

“UU and A Christian Humanist”

Sermon by Rev. Jim Eller

**All Souls
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allsoulskc.org**

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Sermon

Rev. David Rankin is a Unitarian Universalist minister and self-identifies as a Christian. He says that the Gospels are a series of portraits, remarkable stories, and characterizations. One way to know the universal is by the particular. With that in mind I start with a story and end with a story. The first is an adaptation of Dave Rankin.

“It was a long journey on a rainy day. Even our wedding, nine years before, had been easier on our nerves! The shopping mall was one of those brick and plastic affairs with a slick façade and two banks for every store. I think Mel Brooks designed it. We parked the car somewhere on the twenty acres of cement and walked to the Friendly’s Ice Cream Store. Inside, we were pushed to a booth in the rear. A listless waitress tried to memorize our order. Two hot fudge sundaes arrived as two chocolate sundaes. She appeared to be high on vanilla extract. The store was crowded at noon. People were munching hamburgers, slurping coffee, and drowning in ice cream.

They were too busy to witness a miracle! When the social worker arrived, she held a large screaming bundle in her arms. The customers muttered and groaned. “Get that baby out of here!” they seemed to be saying.

Little did they know I had just heard my son. Little did they know I had just adopted a child. Little did they know I had just seen the face of God. I wonder: did the cries of the child in Bethlehem disturb the revelers there at the inn as well?”
Love is not always convenient.

The spirit of Love is powerful. So powerful that not even the indifference or the homogenization of a suburban mall can prevent it. The transforming power of loving service and human communion will not be suppressed for long. Love does come to life. This way of knowing an embodied love is often called an incarnational theology and comes to us from out of the roots of our faith. Those roots are centuries long and are deeply Christian. Being Unitarian, we as a movement do not believe that Jesus was the only person in whom that the spirit of love was fully incarnate.

The incarnation of love is not a miraculous event but a naturally occurring reality made all the more clear in our increasing humanism as we moved into the Twentieth Century. "Humanism...gave us a doctrine of incarnation which suggests not that the holy became human in one place at one time to convey a special message to a single chosen people, but that the universe itself is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in hummingbirds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living thing."

Christianity affirms the presence of a life sustaining energy at the center of our relationships and our existence. It encourages us to love our neighbor and ourselves. Christianity invites us to side with the least and the despised. "What you do unto the least of these you do unto me." This radical acceptance is a call to loving service. From our historic Christian inspiration we now speak of ourselves as a welcoming congregation, as we seek to affirm lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexual members and visitors. We fight injustice based upon category and prejudice. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Our denomination has self-identified as a Christian faith for most of its history. We certainly are no longer Christ-centered, but that does not make us "anti-Christ."

Yet, at a recent meeting here at our church we were considering the challenges and rewards of our increasing pluralism. We identified a significant variety of ways in which we welcome diversity in our congregation. One of the facilitators said that she had heard a number of our members saying about one of those categories that they could take just about anything as long as none of them... joined our church. There are plenty of other places for "people like that" to go without ruining our church. She asked what category of member or visitor that quote of intolerance might describe. The answer was not any one of the dozens of categories we might expect. The answer was "Christian."

We are a place of religious freedom. We believe in the search for truth and meaning, wherever it might be found, but for some of us that may mean anywhere but within Christianity. As individuals we have the right to believe as we might. We are free to believe or reject as wisdom and integrity dictate. Individuals may reject Christianity, but as a community we may not reject those who find meaning within Christianity, or Judaism or a host of other traditions and still be true to our mission of fostering religious freedom.

Recently, Bill Sinkford, the President of our denomination, "spent some time . . . in Dallas with the President's Council, a group of staunch UUA supporters who serve as advisors to the Association. Marlin Lavenhar, the dynamic senior minister serving All Souls, Tulsa, gave the evening keynote presentation.

In his talk, Marlin wrestled with finding a way to describe and talk about Unitarian Universalism. He told about a painting he had commissioned to describe our faith, a painting that now hangs in the vestibule of All Souls. The painting depicts a colonial table, representing the roots of Unitarian Universalism in this country. And there are some books on the table: the Bible, recognizing the Judeo-Christian origins of this faith; a volume of Emerson, who taught that individual experience was a key source of religious faith and life; and one unnamed volume indicating that, for us, revelation is not sealed. There's a spray of flowers representing the diversity of persons who call themselves Unitarian Universalist and the diversity of spiritual paths we follow."

Marlin is clearly trying to find a way to talk about our faith, and this works for him. It is a vision of inclusion. We are so like those flowers, all of us in bloom, but our history and origins have a place and should not be ignored.

Yes, there are members of our congregation and our denomination who have been scarred by conventional and orthodox Christianity. They have been threatened with hellfire and damnation. They have been told their questions, invited by reasonable skepticism, are not welcome. **The excesses of religion are real and abuse can have a religious face.**

Christianity has been abused and Christians have been abusers. Biblical fundamentalism is a live and well. We see the excesses of this religious vision: attempts to displace science in public schools, to place orthodox prayer in public arena, to end reproductive rights, to teach abstinence-only sex education. We have seen the hatred preached by Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and the American Taliban. We

have read about the Inquisition and the Crusades. We know about attempts to silence Galileo and a host of other atrocities and horrors. Why would anyone want to be involved with a religious perspective that has done this much damage. These are reasonable questions. I say because this is not the true spirit of Christianity but perversions of its intent.

We are of the tradition of heretical or primitive Christianity. Most of us are open to the original sayings and the teachings of Jesus, but are very suspicious of the religion about Jesus.

Theodore Parker was one of the great Transcendentalist ministers of our Unitarian history and had very strong ideas about what it meant to be a Unitarian Christian.

Theodore Parker states his ideas in a sermon, "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity." With each of the world's enduring religions, we have seen shifts that occur as people attempt to live that faith in different times and in different parts of the world. People take the basic elements - God, Jesus, and the Bible, some of the rituals like baptism or communion - and interpret them in their own context. Catholic communion services in Uganda use drums. Quaker meetings use silence. At one time, it was thought that mass must be conducted in Latin to be holy, then suddenly that was not considered relevant or intelligible to the average church-goer. So these things change. Our problem is that we get caught up in the transient, and by implication, shallow things.

We miss what Parker considers the permanent things. Love of God, and love of neighbor – learning what each of those terms means and how to live that way. Like the Good Samaritan, we are charged with widening our idea of who our

neighbor is. Whom we must love and care for. Parker expressed this love of neighbor by saying the "arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice." In Parker's time he lived these values by protecting fugitive slaves. He was a strong abolitionist who kept a pistol in his desk to defend the fugitive slaves the church was hiding. That is how he interpreted the story in his time. Parker thought that it was more important to practice the things Jesus taught, and to test his teachings on their own merit, than to make any claims about his authority as God's son. Parker said, "The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words *and actions*."

There is a true spirit of Christianity and it is not the hate of Fred Phelps or Pat Robertson. It is the spirit of love, the spirit that realizes we are all a part of one human community. It is Christianity centered in loving our neighbor and ourselves, inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus, not so much by the religions about him. It is a love that directs itself toward the dispossessed and marginalized.

"With one hand Jesus reaches out to the broken in spirit, the mourner, and those seeking mercy. And with the other, he elevates the lowly, the pure in heart, and the peacemaker, turning the usual ordering of social structure on its head. In story after story in the Gospels, Jesus offers the blessing of liberation to excluded people, and an opportunity to seek healing. At the same time, he challenges the current systems of privilege, disturbing the powers, and questioning whether the rich, the elite and religiously arrogant.... He is a standard bearer of freedom, both internally as we seek to heal over time, and externally as we try to disrupt *injustice* that keeps certain people in and certain people out."

When I was serving our UU Church in Tahlequah, Oklahoma we offered new member classes as we do here. When I teach a new member class I encourage those in attendance to ask questions. One time a woman there, the wife of a retired United Methodist Minister, asked a very interesting question. Vera asked, "Who do you serve?" She was a Humanist and a liberal Christian wondering if we were truly liberal enough to welcome her. I assured her we were, but I was still left with her deep question. What role does service play in our religious life? I could not answer her question then, but I have spent the last ten years finding my answer to this question. How do you serve?

I was riding on my bicycle out into the country. It was a beautiful Saturday morning. As I was going down the road I could see a car along the side of the road. Two older women were out of the car and seemed to be in some distress. So, I slowed and headed over to them. As I stopped one of them said, "The Angel of Jesus. Oh, thank you, Lord. The Angel of Jesus has arrived." I was rather startled to be called by that name. It was a first. They had a flat tire and were not sure how to fix it. This was an easy job for me. I was already sweaty and a bit dirty--what was a bit more dirt and sweat. They were so grateful. One offered to give me five dollars. "No, thank you." I said. "Well, can I give you a hug?" "Sure." I said. "You sure are the angel of Jesus. Are you sure there isn't something we could do for you." "Well, you could pray for the survivors of hurricane Katrina. You do something for them. Just pass the energy along." I said, and with that I headed along feeling a lot like an angel. It did me as much good to serve as it did them to receive.

I have learned that my answer is not whom you serve that matters, but that service is a transforming spiritual path.

The author, liberal religionist, and Biblical scholar Marcus Borg describes himself as a liberal Christian. He tells in his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, of his experience. He grew up Christian but became an atheist. Without God he reasoned he could not be Christian. Later he rethought his image and understanding of God. He came to feel that God is everything that has been is or will be. God is the Ground of all Being or Becoming, if you will. With a new sense of God, he began to rethink his Christianity. He not did believe in the miracles. He did not believe in the virgin birth. He did not believe in a bodily resurrection, but he did find the life of Jesus inspirational. He wanted to follow in the ways of love as his own way of practicing goodness. This image and metaphor describes what it means to be in right relationship with this Holy One, this Ground of all Being. That metaphor informs his life and sustains him. Borg describes himself as a non-exclusive Christian, inspired by this vitality that is the on going legacy of Jesus.

As I read about progressive Christianity and Christian Humanism, I realize that is a piece of who I am as a religious person. As Marcus Borg says, there is a spirit that moves across time and generations that calls people to serve the poor and to love their neighbor. The life of that moving spirit is his spiritual center.

It is a spiritual center for me. It is not the only way of being, but it one of the ways to practice ethical living. As a religious liberal and a Universalist I know that it is an option for

many of us and is one of the informing ways to be religious and to be Unitarian Universalist.

Annie had grown up loving her father very much. She was partly raised by her grandmother and mostly by her father. Her mother died when she was young. As a young adult she wanted to give her father the nicest birthday present she could think to give him. She wanted to show him she understood how much he, as a single parent and a loving father, had given her. It took her some time to come up with the right gift, but she found it. She visited her grandmother twice a week for weeks and weeks before his birthday. They were planning a surprise birthday present for her Dad. It was not a present that could be unwrapped. So, Dad just had to close his eyes. Then he heard his mother... "Once upon a time there was a tree and a little boy. Every day the boy would come..." The gals were laughing so. He opened his eyes. How could this be a present? And then he realized it was the first time he had ever heard his mother read. She had never read before, because she did not know how to read until this time. The gift Annie had given her father was to teach her grandmother to read. It was a service to another person, to her grandmother and in a Christian sense also her neighbor.

Love is the gift. Pass it along.

Readings

Food for the Spirit, by Rob Eller-Isaacs (adapted)

I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me drink,
I was a stranger and you clothed me,
I was in prison and you came to me.

Generosity is the bread of life and food for the spirit.

Let all who hunger come and eat.

May we never praise with our mouths while denying in our
 hearts or by our acts deny the love that is our common
 speech.

I come to be restored in that love.

I come to be made new as an instrument of that love.

I know that I am worthy. I know that I am welcome.

Here all are worthy.

All are welcome.

"Christian Humanism"

During the past few centuries, scientific breakthroughs along with liberalized theology and scholarly Biblical criticism have fueled a movement among Christians who do not consider the Bible to be literal divine revelation, who reject Biblical and modern claims of miracles (including once-central dogmas such as the virgin birth and physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead), and place a high value on social justice in the world. Most rejected the concept of an eternal hell, many - though by no means all - admitted that they saw no evidence for an immortal soul, and most agreed that action in the current world was more important than debate over such things anyhow.

Some retained belief in a personal, transcendent spirit whom they called *God* but who bore little resemblance to the anthropomorphic God of theism.

Many of those liberal Protestants who continued to value their church and did not wish to identify with the proudly atheistic alternative, came to be known as *religious humanists*. While that term too has had varied meaning, it usually denotes humanists who belong to religious communities of one sort or another, value ritual, and find their spirituality enriched by participation in a community dedicated to that quest. Religious humanism is often contrasted with *secular humanism*, understood as the movement in modern humanism that favors the eradication of all forms of religious behavior from civilization.

But the lifestance of humanists who integrate an ethics of human experience and a joy in life is not only compatible with a vibrant, progressive Christian faith, but it would seem a most reliable foundation for such modern faith.

"*Christian Humanist*" is a term applied to those persons who tend to:

- Choose to identify themselves as Christians after some thought on the subject (i.e., not simply as an inherited label or nominal religious classification)
- Find themselves largely in agreement with the positive aspirations of modern humanism as expressed in such writings as the Humanist Manifesto III
- May or may not believe in a transcendent realm or an immortal component of human existence (soul), or may remain agnostic on the matter, but do believe that good

conduct in this life is of greater importance than such belief.

“Christian Humanism” generally denotes a post-theistic, ethical, and relational spirituality drawing heavily from the vast Christian traditions, while incorporating many progressive values of the modern forms of humanism. This form of Christian humanism integrates the humanistic principles of science and reason, advancement of the common good, morality grounded in human experience, equality for all classes of people, and focus on this natural world, with the Christian gospel of liberty, personal and communal transformation, care of the poor and those in need, celebration of the "sacred" within the "secular", support in community of others along the journey, and above all, boundless love.

Christian humanism sees itself as much a branch or style of Christianity as a branch or style of humanism; even while it draws from Christian history, it nevertheless also places itself within that history. This is no small decision, given the often dark moments of history associated with organized Christianity. Unlike secular humanists, however, Christian humanists believe that shared (but not dictated) religious faith has the glorious *potential* to be one of the most profound unifying and liberating forces in existence, and would rather have a hand in creating that than in conceding Christianity to those with regressive agendas.

Luke 10

And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

And he said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?

And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.

And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.

But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbor?

And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

And by chance there came down a certain priest that way; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take

care of him: and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.

Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was a neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves?

And he said, He that showed mercy on him.

Then Jesus said unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.