Whose Jesus is it anyways?
Rev. Bob LaVallee
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There’s a picture that appears about every month in the news these days. Most of the people in the picture are different each time, but the tableau is the same. It’s a picture taken in the oval office, where the president is surrounded by evangelical faith leaders. Some of them are placing their hands on him, much like we lay hands on people in our church during moments of special blessing.¹

Somehow these “Christian” leaders have found their way to bless this con man who was recently fined $2 million dollars² for directing his foundation’s funds that are meant for charities into his own pockets. Month after month these photo-ops appear. And Jesus wept.

And at the same time, I saw where the magazine Christianity Today, that was founded by Billy Graham, called for Trump’s removal, describing him as “a near perfect example of a human being who is morally lost and confused”.³ I don’t know how Jesus would react to that but I like to picture Jesus high fiving the editor

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¹ https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-impeachment-pastors-pray-white-house

² https://apnews.com/7b8d0f5ce9cb4cadad9488c2c414af57

Today I’m going to talk about Jesus. Before I do, I want to say that I have some understanding of how hard this topic can be for some folks. I know that some people come to UU explicitly because they were traumatized by a Christian church in their past. I know that they heard from preachers that preached about Jesus in some way or other and who used those texts to demonize and exclude. And I know that the reason that some folks are here is because the idea of Jesus causes them pain and they want to hear something else.

If someone is here who comes with wounds from a so-called Christian church, I want them to know that they are welcomed here with love and compassion. My hope is that this sermon today might bring healing and understanding, rather than pain. I’ll be available after church to talk individually with folks if they want.

And if you’re not a regular attendee of this church, you should know that we’ll talk about Jesus more during this service than we probably will the entire rest of the year combined, so please don’t think that this is what we do all the time. And thank you to everyone in advance for your generosity of attention and your open minds.
A couple years ago I got arrested in a protest at the Erie County Jail. I won’t get into the specifics of the protest but a couple of details matter: first, I put myself in the position to be arrested as an expression of my faith and values. Being a UU in the way that I understand being a UU to be, drove me to that jail. Second, when I was arrested, I was in my formal clergy garb: black suit, black shirt with a tab collar, a UU chalice pendant hanging around my neck. I showed up with all the symbols of being a religious authority in the Christian tradition.

Four of us were arrested in that protest for peaceful civil disobedience. We were handcuffed and brought into the back. And then this happened. While I was standing there in handcuffs, a deputy holding my arm, one of the supervisors came up to me and began screaming in my face. He wasn’t upset by what I had done so much as the fact that I did it as a minister. “How dare you!” he yelled. “You call yourself a man of the cloth!” After he finished he spun on his heel and charged away. I called after him “When I was in prison, you visited me.” You may remember that line from our reading from Matthew.

Clearly, he and I had different idea about what the message of Jesus was.
It’s not just here that this difference of opinion exists. 81% of folks who are white and describe themselves as Evangelical or born-again voted for the current administration. And I will give that 81% the benefit of the doubt and take at face value that they are serious about their Christianity.

On the other hand, we have Rev. William Barber, a Protestant minister and pastor of a Disciples of Christ Church. He’s leading the Poor People’s Campaign and uses explicitly biblical language to denounce the Trump administration. He and his people take their Christianity seriously too but their version of Christianity takes them to a very different place. Which of these groups is a “true Christian”?

And I wanna pause here to make an observation about why this is an important conversation. Sometimes when we have conversations about religion with folks outside of our faith group, the conversation ends with someone saying “Well, at their heart, all religions are the same”.

I worked as a chaplain in a hospital with all kinds of people and this happens to me sometimes. “At their heart, all religions are the same.” That’s a nice way of avoiding conflict, but it’s totally a crock. Different religions aren’t the same at their heart. The SAME religions aren’t the same at their heart. And the great example of that is the huge mess called Christianity. There wouldn’t be a thousand flavors of Protestant (including UU) if, at their heart, all religions were the same. Within Christianity, there are lots of ideas of who Jesus Christ is, and what he taught.
For the sake of time and simplicity, I'm gonna limit my talk to two major schools of thought about who is this Jesus guy. The first of these is the Jesus who died for our sins. The second is the Jesus who comforted the poor and oppressed.

Let’s talk first about the Jesus who died for our sins. This is the idea that a kind of transaction happened. We mortals inherited the blot of sin from our ancestors all the way back to Adam and Eve. We were all doomed to go to hell until Jesus came, and taught us for a few years, and then willingly surrendered himself to death on the cross. This voluntary death caused God, his father to grant salvation, that is, guaranteed life in heaven, to all who followed Jesus. The bible quote is “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” This appears in the New Testament book of John, third chapter, verse 16. If you watched football on TV in the 90’s, you might remember this guy who seemed to be at every game, wearing a big rainbow afro wig and holding a sign that said John 3:16.
Now in fairness, if there was a bon fide conservative theologian in the room right now they’d be flipping out at how I’ve simplified this idea of salvation. And if you’re curious, there are plenty of places to learn more about this concept of salvation.

But related to this is the message that Jesus is the one and only way to salvation. In the New Testament, John 14:6, it reads “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” Which some Christian churches take to mean, “Get on our team or you’re going to hell.”

The consequence of this idea of Jesus is that there are a lot of churches that focus on getting salvation by believing in Jesus as the savior and then following the rules that these churches glean from the bible, both the old testament and the new testament. And a lot of these rules revolve around notions of purity. Sexual purity is a big obsession with some churches. It shows up in a bunch of ways, including clergy being required to be celibate, or only heterosexual and married folks having sex, or avoiding unclean thoughts. The list goes on.
Related to that, many of these churches that focus on salvation through belief also have specific ideas about the roles of women. And those roles are not fair. Women can’t lead worship, women can’t lead the church, women must obey their husbands. It’s real, it’s a huge presence in American public life, and we need to see it for what it is. Which is straight up sexism.

But the thing is, this Jesus is legitimately in the New Testament. In Ephesians 5:22 it says: Wives should obey their husbands in everything, just as the church people obey Christ. Ephesians 5:24: Wives, obey your husbands as you obey the Lord.

1 Corinthians 6:9 Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robber-none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

I’ll stop there because it’s awful, but my point is that a person can read these lines and decide that’s how to be a Christian and they’d be kinda right. That’s one way to follow Jesus in good faith, pun intended.
Our second Jesus is Jesus the comforter of the poor and the oppressed. This Jesus is the one who said when I was hungry, you gave me food, when I was a stranger, you welcomed me. And Jesus was pretty clear about how he felt about money and wealth.

In Matthew 6:24 he says
“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

And here’s a doozy for you:

Mark 10:27
Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

I saw recently where the early Christians taught “if you have two coats, you have stolen one from a poor person.” They meant that any kind of excess accumulation of wealth was a kind of theft from the poor. What a statement about income inequality.

So we see here another view of Jesus, one that is also validated through the New Testament. And here’s my bias at work, but I think the messages about compassion for the least, last, and lost are a lot more clear and common throughout the new testament.
Now, these two schools can certainly overlap but my experience is that individual churches and traditions tend to lean more one way than the other.

One could say that this is a conversation about biblical authority and interpretation. I say, let’s face it, this is a conversation about values. When we make decisions about our faith, we all start with our values, acknowledged or unacknowledged, and work our way backwards, picking the texts and experiences and wisdom and traditions that support those values. Now, our values may have been shaped by experiences in church when we were kids, but many UUs can attest to the fact that their current values are an explicit rejection of the values they heard as kids on Sunday.

And I want to make this very clear. I’m not here today to get anyone to become a Christian of any sort. Choose Jesus, choose Buddha, choose Beyonce. It doesn’t matter to me!
But this conversation does matter to UUs, Christian or not. It matters because if we’re honest with ourselves, we do the same thing, just with a much broader palate. We UUs explicitly draw on many sources. Christian and Jewish teachings for sure, and humanist teachings, and earth-centered traditions and our own experience and intuition. And we choose the sources and lessons that reflect our values. That’s OK, as long as we’re aware of what we’re doing. Now hopefully because of our celebration of theological diversity, the way we welcome differences of belief in our pews, we’re also getting stretched and pulled and growing into new ways of thinking and being and acting that cause our values to deepen and even shift. That’s a healthy thing.

And let’s take a moment to declare a few of those values out loud. One of our values is that everyone is deserving of love. That’s our Universalist heritage. Another value is that everyone has the right to explore their conscience in their own way. That’s our Unitarian Heritage. And third value is that we have an obligation to work for the common good. That’s the long history in both traditions of resistance on behalf of the oppressed.
Bob:
I’m going to stop there for a moment, and before I wrap up this sermon, I want to explain what’s going to happen as soon as this sermon is over. And Reverend Angela is going to help. Angela, will you join me up here?

Today is going to be one of the best coffee hours ever at First U, today we’re doing coffee hour in our newly, renovated, Social Hall! *(likely applause here)* That’s right! We are wrapping up this service a few minutes early so we can gather outside in the courtyard for a ribbon cutting.

Angela:
We’ve waited a long time for this day. When I started here as one of your ministers in 2010, that hall was our sanctuary! But we had outgrown it. So we built this one. And we used our beloved, echo-ey old hall as well as we could as a social hall for a while. But after sixty years as our sanctuary, it was in need of a lot of work, and it needed to be adapted properly for its new use.

So for several years now we’ve been dreaming and planning. Last year, we rolled up our sleeves and banded together to raise the money. Construction started last May, just after Bob’s first visit here as our new Associate Minister. For the last seven months, we’ve watched with excitement… and lots and lots of patience. We owe a special debt of gratitude to the volunteers who served on the design and fundraising teams. One of your fellow church members, Steve Phillips, worked especially hard, volunteering as the church’s representative and coordinator in this big, complex project. He has been here for several hours per day, just about every day, since May.

Bob: It took a huge amount of vision, generosity, and volunteerism to make this happen.

Angela: *(I may initiate applause at that)*. And we’ve been waiting week by week since early November to know exactly what day it would finally be ready.

Bob: It’s today!! I can see that this shiny new Social Hall is a reflection of a church that has grown and evolved.

Angela: Very much so. Now, when you enter the hall this morning, you’ll notice that we are still getting settled in—we’re waiting for a couch for one of the
meeting rooms to arrive next week, for example. And there are a few loose ends for the construction company to tie up. But we wanted to open the hall just as soon as we could to start sharing and enjoying all that we’ve accomplished together.

So, this morning’s ribbon cutting is simple and joyful.

And then, we’re going to celebrate in a big way at the Social Hall dedication and dance party on the evening of Friday January 17th.

**Bob:** Save the date! Friday the 17th.
- So here’s how this works: after I give the benediction, we’re going to start singing Deck The Halls. The words are in your order of service. During the first verse, the children from RE will be coming into the back of the sanctuary. Families of those children should go meet them during the first verse. Just the families with children in RE. (*you might want to repeat this*)
- When the second verse starts, we’re all going to process out to the courtyard for the ribbon cutting.

**Angela:** There will be volunteers from the construction team wearing yellow hats and they can answer any questions you have about the facility. Be sure to thank them, too, for the many hours they have put in. All right, I’ll head toward the courtyard. See you out there in a few minutes.

*Bob finishes service as Angela heads to back of sanctuary to lead procession*...
OK, back to the sermon: After all this Jesus talk, here’s my prayer for us in this congregation and in our larger faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism: I pray that we examine our values to ensure that we never hold a value without knowing that we are indeed holding that value.

I pray that we examine the texts and experiences and traditions that we hold close as Unitarian Universalists and ask ourselves if they really reflect those values?

I pray that we also consider what we are choosing to ignore in those texts and experiences and traditions. What might we be glossing over because we like some other piece of it?

And I pray, most of all, that we journey together, helping each other live up to our values as best we can.

Amen and blessed be.

Deck the Halls