



UU Minister Erik Walker Wilkstrom suggests that we must look to our roots in order to understand who we are and we have to acknowledge that both Unitarianism and Universalism are rooted in Christianity as is most of western society as a reason for studying scripture and the character of Jesus.¹ I think that this is not only important to understanding our roots but also in proclaiming and living out our justice work.

In today's polarized cultural, ethnic, political and religious world. It is more important than ever that we are able to pull on sources of good will and justice to engage dialogue.

I believe we need to be able to pull on scriptures, Christian and others to enter into dialogue with people in the middle as well as people of fundamental, radicalized and extremist views. Not to argue with them but to be able to understand their point of view and to express ours in a manner that they can understand and relate to. It is by doing this - by using positive reinforcement of the positive messages in the scriptures especially in our own context and in our own individual stories that help bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice² one heart and one mind and one soul at a time.

Ok but enough of all that ... Let's talk about Jesus: Who is this guy named Jesus?

If we are going to understand who the "historical" Jesus was we must first understand his context and separate Jesus of Nazareth the historical figure from Jesus Christ, the founder of faith. We must as Jefferson tells us separate the "gold from the dross"³

So let's start with a few commonly believed and fairly universally accepted facts:

Jesus was a Middle Eastern Jew living in Galilee which is on the outskirts of Jerusalem. His parents were political refugees fleeing their hometown to escape genocide.

He practiced the faith of his people but was an outcast and seen as an unworthy Jew because he was from Galilee. He lived under Roman occupation and culturally probably was more Greek than Jewish. He probably spoke Greek as his primary language, Aramaic, and realistically only some very limited Hebrew.

He was poor.

¹ Wilkstrom, Rev Erik Walker, Jesus and the Modern Seeker in UU World, (January/February 2004)

² Theodore Parker

³ Jefferson Letter

According to Wilkstrom 80% of the people were below the poverty level⁴ meaning they didn't have stable, shelter, food or legitimate income and as Stephen Patterson put it in *The God of Jesus*, "Rome slowly siphoned the life out of places like Palestine." Therefore, the Jesus that I know understood poverty and oppression and he had firsthand knowledge of suffering.

Jesus lived with, was one of and spoke out on behalf of the poor, oppressed and outcast.

He believed everyone deserved healthcare. He defended immigrants. He was a revolutionary. He practiced, preached and promoted civil disobedience and violated religious laws. He gave his life to defend his beliefs and the people that he served. He was unjustly executed by Rome as a political criminal.

Ultimately, he wanted a revitalization of Judaism and the end of the oppression of his people the oppression that was handed to them by the Roman authority.

He believed in the possibility of a new world order, one that was rooted in justice and liberation for all people - He was a Universalist! This new world he named the Kingdom of God⁵ - Basileia - a word that many of us, myself included today term as the beloved community.

Ultimately, he gives a pretty a detailed description of how to manifest this beloved community in his parables - both in and outside the Sermon on the Mount from the Books of Matthew and Luke of the Christian Testament.

He directs his followers to overturn the social norms of oppression of the then modern world and to challenge both religious and civic authority on all fronts.

Today, we as UUs, we continue in this heritage by accepting Jesus as a great sage; in communion with Moses, Muhammad, Siddhartha Gautama and others offering a message of salvation. In 2001 the UUA's Commission on Appraisal, which is the way we officially review and reflect on who we are as UUs, as whole stated very clearly. The salvation we share in is "not as an entry pass into another world at death, but as [is] the recognition that right here we have an opportunity to be more than we currently are, to become complete, to find wholeness, health, shalom."⁶

As Unitarian Universalists, we are very willing to tackle social justice issues in the world around us. Similar to the spirit of Jesus' message to his followers, many of us challenge civic and political authorities every day. Struggling for peace in the Middle East, we provide homes and protection for refugees, we provide homes and protections for undocumented persons, speaking out against homophobia and genderphobia, and we demand healthcare for all. We even challenge other religious traditions when they work against any of these ways to build the beloved community.

⁴ Jesus and the modern seeker By Erik Walker Wikstrom

⁵ Mark 4:10-12

⁶ (The Commission on Appraisal 2001), 18.

Today, we are entering a season and time of reflection as Unitarian Universalists and a whole religious tradition. The UUA has been called out by its own to reflect on the power structures it is participating in that give power to white supremacy and more. We are being called upon as UUs to not only look outward but to now look inward. Just as Jesus demanded that religious authority of his day be reformed, we are being called upon today to reform, rebuild, and reinvest in the UUA and Unitarian Universalism in a way that is difficult and challenging. Just as Jesus called out the Sadducees and Pharisees to look at their hypocrisy and failure to care for its community, we are called out upon look at our own hypocrisy and to look at our failure to care for our community. How are failing to truly engage, promote, and celebrate the inherent worth and dignity of the oppressed in our midst in this case persons of color.

Some people are calling this an emergency. I do not see this as an emergency, it is simply a revelation to white people of the life of a UU persons of color in their communities. I see this as a call to action to swallow our pride, stop patting ourselves on our liberal backs and to get back to work of self-identifying how we participate in social power structures and norms that oppress those sitting in the seats next to us. Do we look around and see who is sitting in the seats next to us? And who isn't?

This is an opportunity for all of us to reflect on our privilege and our oppression in this UUA faith and tradition and in this community.

It is a time for systematic change. It is time for us to reflect on how we comprehensively strategize overturning powerful religious traditions that we maintain in our community.

It is a time for us look at how we welcome people of color in this UU community and across our UU tradition. The UUA has been specifically called upon to look at its hiring practices but I am here to say today that this is not enough. We must as UUs reflect and act on a deeper level. We must reflect and act on how we engage our theologies, who we are as both individuals and as a community. Where do we come from? What are we striving to be? Will we continue to be the Pharisees and Sadducees of today? We will hold onto our sacred and religious structures and traditions of power and privilege at the expense of the people in our care or will we open our hearts, sacred homes, sacred spaces, and our very souls to the plight of the people of color in our community.

We will stretch and grow to change our not only our hiring practices but also our leadership models, our worship styles, our teaching methods and our hospitality?

Are we willing to truly offer radical hospitality to those around us? Every time I discuss radical hospitality in UU circles, the feedback is: "We can't be all things to all people." In some ways I will agree with that statement but in another way I will state very truthfully that that statement is a "cop out." Of course we can't be all things to all people but that doesn't give us carte blanche to just do business as usual. It doesn't give us an excuse to become unchangeable and rigid in our experience.

When discussing leadership. It doesn't give us justification for not changing our leadership models. Instead it should call us to create new models of accountability for our leadership teams that demand accountability to seek out diversity and identify areas where we fail to be hospitable to people of color and others. We need to demand more transparency and reflection on our powerful leadership structures.

When discussing worship. It doesn't give us justification for telling someone, you can't clap during service, there is no room in a sacred space for call and response, or that the music has to be cold and emotionless. It calls us to engage a spirit of community that transcends the here and now.

When discussing our teaching models. It doesn't give us justification for developing curriculum that is white centric and solely highlights white people in history. We would not accept this in our school systems and we should not accept this in our religious education classes. Curriculum that leaves people of color to the periphery is simply unacceptable.

When discussing hospitality. It doesn't give us justification for objectifying people of color, their traditions or cultures as points of multicultural education or experience.

People of color are not here to diversify our UU communities, they, we, are here to be loved and welcomed into the community of beloved in wholeness. We happen to bring with us a rich heritage that we can share as a matter of love.

We need to remember that outreach to people of color is not a social justice project. I am not a social justice project. Outreach to people of color is an offer of love.

Now understand, I am not saying of these things as an indictment of this congregation, quite frankly to state anything about this congregation specifically would be antithetical this goal of this talk. If we are to reject and overturn White Supremacy we must step back and look at all of our UU communities and as a whole systematically. White Supremacy is not a local issue it is a systematic issue. That said, I will state systems of oppression are not changed from the top down. If we want to see systematic change we must think globally and act locally

It is now a time for us to have reflect on the actions of the man Jesus that both walked into and overturned the Temple⁷ and washed the feet of his followers.

We must reflect and ask will we be a "den of robbers" in the temple that prevent our UU sanctuaries from becoming beloved to all?

We must reflect and ask will we offer radical hospitality and be servant leaders not only to the world but each other? Will we ask to have our feet washed or wash the feet of the person next to us?

⁷ Matthew 21:12-13

We must come together as a community of beloved.

As we go forward from this space, we must be generous people, generous in the spirit of a great prophet named Jesus who offered salvation and liberation to the oppressed. We must move forward redefining ourselves not by who we used to be as Unitarian Universalists, not by who we are today and who are to become?

