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UUFTC, Sonora

What's so Funny 'Bout Peace, Love, and Understanding?

O Young and Fearless prophet of ancient Galilee, . .
Help us stand unswerving against war's bloody way,
where hate and lust and falsehood hold back your holy sway. . . .
Stir up in us a protest against unneeded wealth;
for some go starved and hungry who plead for work and health.

For me, this old hymn beautifully sums up the Unitarian Universalist view of Jesus of Nazareth. This is not the Jesus of the Christian "incarnation," the Jesus who is the only instance in history of God coming to Earth in human form; the Jesus who is part of a three-in-one Godhead; the Jesus who rose from the dead. No – this is the flesh and blood Jesus who embodies our UU principles. This is the Jesus who lives on in his teachings and in the example of the life he led.

We have been talking this fall about our UU Seven Principles. In our September services we talked about our first principle – the inherent worth and dignity of every person; and we talked about our 7th Principle – respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. Today, I want to discuss with you our Second Principle – our commitment to affirm and to promote "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations." And what better place to begin our discussion of justice, equity, and compassion than with Jesus of Nazareth? First of all, we remind ourselves that our UU movement came out of the congregational Christianity of the early New England churches – churches that were founded by the pilgrims and the puritans. Early Unitarian and Universalist ministers – even as they began to move away from other protestant churches of their day – still looked to Jesus as the founder of their faith. In the life and teachings of Jesus, they found the theological, philosophical, and moral foundations of what would one day become the Unitarian Universalist movement.

What do we know of the story of Jesus, and how does that story relate to justice, equity, and compassion as one of our UU principles? Well, we know that Jesus was a Jew who lived in what is now Israel and Palestine some 2,000 years ago. We know that he stood firmly within the Jewish tradition; that he didn't see himself as founding a new religion that would be named for him. Indeed, Jesus stood very firmly in a long line of Hebrew Prophets, beginning with Elijah, and extending through several different figures who comprise the prophet Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and Amos, and many others.

We know that Jesus was a teacher – we have no record of Jesus ever having written down his teachings, but we know that he taught through the use of stories and parables, and that these were passed on orally. We know that Jesus was a healer – not unlike many other figures throughout history who have had the gift of healing. Most importantly for our purposes today, we know that Jesus was a trouble-maker, and agitator, who stood against the various power structures of his time. As our hymn this morning suggests, Jesus preached a radical social vision. The world of his time was based on systems of domination – of Rome over the people of the Middle East; of the

priests over the common people; of men over women; of the wealthy elites over the peasantry; of slave-owners over slaves. And he opposed all these systems, preaching a radical form of social equality. At a time when Jews followed a series of very strict dietary laws, Jesus said it was what comes out of a person's mouth that matters, not what goes into it. And he insisted on sharing meals with people not permitted to do so under Jewish laws – with women, with lepers and other ailing people, with criminals, with tax collectors and other social pariahs.

And Jesus spoke powerfully of this alternative social reality that he envisioned – he called it “the Kingdom of God.” Well, as we know, in later centuries people took the Kingdom of God to be something that exists somewhere else, after this life.. But when Jesus used the term, he meant a reign of peace and harmony that could be attained in this world. And Jesus bemoaned the fact that people couldn't see that the Kingdom of God was a vision of this life, not some other one. In Luke, for example, Jesus said:

The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you. (Lk 17:20 – 21)

And in the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus is quoted as saying:

It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, “look, here!” or ‘Look, there!’ Rather, God's kingdom is spread upon the earth, and people don't see it. (Th 113).

So for Jesus, the kingdom of God was a vision of world that would be based on justice, equity, and compassion. It would be world in which all are equal, all are brothers and sisters. It would be a world in which all people would be treated fairly, equitably, and compassionately. In this, Jesus echoed the Hebrew prophets who had come before him. Repeatedly, throughout Jewish history, the prophets were those who defied the kings and the existing power structures. They were the ones who reminded those in power when they were neglecting or mistreating the poor. They were the ones who cried out for justice in times of injustice. Remember, for example, the words of the Old Testament prophet Amos:

Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain,
You have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them. . . .
You who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.
Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time. . . .
But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
(Amos 5:11-24).

[Pause]

So, justice, equity, and compassion are foundational teachings of the Jesus of the four gospels, and they are also foundational principles of the Unitarian Universalist movement. Yet isn't it interesting, when we consider the state of the world today, that these principles are held in so little regard? In fact, to speak up today for these values is to risk being derided as some sort of naïve fool. What has happened? Why have we strayed so far from these principles? We are taught that it is a hard, cruel world, and we need to look out for ourselves and not worry about those less fortunate. There's nothing

wrong with selfishly accumulating lots of money and things, and indeed we have a patriotic duty to do so. If that leaves the people on the bottom sadly in need, well, that's too bad but it's not our problem. "I've got mine; you're on your own." And we are told that to survive in the modern world, we have to be "realistic." And to be "realistic" is to operate on the premise that there are bad people out there who want to destroy us. And the only way to ensure our own survival is to use force and violence to destroy evil people before they destroy us.

Well, I want to challenge that notion of what is "realistic." Several years ago, the musician Elvis Costello sang a song called "What's so funny 'bout peace, love, and understanding:"

As I walk through this wicked world
Searchin' for light in the darkness of insanity,
I ask myself is all hope lost?
Is there only pain and hatred, and misery?
And each time I feel like this inside,
There's one thing I want to know,
What's so funny bout peace, love, and understanding?

What's so funny, indeed? And what's so funny bout justice, equity, and compassion? Here we are, one of the largest – and certainly the most powerful – country that is predominantly Christian, and look how far we have strayed from the life and teachings of Jesus and from the principles of justice on which this country was founded. Often it seems as if the focus of many Christians has shifted from the gospels to the apocalyptic vision of the book of Revelation. The world is seen as an epic battleground between good and evil. The language, and vision, of the Crusades have been revived. Meanwhile, what has become of the message of the gospels? Of the Jesus who preached love and compassion? Of the Jesus who challenged systems of domination based on wealth, and force, and war? Of the Jesus who sat down humbly to eat with the world's outcasts, in defiance of law and custom?

What I want to suggest to you is that it is Jesus' vision that is the realistic one. It's pretty much what we learned in kindergarten -- If we don't want to be scared, if we want to live with a sense of security, then we need to learn to play well with others. And, on the playground, if we try to take what we want by force, sooner or later, we will have to face up to someone who is stronger than we are. And we will have to live in fear. As the Rev. William Sloane Coffin said, "The trouble with believing that the only thing the other side understands is force, is that you have to behave as if the only thing you understand is force." To put it another way, if we want to be treated with justice, equity, and compassion, we need to treat others with justice, equity, and compassion. What's so funny bout peace, love, and understanding?

[PAUSE]

So, our principle of affirming invoking of justice, equity, and compassion might be seen as our equivalent of the Kingdom of God that Jesus talked about. Both contain a vision of a social reality that might be here on earth. Both welcoming all who come to our table. Both emphasize the importance looking out for the oppressed. Both emphasize the difficulties of amassing great wealth and stress the importance of generosity in our dealings with those less fortunate.

We don't have a catchy name for our vision of an alternative reality like "kingdom of God." As many of you know, the term I prefer is "beloved community," as it was invoked by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King meant a community that would include all, black and white, every ethnicity and nationality in a community built on justice, equity, and compassion. And I would propose that what we are doing here, as a liberal religious fellowship is building a community of the sort that Dr. King envisioned. This, I suggest is the great work that lies ahead of us.

What does it mean to say that we are a community based on justice, equity, and compassion? First of all, it seems to me that any religious community, any community of faith, that doesn't rest on these principles is not worth joining. If our tradition doesn't call us to work for justice, equity, and compassion, then what's the point? I know that I would not care to belong to such a community. And our religious beliefs, whatever they may be, lead us in the direction of an ethical stance – in our case, a commitment to justice, equity, and compassion. So, if we were theists, we would say that our commitment to these values comes from our belief in God. But we bring to this community a variety of theological beliefs. What we can say is that we are bound together by our concern and caring for others, and by our commitment to social justice.

Beyond that, though, there's an aspect to our second principle that is even more important. When we engage together in working towards building a loving, caring community we open ourselves up to the possibility of encountering what is holy, what is sacred, what is divine, in our own lives. Never mind the name we give to it – we all know that we have those moments of experiencing awe and wonder at the mystery of the universe. And we all have those moments of feeling that we are tune with the flow of the universe, that we are somehow in touch with the spirit, the force of healing and transformation. And we are most open to those moments of transcendence, I believe, when our hearts are vulnerable and open to the mystery.

And to take it one step further, one of the ways we enable to open our hearts is when we are engaged in working for justice and equity, when our hearts are open in compassion towards others. This weekend, our adult RE class has been discussing the ideas of Andrew Sung Park, a Korean-American minister. Park calls the quality of universal human suffering, *Han*. He writes:

Han is the abysmal experience of pain, . . . the "wounded heart" of humanity. *Han* is the division of the tissue of the heart caused by abuse, exploitation, and violence. It is the wound to feelings and self-dignity.

Our instinct is to turn away from our own pain, and the pain of others. We pass by homeless people in the street, and we pretend they're not there. When we put people into hospital rooms, we tend to forget that they are scared, in pain, and often alone. But when we are able to relate with compassion to the suffering of those who are oppressed, we are able to open our hearts. When we are able to embrace suffering, our own, that of others, the world's pain, we are able to see that we are connected, and we are able to find a place of compassion and love. And we are open to experiencing the presence of the divine. Japanese-American theologian Rita Nakashima Brock puts it this way:

We must seek to embrace and acknowledge our own suffering and the suffering of all creation, to bring healing to our broken world . . . We must learn to listen to, hold, and support others for their empowerment and ours.

Without embracing suffering there is neither love and intimacy nor wisdom and compassion at the deepest levels of our suffering, we encounter our profoundest connections to others as we come to know our relationships both hurt us and heal us.

And that place of compassion and love, I believe, is where we come closest to experiencing connection with the divine, the unknowable, with the transcendent, the spirit of healing and transformation. Andrew Sung Park, writing from a decidedly Christian perspective says:

Han is the point of encounter between God and humanity. God suffers with us, not because sin is all powerful, but because God's love for humanity is too ardent to be apathetic toward human suffering. We come to know the reality of God only in the midst of experiencing *Han* in the world.

[PAUSE]

And this experience of opening our hearts to the "other," through justice, equity and compassion, is always available to us. This morning we sang the famous hymn "Amazing Grace." It was written by a man named John Newton. Newton was captain of a ship engaged in the slave trade, who experienced a conversion during a storm at sea. He quit the slave trade, and eventually he became a minister. In his later years, he wrote that great hymn about the power of redemption in this life. And, as a minister, he joined the abolitionist William Wilberforce in opposing slavery.

It's never too late to begin working for justice, equity, and compassion. Just as we are called by the principles of this tradition to do so. We do the work of making a better world by doing the work of building this loving community.

What's so funny 'bout peace, love, and understanding?

What's so funny 'bout justice, equity, and compassion?

Blessed Be! And Amen!