

“Jesus! What an Exciting Man!”

A Sermon by Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, December 16, 2007

For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, North Carolina

“Who was that masked man?” a bystander asked as you heard a shout in the distance “Hi Yo Silver, Away!” No one ever knew.

They’ve asked that about Jesus too for 2,000 years. He himself once asked “What are people saying about me?... Who do you say that I am?” Some answers have been worse than Tonto’s silence. Some people have torn up our world with their answers. Christmas is a good time for us to think about it.

Was he “Jesus, the son of God,” or “Jesus, the son of Adam,” as the Bible says he said? Was he “Jesus, the Messiah” or “Jesus, the Wandering Wise Man” as many scholars say? Was he “Jesus, the Scold” or “Jesus, the Gentle” as the gospels seem to say? Was he “Jesus, the First Christian” or not a Christian at all, as I say?

Did he say what the Bible says he said, or was much of it put in his mouth as the Jesus Seminar says? Did he expect the world to end soon or did he think that the Kingdom of God was already here? Who was that masked man? And who has the right to say? Who knows? Who cares? I do. This sermon is a crash course for Unitarian Universalists on Jesus. I think I know who he was and why he wouldn’t have joined the Christian movement that became a church dedicated to him after he died.

The Bible tells of two Jesuses, one human and the other mythical. The human one was remarkable. Our UU movement was founded in his memory. We’ve strayed a bit. I’m a religious naturalist and I agree with a lot of what he said. I’m proud of his role in our heritage but I don’t believe creeds about him.

A dozen years ago I chaired a UU ministers’ study retreat led by Dr. Robert Funk, the world-class New Testament scholar who created The Jesus Seminar. Over 70 scholars of many Christian denominations from Baptists to Catholics joined in to decide what they could say with certainty about Jesus. There isn’t much, honestly. They say that.

They’ve met regularly for two decades to talk about Jesus behind his back, and published The Five Gospels, with their views. You may remember that you once learned there were four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the Bible. Their book includes their own translation of them plus one more, the Book of Thomas. It’s an ancient collection of 114 sayings by Jesus that scholars long knew about even though it disappeared over 1,700 years ago.

A copy of Thomas was found in 1945 in a jug buried in the Egyptian desert. It has new stuff not seen since Thomas went missing. Most of it is close to what is found in the “synoptic” gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. They’re called synoptic because they fundamentally agree with each other. The Book of John doesn’t agree with any of them or with Thomas. It may be older than the others but it’s filled with mostly mythological stuff.

I must say right here all scholars agree that nothing in the Bible was written by anyone who knew or ever saw Jesus. Mark, the oldest book, was written at least 40 years after Jesus died. Paul wrote his letters 20 years after Jesus’ death. Thomas first appeared about the time that Paul started writing. There are 15 other “missing gospels” of which only small fragments remain.

We have very little to create a picture of Jesus but enough to know he was remarkable--and unknown outside a small circle of disciples. No other writers of his time mentioned him. He was illiterate himself. The earliest outside comment, 50 years after his death, was in a history of Jewish wars written by Josephus.

So how do we know that Jesus was real? The best evidence is stories attributed to him by Matthew, Mark, Luke and Thomas, tales in a form unique in his era, called parables. Differences among them show that they weren't copying from a single source but they are close enough to show that they must have come from one person who conflicted radically with the leadership of his culture. Might as well call him Jesus. Certainly someone told the tales.

Jesus Seminar scholars say he couldn't have said much of what the Bible says he did or even have believed it all. He contradicts himself too much. The gospel authors took oral traditions that had been passed down over decades and added their own ideas to support views their part of the young church wanted him to have said. Some of Jesus' comments refer to happenings after his death or when he was alone when no one could have heard his words. The oldest manuscripts don't agree with each other so we know parts were added after he died. Jesus Seminar scholars say less than 20% of his words can be authentic.

The Bible portrays a man misunderstood by followers who passed on his teachings even when they didn't understand them. How is that possible? Jesus' stories and sayings were provocative; they were easy to remember. Though his reporters didn't like them all, they were so well known among his people that they couldn't be ignored. The writers added their own ideas to make him more palatable. Think about Jesus, the party-goer. There are many reports of Jesus at parties, but someone else always paid the bill. Luke has Jesus accept criticism that he was a glutton and a drunk. It's in the Bible!

Moreover, though Jewish dietary restrictions applied to him Jesus wasn't careful about what he ate or who he ate with. He said "Listen to me, all of you, and try to understand. It's not what goes into a person from the outside that can defile; rather it's what comes out of the person that defiles." Mark quoted him in crude language to show which body orifice he meant. Translators have always glossed over the original crude language.

Jesus partied with disreputable folk, loose women, tax collectors and foreigners who ignored kosher laws. That was worse than hanging out with gang members, drug dealers and prostitutes today. Just touching such people defiled one so he couldn't enter the temple without ritual purification. Jesus went in anyway. He didn't care what people thought about it.

Stories about Jesus come from a time when the Christian church saw itself as a sect of Judaism that had reverted to fasting. The justification for the stories was that Jesus accepted even the worst of sinners so he certainly would accept you and me. (Well, maybe not you, but me, yes.)

Jesus seemed to be doing more than saving sinners. He acted as if he preferred people who weren't acceptable in proper society. Why? Maybe they were more interesting than proper religious folk, and maybe they were more willing to listen to him. All we know is that he's reported to have spent a lot of time with them. Luke reports he said to the most downtrodden:

Congratulations, you poor!
 God's domain belongs to you.
 Congratulations, you hungry!
 You will have a feast.
 Congratulations, you who weep now!
 You will laugh.

That's the Jesus Seminar's translation of the Beatitudes (Luke 6:20-21) from the oldest texts. They say the words are authentic because of unexpected reversals. Congratulate the poor and hungry? Crazy, but it was typical of what he said. You may remember the words as "Blessed are the poor," etc. People don't go about blessing one another now so the translators used contemporary terms like "congratulations". But then Luke says Jesus went on to say:

Damn you rich!
 You already have your consolation.
 Damn you who are well-fed now!
 You will know hunger.
 Damn you who laugh now!
 You will learn to weep and grieve.

Other translations say "Woe unto you that are rich," etc. The scholars don't think Jesus ever said that. He didn't condemn people because of their group. He said things like "Love your enemies" (another reversal from expectations). The scolding fits Luke's church when Christians were being persecuted and might have liked hearing that other people would get their come-uppance.

Many people hoped the world end soon. They said along with them Jesus believed that too, but Jesus Seminar scholars don't think so. People who expected the End of the World said Jesus was God's unique Son who had been crucified and soon would rise from the dead to judge people. The gospel of John says that. None of the other gospels say that.

Who was the real Jesus? I'm going to tell you what many scholars and I believe. He was an itinerant sage who fondly called God "Dad," using an intimate colloquial Aramaic term that means father. He said God would provide for his needs and for everyone else's daily, just as He does for the birds: "That's why I tell you: don't fret about life--what you're going to eat--or about your body--what you're going to wear. Remember, there is more to living than food and clothing. Think about the crows: they don't plant or harvest, they don't have storerooms or barns. Yet God feeds them. You're worth a lot more than the birds! Can any of you add an hour to life by fretting about it? (Luke 6:24-25 in The Five Gospels)

Jesus didn't do miracles any more than the next healer. His cures were commonplace for healers of his time. Without doctors people counted on the healers to do incredible things. The spectacular nature-bending miracle stories seem to have been added by reporters who wanted to show that he had been able to do wonders for God, even though he often said he wouldn't do them.

Who was he, really? Jesus was a creative story-teller who liked to exaggerate and make people laugh. What do you do when someone steals your shirt off your back? Matthew says he said "Let that person have your coat along with it!" (Matthew 5:40) That's not serious! It was a joke.

Listen. Jesus' society was a two-garment culture. Men only wore two articles of clothing, the shirt and the coat. If a thief stole one and you took off the other to give it to him you'd be naked. When Jesus told people that story they must have roared with laughter. Here's another. If someone hits you on one side of your face what should you do? You know his answer: let him hit you on the other side. There would be more laughter.

He did have serious points, but he didn't expect listeners to take him literally. He was saying "Don't jump to get in a fight and be so serious about life. Take it easy. Lighten up. God will take care of you.

Be gentle to yourself. Be gentle to everyone. Love them. All of them. Even women. Even children. Even thieves. Even tax collectors.” People would laugh. We would too. Here’s more:

“God’s domain isn’t coming tomorrow. It’s here right now. I won’t do any tricks to show you that I’m telling the truth. All I’ll do is preach about it. Anyone here with two good ears had better listen.

“Your real friends will be found among people you least expect to care about you. [Remember the Good Samaritan?] If you want to go with me, forget your family. I had to. You’re my family and all these people who believe like you will be your family.

“Let the dead bury the dead. Your place is with life and the living. If you look for it, you’ll find it. But don’t expect God’s domain to explode on us. It’s like a mustard seed. It’s the smallest of all seeds, but when it falls on prepared soil it grows into a large plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky. Talk about BIG!

“Religion? Ah, it’s okay, but don’t take it too seriously. Remember Sunday was made for people, not people for Sunday. You can lord it over that day as well as anyone. Celebrate your life and God’s good earth. The best place to do it is right here and you’d better get started.”

That’s more or less what the Jesus Seminar thinks he said. He also seems to have gotten angry when people exploited and abused the poor. He didn’t like it when he saw people being mistreated--which was just about all the time in ancient Jerusalem.

He probably did throw a fit about it in the temple. Powerful people got angry and got Pilate, the Roman governor, to kill him for it. He probably knew he’d get in trouble for what he did but he may have been politically naive about how serious the consequences could be. He knew he wasn’t well-known or an honored leader, just a dusty itinerant Jew from the desert. Who would have thought they would take him so seriously and kill him for it?

Pilate did that with people who disturbed the peace. Lots of them. Jesus was just one more even if he didn’t do much to cause trouble. He didn’t even object to taxation as many did. “Give the emperor what belongs to the emperor,” Jesus had said. “And give God what belongs to God.”

Why do I say Jesus wouldn’t have been a Christian? If you read the Bible carefully he didn’t claim ©the things others believed about him. He never said he was the unique Son of God or the Messiah. Others said that. He said little about himself. He showed no interest in starting a religious movement or even reforming Judaism. It was good enough as long as it didn’t interfere with God’s domain and cause too much trouble in people’s lives.

Does this matter? I think it does. Back at the critical juncture in history from which we date our present stood a man with whom we can identify. He was creative, gentle, loving, just and lonely, a man who urged people to care for one another as for themselves, to love life and their God.

Jesus, the sage shouldn’t be a Lone Ranger. He’s ours just as Jesus the Christ belongs to the Christian literalists. They’ve never known what to do with our Jesus, the man. They can have the Messiah. I’m excited to know the wandering sage and loving man who told good stories, believed in joy, got angry at injustice and loved god. He’s our forebear too. Believe it!