part. Still we see lots of echoes of that old purity system today. Last spring a Catholic church threatened to pull out of our interfaith gathering for fear that mingling with other groups, especially yours and ours, might somehow taint them. Of course, many, in the Christian religion seem to be stuck in 2000 year old notions of purity when it comes to women, GBLT persons, sexuality in general, and even such things as illness. The idea that some Christians voiced that AIDS was God's punishment for impurity is an ancient notion about sickness that was common in the first century.

What Jesus taught and did that was so disturbing and revolutionary was that he challenged the purity system. He said that compassion was far more important to God than rituals and purity. He mingled with people considered untouchable by devout Jews: prostitutes, tax collectors, the sick and disabled, even gentiles and women. Rather than encouraging people to the public piety of saying the right prayers and ritual observances of cleansing and purity, he said that what God wanted of us was to heal the sick, visit those in prison, help the poor, show compassion to those whom society despises.

In first century Palestine, one of the ways of being pure was to refrain from eating a meal with those who were unclean as the tax collectors and the sinners in the biblical passage. The word "sinner" in that Palestinian Jewish context did not mean all of us who have failed to live up to the best that is in us, or who have done bad things, it meant the people who were considered "impure." So the Pharisees were upset with Jesus because he was ignoring these purity laws: he wasn't fasting, and he was telling people that what God

wanted was not holiness in the sense of purity, but rather compassion. That we are to be compassionate as God is compassionate. In all the stories in which Jesus is healing, he is offending the purity system by touching the sick and the crippled who were considered impure and he does so to exercise compassion. He hangs around with women, including a former prostitute. Worst of all, he ate with outcasts. In Jesus' time, inclusion and exclusion was most clearly shown by whom you eat with, who is allowed at your table. Jesus was radical in that he included the people that no one else did. He was trying to replace a gospel of purity with a gospel of love and compassion.

So where do all these people who claim to be following Jesus get the notion that they should be the purity police? Why is it so hard to find a Christian Church that puts compassion and radical inclusion first? In other words, why was it the non-Christian UU's who most fully included women? Why did so many MCC churches have to come to a non-Christian church like us UU's to find a place that they could meet when they were getting started? Why does my friend have to search high and low for a Christian church that he can go to with his wife where they won't, as he says, "give them attitude" because they are a mixed couple? Why, when your Pastor Tom and I were searching for clergy who would marry couples gay and lesbian couples in Iowa did we only manage to come up with a handful of clergy serving in Christian churches who were allowed and willing to perform those services?

Why, in other words, is so much of Christianity concerned about the purity systems reminiscent of ancient Palestinian Judaism and the Pharisees, rather leading the way on

inclusion and compassion? Of course there are many wonderful exceptions within Christianity, groups that help the poor and the outcast around the world, groups that help the sick, work for justice, include all kinds of people, don't care about purity and rules but about love and justice. Still, if you look at people leading the charge to exclude and purify they are more likely than not doing it in the name of Jesus. Now as someone who is not a Christian I can follow Jesus' gospel of compassion and inclusion the best I can. I know first hand what it is like to go to churches in which I am not fully included. As a Universalist, as someone whose religion teaches that there is no elect, that we are all beloved, I preach the gospel of inclusion in our church. In every church I serve I ask the congregation to open their arms wider and learn to include more people and for the most part they have. Many of us are good at including people who were outcasts in the same way that we were, but we have to learn to include people who are outcasts for different reasons. One of the hymns we sing in our congregation is "We're gonna sit at the Welcome Table," a gospel hymn that reminds us that in the Kingdom of God we all sit down and eat together as the beloved community, as equal partners in serving the holy. I am proud of how far we have come even while I know that there is still more we can do to set the table. I can follow Jesus' call to inclusion and compassion, but I can't clear his name. Only you Christians can do that. And you can only do that by proclaiming that it was Jesus who taught a gospel of the Welcome Table, that is not just the people like us but the people we despise and cast out who are included, it is not the people like us but it is the Samaritan, the illegal immigrant, the homeless, the prisoner, the poor, the sick, and all the rest who are our neighbors."

This is basically what I said to our neighbors in my sermon. I ended by encouraging the people at the MCC church to challenge their fellow Christians to stop following the Pharisees in their obsession with purity and to give their whole attention to following Jesus' teachings of inclusion and compassion.

My message to us as UU's is a little different. The message of inclusion and compassion is the center of our Universalist heritage, and therefore central to who we are. But I think it is helpful for us all to know and remember that Jesus in his teachings was heading in that same direction in a way radical for his times. The reason I think it is important for us to know this is that we are, inevitably, no matter what our personal theology, in dialogue with people and with a culture that claims to be following Jesus. While Unitarian Universalism may often be most helpful to individuals within our congregations by providing a degree of freedom for spiritual exploration, we are most influential outside these walls when we can, using their own language, call people of other faiths to their better, more compassionate, more inclusive selves, and it doesn't hurt us to understand we have Jesus, in our corner when we do that their guy, most of them. It may seem a weird thing to suggest, but historically, one of the things we as a tiny, heretical, group have done for the greater good all around the country, is to give our neighbors the space and encouragement to listen to the best that Jesus tried to teach. I would love to see First Church of Omaha be a loud voice in this community for that message of compassion and inclusion that is our tradition, and if they would only look more carefully, theirs as well.