

What Would Jesus Do?

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I have often wondered what Jesus do if he were here today?

It hard to be a Christian today – or let me be more specific, its hard to be a liberal Christian today. Conservative Christians, Christian nationalists, are giving Christianity a bad name. It seems that the liberal Christian are fighting against a rising tide.

So why should we care as UU's? Some of us already have a challenged attitude towards the Christianity of our childhoods, others from other religious traditions feel little connection to the Christian message.

We should care first off because there are Christians among us – UU's who identify as Christian – here in our congregation and in the larger UU movement.

But we should also care because liberal Christians are our cousins – we share the foundational DNA of the message of Christ.

But foremost we should care, because the powerful message of Jesus should be a source of inspiration for us and not mangled and misused.

f we imagine Jesus in our midst – how would he relate to the current trends in Christianity? First off, he likely wouldn't recognize what we call Christianity. But what he would recognize is our current culture of authoritarianism, income inequality, fear, displacement, and institutionalized violence.

Years ago there was a bumper sticker that I loved. It said – Jesus is coming and boy is he pissed. I know that some Christians felt that the message was he would be angry at how much sin there was in the world, but I think he would be pissed because of what we have made of his message of love, compassion and justice.

So the task I have set out for us this morning is to consider how Jesus' message can be helpful for us in these times. How do we peel all back all the layers of interpretation, appropriation to fine the gems.

The gospels themselves are problematic. They were written more 60, 70 and 90 years after Jesus death, by men who had never met Jesus, using often secondhand source materials and adding their own stories and interpretations based on their desire to convert a particular people of a particular culture. This is not to say they are bad, they are important documents, they are just not a true picture of what Jesus said and did.

So if we can't use the gospels to understand Jesus, where do we start. That is a question considered by Historians of Jesus, who try to piece together what Jesus may have said and did. Not an easy task because there is very little documentation – none at all until he began his preaching at around the age of 30.

These scholars draw on written records, as well as Anthropology, and archeology to decipher Jesus. You may have heard of the Bart Ehrman, Marcus Borg and John Classon – and likely Resa Aslan who wrote the book Zealot. You may also have heard of the Jesus Seminar a group of 150 scholars and lay people who studied the gospels to make their best judgement on which sayings attributed to Jesus are most likely to have been said by him. Their work has been very controversial among Christian Theologians.

So what do we know about Jesus – the fact is we don't know much.

He was a Jewish peasant who lived in Galilee at the time of Roman rule. He was a teacher, or rabbi, preacher, and healer who challenged the Jewish leadership and Roman rulers during a time of great oppression. He preached in parables – mysterious stories that would upend the expectations of his listeners to make people think more deeply. We know he was crucified by the Romans for Sedition around the 33rd year of the CE.

So to learn more, we must consider state of the world when Jesus was alive. As one scholar put it – why did Jesus emerge at this time and this place? What was happening in the world that brought his ministry to the fore?

He was born in Nazareth to a poor family at a time of the Roman occupation of Judeah – the land of the Jewish people. The Roman empire ruled through state sponsored terrorism - quickly suppressing any uprising by killing all the leaders. The Jewish religious leaders were complicit with the Romans – and benefitted with wealth and power in the region.

Rome was engaging in a process of commercializing agriculture and fishing in the region -which meant taking away the land and fishing rights from the peasants and requiring them to work for the empire. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

Jesus' audience were the local oppressed people in his community, and they were drawn to his message, and especially to his healing. There were many healers and preachers going around – but none were as charismatic as Jesus. Many of them claimed to be the Jewish messiah -the one sent from God to save the Jews. So if he was just one of many preachers and healers in his area, what made his message unique.

Let me tell you.

One important component was his ideas about Eschatology – the end times. Remember these were a people who were desperate to believe that there was something better for them in the

future – that it wasn't always going to be like this. These were Jewish people who wanted to believe that God was not going to abandon them. A common form of Eschatology - was that end will come by violent means, this was preached by other zealots at the time to motivate people to take up arms and overtake the authorities. There were several failed uprising, all put down with viciousness by the Romans.

Another eschatological idea was interventionist – that God will come to save them – make things right. Jewish scripture has stories of how God fixed things for the Hebrews – the escape from Egypt is celebrated at Passover each year.

But Jesus had a different approach. His was an Eschatology of collaboration - where everyone worked together to create the world order where each was valued and each had what they need. He called this the Kingdom of God.

Most religious historians agree that when Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God he didn't mean a time to come in another realm – he meant a kingdom here on earth. The Kingdom of God is where we live in the way God intends, where each of us participate in its creation, a kingdom here and now, where justice and power are shared equally.

By the way you can find a description of the Kingdom of God in our UU values. Its all called the Beloved Community. I put some copies on the table in the welcome hall.

Jesus used parables to explain the Kingdom of god to his followers – it is like a woman putting yeast into bread - One small bit of yeast can transform the whole loaf- one tiny mustard seed can become a haven for the birds. The least will become the greatest. Community organizing anyone?

These stories would have been confusing to people expecting an intervention to their troubles. His parables were meant to change people's way of thinking, not reassure them. He literally wanted to shake things up, and empower people to see how they can be part of the transformation to the kingdom of God.

Of course what could they do with little power? He had ideas. He was proposed some tricky forms of resistance. The instruction to turn the other cheek was not to be a door mat – in Jewish culture only the right hand was used to public, the left hand was considered unclean. So to strike a subordinate meant a back slap on the left cheek – but if you turn the other cheek – then if the person wanted to hit you again, he had to use his fist – and fists were only used against equals. You just put him in a bind.

Similarly, very poor people would use their robes as collateral when they needed a loan – so if a lender asks for your robe – and as Jesus suggests, you give them the rest of your clothes you

would be naked. In the Jewish tradition the shame is on the one who is looking at the naked person. So the shame would be on the oppressor.

Jesus was giving specific guidance on how to force the hand of the oppressor. But more importantly he was teaching them not to give over their power to the oppressor. This is the essence of non-violent resistance – don't let your hate of the oppressor take away your power. Jesus taught that you are not going to win with hate and violence.

These were the tools of our civil rights movement. The videos of law enforcement brutality such as with George Floyd are the modern form of shaming the oppressor – exposing their brutality putting the shame back on them.

Jesus used also meals as a way to break down barriers and restore connections and dignity. In his era there was a hierarchy of who could be included and people of various strata did not mix. Jesus blew that all apart with his table fellowship – inviting all those considered unclean by purity laws to eat at the same table, tax collectors, fallen women, peasants, lepers, etc. All were welcome. Our modern equivalent would be conservative liberals, multi racial multi gendered folks. For Jesus it had the added benefit of angering the temple priests.

But of greatest significance is that he was an Organizer – he didn't go around the region with his posse out -he sent out his disciples to spread the word- teaching and healing – all works did not need to come from him. We remember the 12 disciples, but its estimated that there were about 175 disciples sharing his message. Start with the small and build from there, train people to spread your message. This reminded me of the organizing effort of the Obama campaign. Or indivisible, or sister district. Start with the small and build from there. The kingdom of God is like yeast. His organizing skill was part of the reason why his message continued after his death.

He preached for 3 years until Rome killed him in their brutal way. That's what we know.

He could simply have been another Jewish radical who tried to organize people to take down the Romans and their Jewish collaborators. But he was so much more than that.

After his death, his followers kept his teachings alive-practicing what he preached, living simple lifestyles sharing the message of the non-violence, sharing material wealth among them – living in the collaborative kingdom of God. Small pockets of Christians developed all over the Mediterranean.

Two pivotal moments in history that changed the direction of Christianity. - First is the disagreement between James Jesus' brother, and Paul of Tarsus. James taught Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God. Paul taught the message of personal salvation. Paul won.

Then the emperor of Rome - Constantine became a Christian and made Rome a Christian empire. It was a shrewd move that likely sustained the empire for another 100 years and created the holy Roman empire. Constantine created the Council of Nicea - and Jesus the radical Jew became God, and the message of the Kingdom of God took on a whole new meaning.

Can we still hear his message today? Can we hear it over 2000 years of overlay that has obscured its essence. And distorted it.

Why should we try? We are living in a time when Christian Nationalism is on the rise. And we can't pretend that we don't have a role in confronting it. This movement believes in an eschatology of violence as outlined in the book of revelation where the righteous destroy the non-believers. They are trying to shape our country to their own ends.

"James Talarico is a Texas legislator who gave a powerful sermon on Christian Nationalism he says "they have Coopted the humble rabbi into a gun toting, gay bashing, science denying, money loving, fear mongering fascist. It is incumbent on all Christians to confront and denounce this ideology. "

And many Christians are denouncing this hateful use of Jesus message. That is where we come in. Christianity is in our UU DNA. I often get the question of whether UU are Christian. My answer has been that we have Christian origins but have moved to being more pluralistic. That Jesus was a great prophet, among many great prophets that we draw from. This is all true. But I think upon reflection that I have a different way of answering this question. U and U were both born from Christianity – and though we have broadened our theology the message of Jesus is still at our root. If you want a road map to the Kingdom of God you need to look not further than our UU values statement – with love at the center. If Jesus were here today he might look at that and know that the essence of his message lives on. That there are people - UU's and many others -for we are not the only ones who hold these values – who are striving to build the Beloved community and Kingdom of God.

What else do you think Jesus would say to us in these times? He might look at our UU values and say "now that you have the instruction manual -what are you waiting for?"

Despite our feeling powerless in our current political climate, we are not poor peasants in Palestine – we have power – the power of speaking up, standing up and pointing out what you see - not with hate but with clarity. Not with a desire for revenge, but with a vision of a world with love at the center. We can be a place of love and inclusion for all those that the world is trying to put down and disempower.

We must counter hate with collective power of love. This is the essence of Jesus message - Love is stronger than hate. Not passive love, but authoritative love, transformative love. He would urge us to act like we believe it, live like we believe it.

Go out and preach the power of love to all the people in your community and your world. That's what Jesus would do.