

YOU MAKE VERY GOOD JESUITS, AND VERY BAD CHRISTIANS, II

A month ago we began a discussion of the pre-Easter Jesus and post-Easter Christ. Since this is the Sunday closest to Easter that I will be here, it is most appropriate to continue the discussion today. Last month I shared with you how my friend commented about Unitarian Universalists, *You Make Very Good Jesuits and Very Poor Christians*. And I laughed and agreed and decided I needed to explore that idea further.

Thus, last month we talked about Jesus the person—the *cultural revolutionary* who defied the then current idea of God as one who demanded holiness or purity of his worshipers. Jesus held that the core characteristic of God was compassion. He was a *spirit person*, one who so felt the presence of God that he incorporated that presence in his being. So, enacting God's compassion for all people, he ate with those who were impure and healed sinners. He consorted with women and tax collectors. He brought an alternative paradigm to the poor and dispossessed people of Israel. He was a *Teacher of Wisdom* who used parable and aphorisms in his storytelling to great effect. And he spoke of the *Kingdom of God* that he believed was breaking into society at that very time.

I find this picture of Jesus very attractive. I can, with complete honesty, say that I am a Jesuit, a follower of Jesus, an enactor of his vision. But what about Christ—the post-Easter Jesus? That is the challenge we turn to today. Are we Unitarian Universalists all very poor Christians, as my friend maintained?

In one of our readings this morning, Karen Armstrong quoted part of a letter Paul of Tarsus wrote to the members of a church he gathered at Phillipi. Scholars believe it to be one of the earliest Christian writings. But the *Letter to the Thessalonians* is believed to be the first, written about 30 years after the death of Jesus. The first gospel was Mark, written about 20 years later. There is a long stretch, a “dark tunnel” as Bishop John Shelby Spong says, between the death of Jesus and any written information we could even try to verify. Flavius Josephus, the ancient historian I spoke of last month is one non-Christian source we use to shed light in that dark tunnel.

I will be using the work of Bishop Spong and Marcus Borg in this sermon, as well as that of John Dominic Crossan.⁴ Borg and Spong have both visited West Michigan for weekend seminars at Christ Community Church in Spring Lake. Part of this information is from notes taken at those seminars. All of these writers are respected academics from the liberal wing of current Christianity.

One of the things that Borg pointed out during his presentation was that, in the ancient world, and even the Middle Ages, it was not at all unusual for people who died to reappear among their family and friends. A deceased father would

appear to give directions to his sons on how to best care for their mother. Or he may appear, as did Hamlet's father, to demand vengeance for his murder. And heavenly beings took various forms as they incarnated to perform various tasks in our *real world*. 4

Homer's masterpiece, *The Iliad*, is rife with gods and goddesses who appear in various guises to influence the War between the Greeks and the Trojans. In the earlier chapters of the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh appeared frequently to speak to the patriarchs, and Moses received detailed instructions to free the Israelites from *The Burning Bush*.

Therefore, Josephus' history raised no eyebrows with its claim that Jesus "appeared restored to life." So what? Lots of people returned. However, it was also clear that they did not return as the same class of beings. They may appear the same initially, but everyone knew they were not corporeal, but beings of a different nature. For centuries, when Christians heard the stories that Jesus rose from the dead, they understood that he was still alive, but in a different kind of existence. It was only with the rise of science, the Age of Enlightenment, that problems arose with the interpretation. In the age of literalism, church fathers claimed he was literally alive as you and I are now. Until then, few people questioned the resurrection stories of the New Testament.

Borg, and other writers of the Christian left, take care of this question very easily. They say—*it doesn't matter*. It doesn't matter whether Jesus was physically raised or not. The truth of his teachings does not hang on whether a resurrection of the body took place. Furthermore, says Borg, *Easter faith is not about what happened to the corpse of Jesus*. The Gospels, he says, don't record visible events, they record metaphorical events. For Borg, and other liberal Christians, the meaning of the Christ event is not found in a literal interpretation of the Easter stories. Or, as Borg says, *Resurrection is not Resuscitation*.

When I was attending theological school, and my colleagues at the Presbyterian school down the street, or the Lutheran school a few blocks away, began talking about *the Easter event* I was completely puzzled. "What on earth do they mean, *the Easter event*?" I thought. When I inquired about it, some of them were fairly unclear also, and I came away still puzzled. But I think I am beginning to understand. Let us now turn to the work of John Dominic Crossan. There is a chapter in his book titled, "How Many Years Was Easter Sunday?" It is his contention that after the death of Jesus there was a considerable time of confusion and amid the confusion, a struggle for the leadership of the remaining Christians. It concerned individual leaders—Peter versus John, the Beloved Disciple; the Apostles—were there only Twelve, or was the title also open to Paul, or even the women who were leaders in the community; and the struggle between these leaders and the general community. We have not time to explore this further, but I commend Crossan's book to you.

All of this time, as long as three years, was encapsulated in the story of Easter Sunday, says Crossan. And the experience of *the living risen Christ* is metaphorized in the story of the journey to Emmaus.

We earlier heard that story of the two travelers who did not recognize Jesus until they shared a meal. And it was in the breaking of the bread that they recognized him. When they did so, he vanished, and they traveled back to Jerusalem to share their story. Let us examine this story.

Jesus traveled with the Christian couple on their journey, but they did not recognize him. He continued the relationship that was already present, teaching and sharing his wisdom along the way. However, they had to invite him in, and share their evening meal, before they recognized him. It was in the breaking of the bread, the repetition of many meals they shared with him that they knew him. Then they could share their experience. It is the *Continuing Relationship* with Jesus that is the embodiment of the Compassionate God, and the recognition of that continuing relationship that constitutes the Easter Event. The story, say both Crossan and Borg, is a metaphor. "Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens." (Borg, lecture)

Bishop John Shelby Spong has his own theories about Easter and the post-Easter Jesus that closely parallel those of Crossan and Borg in their broad outlines. He too, postulates an Easter of much longer length than one to three days. His Easter Event is about six months in length, and he places the center around Simon Peter. However, his central argument is that the *Continuing Relationship* of Jesus with his followers, especially Peter, results in their decision to continue his work. Jesus was too vital, too charismatic, too much the embodiment of all they considered holy, to allow him to pass away. The things he taught, the vital presence among them lived on and lives on.

Factually, we don't know what happened. And we will probably never be able to *prove* one story over another. However, I think it is clear that liberal Christian scholars have devised an understanding of the post-Easter Jesus that rings true for we moderns and post-moderns who have been exposed to Freudian and post-Freudian psychology. To name oneself Christian one no longer has to profess belief in a physical resuscitation of the body of Jesus. One can embrace this psychological explanation, that is that the presence and teachings of Jesus were too life affirming and important to let die. Then one can pursue one's own continuing relationship with Jesus, the embodiment of God, the Compassionate One.

And how do some of these liberal Christians envision God? They have modernized Jesus, but do they still envision God as the big, old white man in the sky who doles out goodies if you pray correctly, and punishes those who sin, especially if the sin involves sex? I am sure you will not be surprised to find the

same level of sophistication in their ideas of God. ... A small digression.

When I was in theological school there were many questions among UU students about the nature of the Divine. The answers ranged far and wide, not only among the students, but within each student, depending on how long they had engaged in serious theological study, and deep discussions. In the process I learned the difference between theism: belief in a god or gods; atheism, denial of any gods; agnosticism, the existence of god can be neither proved nor disproved; pantheism, the identification of God with nature; and panentheism, (which isn't even in my dictionary), but means the presence of God (or the Divine) in and among all of the natural world.

Panentheism understands that everything that is, is in God, a part of God. When I first heard this definition, I said, "That's me!"

I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe there is a sacredness in the world, and the only way I experience that is in the world around me. I thought this understanding was confined to a few Unitarian Universalists, especially with pagan leanings. Imagine my surprise to hear Marcus Borg identify himself as a panentheist. (lecture) "My gracious," I thought. "This man is really taking on the lions."

This is a very sophisticated theology, deserving of our attention, no matter how we name our own. It is a theology that is compatible with modernity, and, even more significantly, post-modernity, into which we are rapidly moving. It is appealing to those people who can no longer believe in the literal religion of their childhood. It is also, of course, very threatening to the more conservative elements of Christianity.

We expect the Pat Robertsons and James Robson of the Religious Right to cry heretic at such notions. But even some respected scholars have been so threatened as to step over the line of propriety in their discourse. Accusations of *twisting the facts* and *cooking the books* have followed Crossan and Borg. When academics stoop to such polemics, one knows they are operating out of fear.

Fear causes we humans to do and say things we know are improper. Fear causes us to re-act rather than initiate action. Fear is the enemy of rational discourse, and the opposite of love. We recognize when the Religious Right operates out of fear, demonizing liberal Christians, as well as Unitarian Universalists. Let us also recognize that we, too, can operate out of fear, which chases out love.

For we have recently seen a rise in Unitarian Universalists who name themselves Christians. I have been asked many times, "How can they be both Unitarians and Christians? How can they believe *that stuff*? If *that stuff* means the understanding of God and Jesus and Christ that I heard from Marcus Borg and

read in Crossan and Spong, I see no problem. Most of us have few quarrels with the teachings of Jesus. If anything, they tend to be more demanding than we are comfortable enacting.

And the understanding of Christ as the continuing relationship of Jesus with those who follow him is not a problem to me. I am beginning to understand my Unitarian Universalist friends who name themselves Christians.

Liberal Christians allowed the Religious Right to usurp the definition of Christian in public discourse. I think there is now a move to reclaim their identity as Christians of a different stripe. Borg, Crossan, and their colleagues in the Jesus Seminar gave us a basis for re-thinking Christian theology. Theologians are responding to the challenge. New pastors are emerging from school with a fresh idea of what Christianity can mean, and they are bringing it to the churches throughout our country. There are models of inclusive, theologically modern and justice oriented liberal Christian churches in Muskegon, where I live, and here in Mount Pleasant.

It will take time, but the usurpation of the Christian Right will be reversed. We liberal religionists can cheer on and support our friends in other pews who are in the midst of this struggle. Our challenge is to expand our idea of what Christianity encompasses. It is far more sophisticated than we have thus far understood. It will aid us to understand our UU Christian siblings, whether in our own church or in a Christian-identified UU church. And we can embrace with enthusiasm our liberal Christian cousins.

As we continue our individual search for truth and meaning within our faith community, let us honor those who found their own answer. That answer may lie within religious humanism, neo-paganism, Buddhism, Christianity, or another religious path. Let us honor our own truth, following its path, but remain open to new truths we find on our journey. And let us so live our lives that they will embody the truth we understand, and from which we derive meaning.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.