

## Jesus, Our Brother<sup>1</sup>

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Today is the Christian feast of Easter, a celebration of hope and resurrection. In the midst of winter, we trust that spring will come, in the midst of darkness, light will dawn, in the midst of suffering and death, there will be new life.

*Reading:* Rebirth by Elizabeth Tarbox<sup>2</sup>

When the day is too bright, or the night too dark, and your feelings are like an avalanche barreling down the mountain of events outside your control, when you look down and you are falling and you cannot see the bottom, or when your pain has eaten you and you are nothing but an empty hungry hole, then there is an opportunity for giving.

Don't stay home and cover your head with a pillow. Go outside and plant a tulip bulb in the ground: that is an act of rebirth. Sprinkle breadcrumbs for the squirrels or sunflower seeds for the birds: that is a claiming of life. And when you have done that, or if you cannot do that, go stare at a tree whose leaves are letting go for its very survival. Pick up a leaf, stare at it; it is life, it has something to teach you.

You are as precious as the birds or the tulips or the tree whose crenelated bark protect the insects who seek its shelter. You are an amazing, complex being, with poetry in your arteries, and charity layered beneath your skin. You have before you a day full of opportunities for living and giving. Do not think you know all there is to know about yourself, for you have not given enough away yet to be able to claim self-knowledge. Do you have work to do today? Then do it as if your life were hanging in the balance, do it as fiercely as if it mattered, for it does. Do you think the world doesn't need you? Think again! You cleanse the world with your breathing, you beautify the world with your giving, you perfect the world with your thinking and acting and caring.

Don't stay home and suffocate on your sorrow: go outside and give yourself to the world's asking.

### *Sermon*

What does it mean to suffer? Many of us, perhaps subconsciously, are still attached to an old myth—that when good things happen it is a sign of blessing or favor from the *Divine* benevolence, or the great *Mysteries*, the *Spirits*. Even if we don't believe in spirits, we might still take success as a sign of goodness. And its counter: We harbor the belief that when bad things happen it is a sign of abandonment or disfavor or lack of goodness. This myth of blessing or disfavor is perhaps the quintessential American myth.

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2 From Elizabeth Tarbox, *Eveningtide Meditations*, (Skinner House: 2011/1998)

But what does this mean for people who face troubles—the small day-to-day troubles that come to all of us, or the so much bigger troubles that come to a few. Are they really abandoned or in disfavor with the Spirit, or lacking in goodness? What about every child who has lost a parent, or parent who has lost a child? What about the people who have lost lands and cultures to the genocide of foreign explorers and settlers? What about the people who have been torn from their own countries in the wake of war and terrorism?

One of the lessons that I have held onto from the story of Jesus, is that even the innocent may suffer, even the best among us. Even a teacher of goodness and love can fall prey to the destructive power of imperial violence. And even Jesus knew that old mythic feeling of abandonment. But the lesson that endures for me from his legacy is that the *Spirit* remains present with us through everything. Whether we face happy outcomes or troubles, *Love* enfolds us in its widest embrace. That is the truest reality. And to take that in, I have to let my small heart open wide, to move beyond a simplistic attachment to things going my way, into perceiving the hope and life-giving power of an all-embracing *Love*.

When I was attending a Catholic college, one of my religious studies professors was Father Philip Hanley, a priest who was a member of the Dominican order. He began our class about Jesus by having us look together at the controversial musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I remember Fr. Hanley being delighted with the musical, because it raised once again all the questions that people had been asking about Jesus for centuries. Who was he? What did his life mean? What did his death mean?

Rather than give us a set of doctrines about what we were supposed to believe, Fr. Hanley gave us permission to wrestle with our own questions, the questions of young adults trying to make sense of our Catholic Christian faith tradition. That permission helped to shape my own spiritual journey, helped me to grow from the simple faith of my childhood into a love for spiritual questioning and deepening.

Our class learned that, during the centuries after Jesus' death, there was incredible controversy and turmoil about who he was, and what it all might mean. Some argued that he was God, and had only appeared to live and die as a human being. Others argued that he was a man—a teacher and prophet extraordinaire—but fully and only a human being nonetheless. Others would say he was both God and man—and eventually, after a few hundred years and more than a small amount of bloodshed, that became the prevailing dogma of the church in power, along with the doctrine of the Trinity—God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But stamping certain views as official doctrine did not stop the questioning or the proliferation of interpretations about the life and death of Jesus. It continued through the centuries, and Fr. Hanley helped us to put our own questions into this historic tradition of argument and the search for understanding.

I know that for the people of our congregation, there are also many questions and interpretations about the person and life of Jesus. Some of you may find important inspiration in his life and

teachings, and others may not have much interest. Perhaps some of you were even wondering about whether you should attend this morning, because Jesus was something you were trying to get away from, after difficult experiences at other churches. So I want to affirm what I learned from Fr. Hanley—that our questions and interpretations are all welcome, are all part of a long tradition of challenge and controversy over the mystery of this person who lived over 2000 years ago yet had a profound effect on the world.

You don't have to follow the prevailing doctrines about Jesus to find some inspiration in his life. Tim Rice, the lyricist for *Jesus Christ Superstar*, said, "It happens that we don't see Christ as God but simply the right man at the right time at the right place." He went on to say "we are basically trying to tell the story of Christ as a man. I think he increases in stature by looking at him as a man."<sup>3</sup> The early history of our own faith tradition, Unitarianism, also began with questions about the person of Jesus, and an assertion that he was a man. Our forbears challenged the prevailing notion of the day that Jesus was both man and God.

William Ellery Channing, in a sermon in 1819 that marked the first exposition of the theology of Unitarians, said:

We believe, then, that Christ is one mind, one being, and, I add, a being distinct from the one God. ... We wish, that those from whom we differ, would weigh one striking fact. Jesus, in his preaching, continually spoke of God. The word was always in his mouth. We ask, does he, by this word, ever mean himself? We say, never. On the contrary, he most plainly distinguishes between God and himself, and so do his disciples. ... If we examine the passages in which Jesus is distinguished from God, we shall see, that they not only speak of him as another being, but seem to labor to express his inferiority. He is continually spoken of as the Son of God, sent of God, receiving all his powers from God, working miracles because God was with him, judging justly because God taught him, having claims on our belief, because he was anointed and sealed by God, and as able of himself to do nothing.<sup>4</sup>

Channing goes on, expressing the beliefs of these early Unitarians,

We believe, that [Jesus] was sent by the Father to effect a moral, or spiritual deliverance of mankind; that is, to rescue men from sin and its consequences, and to bring them to a state of everlasting purity and happiness. We believe, too, that he accomplishes this sublime purpose by a variety of methods; by his instructions respecting God's unity, parental character, and moral government...; by his promises of pardon to the penitent, and of divine assistance to those who labor for progress in moral excellence; by the light which he has thrown on the path of duty; by his own spotless example, in which the loveliness and sublimity of virtue shine forth to warm and quicken, as well as guide us to perfection; by his threatenings against incorrigible guilt; by his glorious discoveries of immortality;

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3 *Time* magazine, November 9, 1970.

4 William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," Sermon delivered at the Ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks in the The First Independent Church of Baltimore on May 5, 1819.

by his sufferings and death; by that signal event, the resurrection, which powerfully bore witness to his divine mission, and brought down to men's senses a future life; by his continual intercession, which obtains for us spiritual aid and blessings; and by the power with which he is invested of raising the dead, judging the world, and conferring the everlasting rewards promised to the faithful.

Channing also acknowledges the differing interpretations that Unitarians give to the death and redemption wrought by Jesus, but argues that they have all rejected the idea that Jesus died to placate God's wrath. They believed that God was already infinitely merciful and compassionate, and needed no bloody death to awaken his mercy. If you have never read Channing's whole sermon, I greatly encourage you to do so, and am happy to send you a copy if you'd like—it is 21 pages long because sermons in his day lasted more than an hour. This week I read it again, and his words are profoundly relevant, even today, in challenging fundamentalist interpretations of Christianity. For the early Unitarians, Jesus was understood to lead us into a life of virtue, and inspire us by his own example of what a virtuous life should be.

In the two hundred years since Channing's sermon, however, Unitarianism itself has gone through vast changes. Next week I hope to talk more about the long relationship between Unitarian Universalism and Christianity. Today, in our time, Unitarian Universalism is more like an interfaith community, with members who identify as Jewish or Christian, yes, but also atheist or pagan, Buddhist or mystic naturalists. We continue to celebrate the thoughtful questioning that marks a spiritual and intellectual search for meaning and truth.

But the person of Jesus has profoundly influenced our faith tradition, and so I invite us today to look more closely at this human Jesus, and what he might teach us of life and suffering and goodness. As I said earlier, one of the most important messages for me was in the very re-definition of suffering itself: that suffering was not the mark of divine disfavor. There is a temptation among us to imagine that success is an indicator of virtue. Or to assume that what *God* might be about is to provide answers to our prayers and to get us out of trouble. But if we look at the life and death of Jesus, we see that the virtuous may suffer, and the innocent can be victimized by powerful state forces. Bad things can happen to good people.

On the one hand, this can be scary, because there is nothing we can do to protect ourselves from tragedy—no magic or sacredness or being good can ensure that we will not perhaps face the unthinkable. But on the other hand, what it says is that no calamity can keep us from being loved, from being held in the blessing of divine providence. Jesus too has suffered, and suffering cannot remove us from beloved-ness.

I think this is part of why African people who had been kidnapped and enslaved in America found strength in the Christian stories of their captors. Jesus had also been taken and forced to suffer. They were not alone. They were not abandoned. Jesus was a brother who also knew the burden of a heavy weight, who knew fear, who could see the darkness falling around him. When our lives are a challenge, the story of Jesus may be a comfort.

When our lives grow more comfortable, however, the story of Jesus is perhaps more a challenge. Another important way Jesus inspires me is in his embrace of those who were considered to be marginal or unimportant. He ate with outsiders and invited ordinary working fishermen to be the leaders among his followers. He spoke with Gentiles and women, who were considered lower than the lowest Jewish male in the hierarchy of power in his time. He didn't try to cozy up to the influential or so-called "important" people of his day. His validation of the ordinary person is one of the roots of our UU first principle—the inherent dignity and worth of each person.

Jesus connected with the lowly people, and that made the movers and shakers of his day uncomfortable. I think about his story of the Good Samaritan which has been told and retold thousands of times. Jesus was teaching and a learned man asked him, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus said, "The greatest commandment is to love God with your whole heart and mind and soul. And the second commandment is like it: to love your neighbor as yourself." The learned man, not wanting to be bested at anything, said, "And who is my neighbor?" And then, Jesus told this story.

A traveler was walking on the road to Jericho, and was set upon by thieves and brigands. He was robbed and beaten and left for dead. We are told that a priest was walking that way, and crossed over to the other side when he saw the wounded man lying by the side of the road. Next passed a Levite, who was an important person in the Jewish social hierarchy, and he also did not stop.

Then a Samaritan came by. Now Samaritans were considered as lesser people by the Jewish people of that time. Jews would generally not even associate with Samaritans. Perhaps if this story was told today, we might say that a Muslim came by. Just as Muslims have been held with suspicion and hate by many in our country, so the Samaritans were held in Israel. But this Samaritan stopped to help the wounded man. He bandaged him up and took him to a nearby hostel, and paid the owner to continue to care for him after he had to go on his way.

Jesus asked, "Who was neighbor to the man on the road?" The learned man had to say, "The one who helped him." And Jesus concluded, "Go and do likewise." He sort of turned it all upside down. Are we to love our neighbor or are we to be a neighbor? Or is it the same thing? He challenges us not only to help those who need our help, but to notice that those we like to think we are better than, in fact may be more virtuous and loving than we are. Loving our neighbor means not holding ourselves above other people, even in the ways we try to do good in our world.

This week I heard a story that reminded me of the Good Samaritan.<sup>5</sup> After the horrific bombing in San Bernardino in December that killed fourteen people and wounded twenty-two others, a young Muslim woman in Massachusetts was in the airport when someone came up to her and whispered in her ear, "You killed my people." Mona Haydar said, "It was gut-wrenching and so startling. I kind of lost my breath. And then I thought, 'If you knew me, you wouldn't say that.'"

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5 <http://www.people.com/article/mona-haydar-ask-a-muslim>

She put her thoughts into action, and began to set up signs outside the Cambridge Public Library, once a week, inviting passersby to stop and ask her about her Muslim beliefs and traditions, with free coffee and donuts. She says,

I'm in deep mourning for the loss of life and violence and for the continued hijacking of my religion. It's so heartbreaking and furthers our drive to wholeheartedly stand up against any and all acts of violence – no matter the perpetrators.

Our [#AskAMuslim](#) project was us standing up to ISIS and their sick and twisted understanding of what Islam teaches. Anti-violence and pro-justice acts of love are a part of my path and work in the world as a Muslim.

She goes on, “As Americans, we have to stand up to dog whistle politics and the fear mongering rhetoric that separates us. Acts of violence make it all the more obvious that those of us who believe in love need to work even harder to counter hate and violence to manifest our more beautiful world.”

Haydar's parents came to the U.S. from Syria in the 1960's. She has had a positive response to her Ask-A-Muslim project. She says, "It's about dialogue and humanizing each other. I'm a Muslim, but first I'm human." She adds, "Love is my religion."

I think Jesus would be delighted with the way this Muslim woman has been a neighbor to those who are frightened and afraid about terrorism. One more promise of hope—that even in the midst of hate, love is possible; that after death, resurrection is possible.

### *Closing Words*

In the beautiful words we heard today in the song, *Rise Up*<sup>6</sup>,  
“All we need, all we need is hope.  
And for that we have each other.”  
As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,  
let each of us carry its light and hope into every day of our lives.

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6 John Howard sang this live for our worship, but you can also hear it at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmHfo\\_3EGFA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmHfo_3EGFA)