



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### The Barbarian Way

Rev. Hannah Petrie, Associate Minister  
December 14, 2014

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 [information@neighborhooduu.org](mailto:information@neighborhooduu.org)

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The power of Jesus never fails to amaze me. Every year, my husband Kit and I attend the annual KCRW public radio station fund-raiser, Masquerade, which is a huge Halloween dance party at the legendary Park Plaza hotel in downtown Los Angeles. We always do a couple costume – in some previous years we were a bee and bee-keeper, Adam and Eve, lion and lion-tamer. This year we decided to go biblical again and be Jesus and a prostitute.

Not Mary Magdalene, an anonymous prostitute, for that is true to his story. Jesus saw the goodness in anyone who was labeled as a sinner, like prostitutes or the tax-collectors who were associated with corruption in his day. This is why the primal message of Jesus is a powerful one of hope for so many people. You don't have to be a prostitute to feel like you're a sinner. Any of us label ourselves as sinners for the mistakes we can make and deeply regret - and here is a message that promises forgiveness, freedom, and salvation.

So it's not that Jesus was "way cool" and that's why he hung out with sinners. Jesus looked at people who were defined by their sins and instead saw names and faces and stories and hope.<sup>i</sup> But to the members of high society in Jesus' day, these were barbarian acts to comfort "women of sin." And I think that's what McManus, the author of *The Barbarian Way* is trying to get at – that the original message of Jesus was to follow his example, and break the codes of our socialization. Reach out to human beings who are distraught, have lost their way - who are different from ourselves but as human as we are, and as rightfully share residency in the Kingdom of God.

I want to explore what this could mean for us as religious liberals. But first, I'd like to tell you what it was like being Jesus with random whore at the KCRW Masquerade. I was an awesome-looking whore, but Jesus got all of the attention. It was like I wasn't even there. If you know what Kit looks like, you can see how he could really pull off the Watchtower version of Jesus. When he was younger, he had long hippie hair, and his friends teased him by calling him Jesus. At the Masquerade, Kit wore his internet-purchased long-haired wig with a crown of thorns and a long tunic. I saved money and drew upon my own cache of sinful-lady-wear. Perhaps people mistook me for any number of female pop music performers, but there was no mistaking Jesus. Many people exclaimed with reverence, aha it's the Lord! And they were genuinely happy to see him, giving him high-fives and expressing their love of Jesus in a sincere way. Other party-goers gave him menacing looks like, "how dare you dress up like Jesus and dirty-dance with the harlot."

We decided red wine was our proper beverage of choice that evening and we really had a blast. When we ordered drinks Jesus ordered water since he could turn it into wine. Maybe Jesus *partying* with a prostitute was not biblically accurate, but the sex-positive Jesus was our Halloween twist on it, and a couple costume I'll never forget.

In part what we were doing was making fun of the ubiquity of Jesus – he’s everywhere! He *is* a superstar and I personally identify as a fan of Jesus the man, Jesus the prophet who came to teach us how to live in right relationship with one another.

Generally, it can be challenging for religious liberals such as ourselves, as Unitarian Universalists, to navigate our feelings about Jesus. Some of us come from faith traditions that used Jesus in harmful ways, to shame or condemn. The theology of Jesus is often associated with violence, pain, and suffering. Is it worth it to stand up for the Jesus we can believe in? It’s true we could live religious and meaningful lives without Jesus, but his primal message of love as action is timeless and as relevant as ever. The struggle for society to really learn and be transformed by his teachings is ongoing, exciting, full of passion and a deep yearning for justice. It can also be “barbarian” - dangerous and unpredictable because it’s a struggle that goes beyond the walls that house our comfort zones – like this sanctuary, like our homes.

Unitarian Universalism does not call itself a Christian faith, but true to McManus’ critique, we too can be too civilized and safe a faith tradition. Allowing the deeper meaning of the “reason for the season” – Jesus – to fit into our Christmas holidays could become a little untidy.

I love Christmas – the gift-giving, the decorations, the rituals. But my favorite thing is getting down to the primal, ancient meaning of it. First, I love celebrating the solstice and acknowledging the gift of light and the miracle of the solar system that makes life possible in the first place. Then, after I’ve dug beneath the commercial distraction of Christmas, I love to celebrate the birth of a great teacher for humanity. I reflect on how the message of Jesus was not pretty and proper, or about choosing the perfect gift, but about seeing my part in how I do or do not help create the Kingdom of God, which I think of as the state of humanity being in right relationship with one another.

I’ve been leading social justice programs and initiatives here at Neighborhood Church for seven and a half years now, and the work I love most is getting myself and you out into the community, making a difference, building relationships. And from the popularity of such programs as Esperanza, Jericho Road, Building Bridges and Big Saturday, I know you guys love it, too. Rev. Lissa also loves it – last week she spent a lot of her time on the streets, leading peaceful protest against the non-indictment of the police officer who choked Eric Garner to death.

What we’ve done and do is great. But what would it mean to step up our participation and have a more barbarian response to injustice, one that is less civilized and untamed?

In this country, we’ve always lived in barbaric times, because slavery was barbaric. We’ve never outgrown the barbaric bi-products of racial injustice – there is as much Jim Crow injustice today as there ever was. The difference since August is that it’s been thrust into the consciousness of mainstream America. Barbaric times demand a barbarian response. In this

context, the clarion call of Jesus to love thy neighbor is impossible to ignore – but what does that look like?

David Shechtman's testimony can begin that conversation. I loved his piece because it spoke to the ministry I've worked to convey for several years here – get out and meet people who are different from you – do not be afraid! Talk to people, as David has, to people you do not agree with. Break the social codes of silence that keep us polarized and keep injustice in place. Make mistakes – put your foot in your mouth and then learn from it. Don't retreat!

Another of McManus' critiques of sanitized Christianity is that it doesn't ask that much of us. We don't ask that much of you either. We don't indoctrinate, we say, "for your consideration . . ." Maybe, like McManus is suggesting, I need to be more barbarian, and express in more raw fashion something that I've come to understand in recent years in my advocacy work, especially with the issues related to Incarceration Nation, or the Prison Industrial Complex.

I've come to understand that complacency is participation in injustice – it's passive, but it's participation because we go along with it. Unless the masses demand change – and the masses cannot 'on masse' without our demographic – after a few months, it will return to business as usual – to police killings of black and brown unarmed men and children (such as, right here in Pasadena, Kendrick McDade), and private incarceration corporations like GEO will continue to see their stock prices soar. You want a solid investment? Invest in incarceration – it's one of the strongest industries in America.

Without a barbarian response to these barbaric times, of impassioned protest, of witness, of advocacy that is inconvenient, of relationship-building that is uncomfortable and time-consuming, we will continue on the present trajectory of more deeply entrenched suffering and injustice. It's on our watch and it's by our own hands.

This is a dangerous thing for me to accuse you of! I know how overwhelmed we feel with the demands of our everyday lives because I feel overwhelmed, too – just with trying to be a good parent, for example. Today, I'm taking my kids with me to the march.

The phrase that keeps repeating in my mind is: don't be Christian, be Christ! Jesus said, come, follow me. Follow me to the march today – cancel your plans. You can buy Christmas gifts or clean your house another day.

If you can't make it you will not be judged. But for your consideration, reflect on this during this holiday season: We miss out if we choose to stay in our safety zones, and conclude that life is just about trying to do the best we can so we can feel okay about ourselves. It's a mistake because we're opting out of a salvation that brings authentic comfort and joy, especially for religious liberals. The substance of that salvation is participating in the world in such a way that makes a difference, is defined by service, and is far more connected to the world we all share - the world as it is.

We can stay safe in our little bubble of like-minded folk, but are we really safe there, or just limited? Safety doesn't matter so much when we are saved by experiencing the world in all its fullness: in its pain, its injustice, and the struggle to make us all free. We are saved with the knowledge that no one is on the outside, when this many people are on the inside, and it's up to each one of us as much as anyone else to transform ourselves in order to transform the world.

Here's an example of something I'm thinking about doing, but I'm frightened of doing. I live in Altadena where I'm proud to say we are a mixed community of many races who get along and respect each other – except – for a few areas. Some blocks here and there are riddled with gangs, and have been for decades. Except now, it's getting worse because of gentrification, gentrification that I'm probably a part of. The complexity of gentrification is sermon material for another day, but the point is it's making gang tensions worse because these neighborhoods are squeezing them out, little by little.

On October 30<sup>th</sup>, there was a shooting, just blocks from where I live, at the Fair Oaks Burger at Fair Oaks and Calaveras. A 26-year old named Chris Walker became the victim of a revenge killing, I am told, between the Crips and the Bloods.

I know the business-owner of the Fair Oaks Burger and the business-owner across the street at Pizza of Venice, because we all hang out at the local pub where – not everybody – but several people know my name. The business-owner at Pizza of Venice rushed across the street as the shooters drove off. The man was shot six times and he saw him die, which was as traumatizing as it sounds. Christy, the owner of Fair Oaks Burger was also traumatized by this event, and it's why I was afraid to ask her about my idea.

My idea is to get Father Gregory Boyle to come speak at the Fair Oaks Burger, which has a huge parking lot, maybe on the six month anniversary of the shooting. Neighborhood Church could sponsor it, and it would be a way to bring the community together, and talk about the struggle of gang warfare, about gentrification, about what we as a whole community can do about this. Father Boyle is the Jesuit Priest that began Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, and back in the 90's, helped gangs sign truces in the Boyle Heights area. Does he still do this kind of work? I'm not sure, but maybe he could tell some community leaders how to do it. Who could be the Father Boyle of Altadena?

Will Father Gregory Boyle accept this invitation? I don't know, I need to find out. If anyone here has connections, let me know. I did find the courage to ask Christy, and to my surprise, she thought it was a great idea. So I'm going to work on this and I'd love anyone's help with it. Could we pull it off? There's only one way to find out – by wading through our fears and having barbarian courage and creativity - we could find a way. If not Father Boyle, then someone else, someone else. Maybe the Altadena Police Chief. Maybe someone we would

never think of until we think outside the box, and we get barbarian and uppity and make a new friend.

This potential rally and the march today are absolutely related, as they're also related to our work with immigrant detainees, and the effort to create a civilian oversight body of the Pasadena Police Department. We are bearing witness, and we cannot deeply bear witness without building relationships and making new friends along the way.

What new friends do you wish to find in the Kingdom of God? I'm going out on a limb here today, using these high-falutin' religious phrases. I believe that's what you called me to do, and what you've called Rev. Lissa to do, and we're going to do it. We're going to go out on limbs because we have faith in ourselves and we have faith in you. There are times we are called to our ancient roots, to the roots of Christianity that served faithful Unitarians and Universalists for centuries, calling on them to have barbarian courage in their times of deep trouble, deep despair, and deep injustice.

These are the troubled times of our day. The dirty laundry of America blows everywhere and we can't ignore it without shutting down our spirits. So let us be brave and activate our spirits, our deeply flawed and human spirits, our barbarian spirits that no amount of fear could tempt back into complacency. We don't have to be Christian, we can be Christ, and see names and faces and stories and hope – we can see the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. Let us be true to our religious impulse, to discover what it really means to love our neighbors as ourselves, to work together – so that our impact shall reach far and wide, well beyond the walls of this beloved sanctuary, far beyond what we ever dreamed possible.  
LET it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://redemptionpictures.com/2013/08/22/friend-of-sinners/>