

Sermon February 16, 2025 Linda Hoddy

CONTEMPORARY READING: “Wild Faith”

Mine is not the reasoned faith of philosophers, nor measured faith of astronomers; not the doubtful faith of warriors, nor faint faith of the wounded. No, mine is the wild faith, unkempt and throbbing, that sustains dancers, poets and painters, some prisoners and the poor.

THE GOSPEL READING: Luke 7:18-35

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ When the men had come to him, they said, ‘John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”’

Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.’

When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’

(And all the people who heard this, including the tax-collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John’s baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves.)

‘To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling to one another, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.” For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.’

SERMON: Who IS Jesus?” The Rev. Linda Hoddy

The central question of our scripture passage today is Who Is Jesus? Not who WAS he. But Who IS He? For you, for me, for us?

The Jews of first century Palestine were living in perilous times. -- Not too different from our world.— The Romans who occupied and ruled Judea were ruthless and cruel, which only increased the Jewish people's longing for the One who would come. The messenger from God, promised by Isaiah and Micah. The strong man who would kick out the Romans and allow the Jews to govern themselves in a new age of harmony. The question had a sense of urgency: Are you the one? Or should we look for another?

Perhaps this question, Who is Jesus, is settled for you. Perhaps you have a ready and satisfying answer. But for me, it is quite an alive question. To know why, you need to know a little about my background.

I was raised in the Church of God, a very conservative, fundamentalist sect. My family was intensely religious. We went to church at least three times every week, where we learned that the answer to Who is Jesus? was: "He is your savior, because he was crucified for your sins. A sacrifice was required in order for humanity to be reconciled to God, and only God in human form could suffice. Jesus died not just FOR your sins, but BECAUSE of your sins." In the long run I found that pretty hard to take. I suffered some abuse in that system, and I chafed against the theology and the rules and the long lists of things that were "sins".

So, when I got to college, I took a course in World Religions, where I learned that the gods arose and disappeared according to what was going on in the world. I boxed up my fundamentalist Christianity and threw it out wholesale. And yet, I experienced a need for something, a yearning, seeking answers to "life's most persistent questions."

A friend in Atlanta introduced me to Unitarian Universalism in my mid-twenties. I was thrilled. I found a religious community that prized rationality, that drew wisdom from all the world's religions, that offered freedom of belief. But, when I was 30 my brother died of complications of diabetes. I felt like both of us had been crucified. I didn't know if or in what form my family was going to survive. I now know that suffering and sorrow are often gateways to a spiritual path. But the intensity of my religious search increased. I felt called to UU ministry and entered Harvard Divinity School, thrilled to be in a place where I could study world religions.

But, after about 20 years I grew dissatisfied. The congregations with which I had been affiliated were highly Humanistic. Everything had to be rational. Scriptures were dismissed as antiquated and irrational. Jesus was reduced to a human being who had lived a long time ago and had little if anything to say to us modern people. God and prayer, and mystical experiences, were not to be spoken of. I began to feel spiritually starved.

I tried to fill that hunger by taking training in Spiritual Direction at the Shalem Institute. I loved it. I found the Spiritual Directors to be deeply spiritual, and yet also very open. They ruled out only that which seems harmful to life. Prayer is the center of practice among Spiritual Directors.

And so, my answer to that question, Who IS Jesus, has evolved through my spiritual journey. In my childhood and youth, Jesus was sacrificial lamb. During my UU years, Jesus was historical figure. And for the last twelve years, as I have hung out here at the Stockbridge Congregational Church, I've opened to new possibilities of how to answer that question.

Over the years, I have had people tell me “I can believe in Jesus. After all, he was a real human being, who actually lived. But God? God is just a figment of our imaginations.” And I’ve had people tell me, “I believe in God, but Jesus? Jesus is like Santa Claus, a mythical figure.” I suspect that in this room, we have many questions about Who Jesus was and is. I want to begin where we are, with a little participation from you. To that end, I invite you to close your eyes and think for a moment, Who is Jesus for me? And now, with no answers off limits, in a word or a phrase, speak your answer into the room. Not the answer you think you are supposed to give, but the answer in the deepest part of your heart and mind. The answer “I’m not sure” is welcome here. It leaves room for growth. Pastor Brent often says we are welcome here, whether we “believe a little or a lot, or don’t know what to believe.” He, and I, want this to be a place where we can bring our doubts. (Congregation answers.)

Someone has actually studied how sermons by women and men differ in their structure. Men, they say, tend to write linear sermons, which take us from point A to point B. Women explore in more circular ways. I sometimes think of sermons as being a little like those disco balls that have hundreds of little square glass surfaces that reflect the light in many different ways and places. So the question, “Who is Jesus?” has many different answers. And the answers can change as we move through our lives.

When I joined this church, I saw it as exploring my Christian roots. I embraced Jesus as an important wisdom teacher and good model for my life. Living like Jesus was a good way to help create the world I want to live in. I carefully examined the statement of faith, and was relieved that it spoke about the “religion OF Jesus”, not the religion ABOUT Jesus. I was relieved not to have to recite a creed about God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. I thought I had Jesus safely in a little box of rationality and wouldn’t be too disturbed in my comfort. But the Universe, or God, had other plans.

During my training at the Shalem Institute, one of our exercises was to “pray with Icons.” Now, I had never done that. In fact, I was a little suspicious of it, having learned as a child that Roman Catholics engaged in idolatry by praying to the idols in their sanctuaries. But in the spirit of growth, I opened myself to this new-to-me practice.

So, one evening, we were invited to sit before an icon for at least half an hour and pose a question to the icon. There were several icon “stations” around the room, paintings with a religious theme. The electric lights were dimmed, and candles surrounded the icons. I chose as my icon a painting called The Sinai Christ, believed to be the oldest image of Jesus, painted in the sixth century in Constantinople. It shows a man of about thirty, long dark hair, beard, and halo. So, here I sit looking at this face of Jesus, in soft candlelight. And my question is “Should I, do I need to go back to Christianity?” I gaze sleepily at the painting, and for a while not much happens.

But then, the face of Jesus starts changing. The original face of Jesus fades away, and new faces are coming into view. It is “morphing” as we might say today. I see the face of an old, wrinkled woman in middle eastern dress. I see a business man in an expensive suit. I see a homeless man sitting on a street corner with a cup for coins. I see a small child in Africa,

starving in its mother's arms. I see a factory worker. I see sad faces and exuberant faces, and laughing and quizzical faces. And the message I am receiving from Jesus is "I am in everyone. I am everyone." And the question "Should I go back to Christianity?" Jesus seems slightly amused. Smiling a quirky little smile, he says, "If you want to." Wow! That rattled the cage in which I had him securely confined. I asked the instructor about it. She would give me no answers, just shrugged and said, "People often report that the icons 'come alive.'" Oh dear. The historical figure of Jesus has become something else.

Now I understand John 3:16 in a new way. Perhaps God gave his son not because he required a sacrifice, but because he wanted to show us how to love. An ever expanding "Love Eternal" as the hymn says... And what we do or do not do to other people matters in a whole new way. That 25th chapter of Matthew, where Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." And "Truly, I say to you, as you did it NOT to one of the least of these, you did it not to me." It works both ways. Whatever we do, or do not do to one another, we do also to God, because there is that of God in each of us. Whenever we neglect to enact compassion, neglect to feed the hungry, or clothe the naked, or visit the sick or the prisoners, whenever we fail in compassion, we crucify Love anew. These passages are now a touchstone of my living.

I still struggle with atonement theology. And I am grateful that Rick Floyd and Jeremy Ridenour are inviting us to explore that as our Lenten Study this year. I suspect there are things I don't yet know about it, something I have missed. I try to stay open. We humans like to nail things down. Our illusions of rationality help us feel secure. And yet, they can also imprison us. The Buddhists have a saying, "See how far don't-know mind can take you."

I know some of the answers to Who IS Jesus, but I have "miles to go before I sleep." (Robert Frost). My views of Jesus continue to evolve. He's moved from primarily sacrificial lamb to historical figure to a symbol of something deeper and wider.

One of the things that has surprised me about this journey is how deeply I am affected by communion. In the Church of God, we took communion only once or twice a year, usually on Maundy Thursday. I don't remember being affected by it much. I can't yet articulate why, but I find that here I am deeply moved by it, and I feel bereft when I'm singing in the choir and miss participating in it. There is something which it stirs in me. It powerfully symbolizes deep meaning for me.

In Helmut Koester's class on New Testament History at Harvard Divinity School, I learned about the background of communion, a practice called ophagia. Prior to communion, many people practiced a process of eating the god, of ingesting the god in order to take on the power of the god. It reminds me of Native American practices of eating a totem animal, in order to take on the power of the animal. When I partake in communion here with you, I am symbolically consuming the body and blood of Jesus, so that I may take on his power to love, even when love is most challenging. I am allowing his spirit to live in me. That empowers me to love you, even when I don't agree with your politics or your religion or your economics. Even when I am hurt by you. It symbolizes for me that God is present in each of us.

Therefore, we are connected, we are one, and we work for the well-being of one another, and for all human lives. We care about the “least of us,” whether the suffering is material or spiritual. It symbolizes that life is always given up for other life. And that we do so willingly and appreciatively. How willingly we can surrender our material and spiritual comfort for the comfort of others is a measure of our faith. How willing are we to sacrifice so that we can care for “the least of us.?” Will I have enough? Can I trust that if I give away my wealth that God will provide?

It’s not a get-out-of-jail card. It’s not a guarantee that we will not suffer. We’re all subject to the human condition. But Jesus does give us a powerful model for how to deal with our suffering, how to soften into what is real, even sometimes, in being devastated, feeling crucified, and yet rising to live again.

So my answer grows. Jesus, a historical figure. Jesus, one of, perhaps THE best person we have ever known. Jesus, God incarnated present in human form, in Jesus and in all of us. Jesus as Guide for our living. Jesus, our foremost example of sacrificial love. Jesus, a living presence in my life.

Don’t be afraid to let your answers evolve. When I was undergoing psychological evaluation for the ministry, they were a little concerned because my Rorschach tests had “a lot of flying” in them. Probably I had seen Star Wars or Star Trek not too long before, and saw in the ink blots the shapes of space ships. That was my explanation then. My thought now is that I was flying around a lot psychically, spiritually restless, because I had thrown out the Christianity of my childhood, and was bouncing around from religion to religion, wandering through Buddhism and yoga and the wisdom of Lao Tse and Rumi. And I still find wisdom in those traditions.

But it was a little like being a water spider. I skimmed the surface. And I began to long to go deep. Imagine my surprise, when in divinity school, I found I was not most interested in world religions, but my best class was Old Testament. Then I realized, I could experience other religions intellectually. But reading about basketball is not the same as playing basketball. I had been steeped in Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, as we more respectfully say today. Thus it spoke to me in deeper ways than “reading about.” Now, I am more grounded, partly because I am more deeply grounded in one faith.

This week, in the Christian Century newsletter, there is a review of a new translation of Simone Weil’s book, “The Need for Roots.” Reviewer Mac Loftin wrote: “Politically, The Need for Roots is impossible to pin down. The book’s central concept of ‘rootedness’—Bringing all the soul’s needs together -- is kept broad enough to encompass a range of political forms. We’re rooted when we feel ourselves (to be) irreplaceable members of a community with a past and hopes for the future. But these roots are fragile, and Weil spends much of the book talking about uprootedness. Colonization, war, capitalism, racial supremacy —all these structures of domination sever the attachments necessary to fulfill our deepest needs.”

Weil wrote the book in 1943, also a perilous time. Exploring my roots in Christianity has given me a deeper grounding. I have grown roots by being part of a community “with a past, and hopes for the future.” Yet, I also know that religion can be used for harm as well as healing, and I try to

guard against those parts of the faith which divide people into those who are 'acceptable' and those who are not. The Jesus whom I follow excludes no one, and offers compassion to all.

I sometimes think of choosing a faith tradition as being a little like marriage. Just because I am married to John Tracy does not mean that I dislike or discount or cannot learn from other people. But because I am committed to him, I have a deeper relationship with him. I have had the privilege of watching him unfold as a person, of walking with him for 50 years, through joys and sorrows, births and deaths, "for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health."

We are all in different places. Some of us may be in a church for the first time ever. Some of us have graduate degrees in theology. Some of us skip around from religion to religion, never quite finding the place we want to put down roots, never making the transition from tourist to pilgrim. Some of us feel Jesus is like Santa Claus, a nice myth. And some discount Jesus, as did the Pharisees and the lawyers of his day because he challenged social boundaries, eating with tax collectors and prostitutes. They slandered him, dismissing him as "a glutton and a drunkard."

Each of us must answer the question, Who Is Jesus? for ourselves. Who is he for us today? And to what and to whom is he calling us today? It actually takes great faith to abandon our locked-in, tightly defended world views. I advocate letting go of the mental gymnastics, and instead, simply looking at what Jesus said and did.

He restored sight to the blind. Some blindness is in the ways we think, and not just in what our eyes see. He healed the lame, restoring mobility. Again, that might be physical, and it might be spiritual and mental, as in trying to see the point of view of those with whom we disagree. He cleansed lepers. He raised the dead,-- physically and spiritually.

You don't have to nail down the meaning of Jesus in a tightly-reasoned, well-structured theological statement. Simply rely on him as a Guide. Read the gospels, learn what he actually said and did, And what those first-century witnesses said about him. Let him guide you to joining in the suffering of others, relieving it wherever you can. Jesus saves the world through us, through our awakening to truth, speaking it in love, caring for, healing, embracing and rejoicing in and with one another. All of us. All Humans. Let Him be your Guide.