

**YOU MAKE VERY GOOD JESUITS,  
AND VERY POOR CHRISTIANS, I**

Shortly after I moved to West Michigan I met a man who lived only two blocks from the church I was serving. His name was John Allen, and he was a cultural leader who gathered folks in his living room for films and discussions. I introduced myself to him as the new minister at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. “Oh yes,” he said. “Unitarians...you make very good Jesuits and very poor Christians.”

At first I was puzzled, and then realized that he was not speaking of the radical Catholic sect that called themselves *Soldiers of Christ* and traveled to far-off lands to convert the heathen. He was talking about the second meaning of *Jesuit*, that is: one who follows the teachings of Jesus. And so I laughed and agreed that we do make very good Jesuits and very poor Christians. I thought perhaps I would invite John to join me in a dialog sermon to explore that statement. However, John, who was a Christian Scientist, *transitioned* before I could arrange it.

I thought the implications of his statement were worth pursuing, and so wrote two sermons—one for each half of his remark. The second will be delivered the next time I am with you, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March.

These sermons draw heavily on the work of the Jesus Seminar and their search for the historical Jesus. It is their study and scholarship that makes possible current understandings of this First Century Jew who influenced our culture and faith so strongly. According to their work, few of the sayings traditionally credited to Jesus stand up to critical scrutiny. However, some version of the Beatitudes do, as well as most of the parables. Let us take these teachings, and the work of some of the members of the Jesus seminar, and see if we wish to be Jesuits, followers of Jesus.

When we begin to deconstruct John's statement, we need first to differentiate between the pre-Easter Jesus, and the post-Easter Christ.

That is, we will first examine the historical Jesus, the man who lived, worked, taught and preached in ancient Israel, in the years we have come to know as the first century of the Common Era. In the next sermon in this series, we will look at what happened to Jesus in the aftermath of his death and the Easter experience. This also could be seen as the difference between the historical Jesus and the mythical Christ.

I told you that I am drawing on the work of the Jesus Seminar, under the leadership of Robert Funk. John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg's work are also a major source. Let me also specify that I accept their work as excellent scholarship, which yields the best possible factual understanding of Jesus that is currently available. I also recognize

that there are many Christians and perhaps some Unitarian Universalists who would not agree with that assessment.

Jesus was a revolutionary! No, he didn't join an army, or form one.

He did not arm himself with weapons of war and attack the Roman soldiers who kept the *Pax Romana* in ancient Palestine. He didn't even advise others to do these things. Jesus was a cultural revolutionary.

Key to Jewish culture in those years was the purity system. It evolved from the verse in Leviticus which says, *You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy*. Holiness was determined to be separation from everything unclean. (Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 50.) To be right with God it was necessary to be ritually pure. Certain classes (priests and Levites) were pure, and others, (Gentiles and disabled people) outcasts. Certain occupations, such as tax collection, were considered impure. It was very difficult for a poor person to be ritually pure, for wealth was seen as a blessing from God, and it was very difficult for those in poverty to obey all the purity laws.

The purity system defined what one could eat or not eat, such as pork and shellfish, and also stated one could not eat with others who did so. All who aspired to ritual purity must tithe to the temple from their agricultural produce—grain, grapes, herbs, cattle. Observant Jews could not buy from those who did not tithe. One could not wear garments that were made from cloth woven from mixed fibers such as linsey-woolsey, woven from linen and wool. Men were considered to be naturally more pure than women. Impurity was acquired in many ways—bodily emissions or touching one who was dead, for example.

Jesus challenged these purity laws, and the culture they embodied in many ways. He was famous (or infamous) for eating with tax collectors and sinners. (Sinners were people who were impure.) John Crossan speaks of the “open commensality” of Jesus. By this he means those stories we hear of Jesus sharing food with all manner of people—Mary and Martha, the woman at the well with many “husbands”, the crowds of people who came to hear him preach, the poor and the outcast. Jesus ate with them all.

And he was not particular about who he healed. In one story, he came ashore and found a young man possessed by demons who was a swine herder—the epitome of an impure outcast. Jesus cast out the demons, thus healing the young man. In another, he healed a woman with a long-term hemorrhage, thus confounding a double impurity—gender and bodily emissions. These were radical challenges to the purity system.

Jesus not only taught, but enacted an alternative culture. It was a culture that embraced the poor and outcast of society, and condemned the status quo. No wonder he was considered a threat and had to be silenced.

Jesus started out as a follower of John the Baptist, and only emerged as a leader after the death of that prophet. He was well aware of the fate that waited those who

challenged societal norms. Why would he take such risks? What could have called him to a ministry that caused his family to declare him insane?

Marcus Borg says, "The historical Jesus was a *spirit person*, one of those figures in human history with an experiential awareness of the reality of God..." (Borg, p. 32.)

By this he does not mean the third person of the Christian trinity, rather that someone experiences the sacred within their life, and names that the presence of God. And Jesus—unlike the ancient Hebrew prophets who called their people to right behavior with the threat of a judgmental God—Jesus emphasized the compassion of God. The Hebrew word Borg translates as *compassion* was translated as *merciful* in earlier versions of the Bible. However, Borg claims *compassion* as more accurate, and then tells us the root Hebrew word is *womb*. And he illustrates with a passage from Jeremiah translated by Phyllis Trible thusly:

Thus says Yahweh:

Is Ephraim (Israel) my dear son? My darling child?

For the more I speak of him,

the more I do remember him.

Therefore my womb trembles for him

I will truly show motherly-compassion upon him.

Jeremiah 31:20

Borg continues:

And so Jesus' statement, "Be compassionate as *God is compassionate*" is rooted in Jewish tradition. As an image for the central quality of God it is striking. To say that God is compassionate is to say that God is "like a womb", is "womb like," or, to coin a word that captures the flavor of the original Hebrew, "wombish." What does it suggest to say that God is like a womb? Metaphoric and evocative, the phrase and its associated image provocatively suggest a number of connotations. Like a womb, God is the one who gives birth to us—the mother who gives birth to us. As a mother loves the children of her womb, so God loves us and feels for us, for all of her children. In its sense of "like a womb," *compassionate* has nuances of giving life, nourishing, caring, perhaps embracing and encompassing. For Jesus, this is what God is like. (Borg, p. 48)

If Jesus is a *spirit person*, one who experiences the reality of God, and if he experiences that reality as *compassion* rather than the accepted tradition which emphasized *holiness* (marked by ritual purity) then he was called by his experience of God to enter into a

dangerous ministry which challenged the social vision of First Century Israel. As we know, it cost him his life.

Jesus presented his alternative religious and political vision using simple tools—storytelling or parables and aphorisms or pithy sayings. As a Sage or teacher of Wisdom, Jesus told stories that were arresting. He knew the fine art of the final twist to a story that made it memorable. Let us look at the parable of the Good Samaritan.

We moderns usually tell the story as a simple lesson in brotherhood or neighborliness. However, let us examine how Jesus subverted the holiness vision in this parable. Remember that the injured man, lying by the side of the road was described as “half dead.” Now, remember that one incurs impurity by touching a dead person. It was not

unusual that the priest and the Levite (both inherently pure) passed on the other side. However, the Samaritan—regarded as inherently unclean—was moved to pity (or had compassion) and bound his wounds, first cleaning them with wine and olive oil, then took him to an inn. This story “subverted the dominant paradigm.” The priest and Levite were presented as lacking in the core value of God, compassion, and the impure Samaritan as embodying that value.

Or again, let us look at the Prodigal Son. The first act of this three act drama shows the son going into exile, wasting his money, and becoming an outcast. He hires himself out to an impure Gentile, herding swine, an impure animal. He is completely degraded by the standards of First Century Israel. Then he decides to go home, and beg for forgiveness, asking only for a position as a servant in his father's home.

The second act is the father's. He sees the son coming from afar and has compassion. He runs to meet him, clothing the son in his best robe, and placing a ring on his finger—symbols of forgiveness and acceptance. He calls for a banquet to celebrate. Thus far the parable illustrates the compassion of God and the acceptance of untouchables. But there is a third act.

And a third character is introduced—the older son. This is the stay at home son, the good child, the one who always obeyed his father. He is outraged—all his good works have not resulted in such a celebration, so he complains and refuses to join the banquet. His father implores him to do so, but the parable ends without resolving his fate. “...will the older son's sense of the way things ought to be keep him out of the banquet?” (Borg, p.84)

Jesus' stories were designed to raise questions. Can't you imagine the discussion following this particular sermon? “It's not fair...”cries conventional wisdom, voice of the patriarchal hierarchy that marked society. And “No, however...” the disciples of Jesus reply, with their vision of a new and compassionate society. And the status quo is again threatened.

Jesus was a master of the pithy saying—a few words that turn conventional wisdom on its head. “Love your enemies,” he said. His audience of Hebrews conquered and ruled by Rome must have gasped. ... How could they love their enemies? Indeed, how can any of us do so? However, they must have discussed what one meant by *enemy* and what was meant by *love*. And when Jesus said, “Congratulations, you hungry. You will have a feast,” they must have engaged in conversation around what kind of hunger he meant, and what kind of feast he was promising. Was it a physical hunger, alleviated by bread and fish, or a spiritual hunger, which the experience of God would cure? I believe he was speaking in metaphorical language, promising his listeners God's compassionate presence.

Jesus spoke many times of the *Kingdom of God*. Present conventional wisdom says that he was speaking of a post-apocalyptic world—a world available to us only after death.

Borg, and other members of the Jesus Seminar challenge that conventional wisdom. They think he may have been speaking of perfecting the present society. Borg says:

...in all likelihood the pre-Easter Jesus was *noneschatological*. (Eschatology is the theology of end-times.) That statement needs precise formulation in order not to be misunderstood: what is being denied is the notion that Jesus expected the supernatural coming of the Kingdom of God as a world-ending event in his own generation. This growing scholarly consensus is a recent development. Over the last ten years, the image of Jesus as an eschatological prophet, which dominated scholarship through the middle third of this (last) century has become very much a minority position. (Borg, p. 29)

If this is true, then the image of the Kingdom of God changes. We move the ideal society from some vague future time not of this world, to this-world, not-too-far-in-the-future. It is a society far more egalitarian than the one familiar to Jesus' listeners. And what did Jesus tell them it was like? His descriptions were unlikely, if not impossible.

The Kingdom of God is like leaven (which was impure) which a woman (also impure) puts into flour...What would his listeners have thought of that description? Or, the Kingdom of God (something great) is like a mustard seed, (small). Mustard was considered a weed, so the image is of something small that “grows like a weed.” Or, it is for children (nobodies in that society), thus the Kingdom is for all of us nobodies. (Borg p. 81) Jesus' words invited comments, discussion, challenge—and they invited cultural revolution.

I like this picture of Jesus—who experienced God's core value as compassion, who was a cultural revolutionary, told stories we still remember, was the carrier of a vision of a better society, and who took time to share food and drink in celebration with all manner of people.

Many, if not most Unitarians and Universalists have embraced the teachings and ideas of Jesus, and they began to separate the historical Jesus from the mythical Christ almost 300 years ago. Joseph Buckminster and William Ellery Channing were friends and companions in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Buckminster was one of the first American ministers to study the Bible using the critical methods developed in Germany.

When he died, at only 28, he left the largest private library in the United States, and a model of scholarly ministry still pursued by Unitarians. Channing followed in his footsteps.

However, it was Theodore Parker, in his classic sermon, “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity” who first publicly expressed the division between the historical Jesus and the mythical Christ.

Historian Conrad Wright analyzes the message of Parker's sermon:

He argued that certain elements in Christianity may be regarded as permanent and essential, while others are accidental and subject to transformation with the passing years. That which is permanent is the pure religion Jesus taught. “It is absolute, pure Morality, absolute pure Religion; the love of man, the love of God acting without let or hindrance.”

Those things that are transient are the forms and doctrines with which Christianity has been clothed in successive periods of history. ... (Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker*, p. 36)

Parker influenced our history by preaching the story and ethics of Jesus to pre-Civil War Bostonians. Meanwhile the Universalists were emphasizing the love of God in opposition to the conventional religion of the day which emphasized judgment. John Murray and Hosea Ballou brought hope to thousands as they preached “the everlasting love of God” to sin-drenched Calvinists.

The scholarship begun by Buckminster, and continued by many allowed us to move away from literalism. It allowed us to see the mythic truths present in the story of Jesus, as well as the stories he told. It allowed us to embrace the teachings of Jesus, while viewing with a skeptical eye their embellishments. Compassion, so central to Jesus' teachings is the base of our second principle—justice, equity and compassion in human relations. A vision of an alternative culture is frequently present in our movement.

I can easily affirm that I am a Jesuit—a follower of Jesus' teachings. We may not all wish to do that—and that is alright. We follow differing paths to the divine in this church. However, I find much to admire about the cultural revolutionary who walked the roads in First Century Palestine. I envy his way with words and his vision of divine compassion. And I find his teachings continue to challenge me and call me to embody my values in action

May we all be as true to our vision and values as was Jesus.

Shalom and Saalat.

Blessed Be and Amen.