

“The Beatitudes”

When I was searching for a new ministry last Autumn, I read materials from a number of churches. Several congregations included comments from individual parishioners about what they were looking for in a minister. The following caution, voiced by one congregant for his church’s Search Committee, was particularly memorable: “Make certain you don’t hire a Christian,” he wrote. “They won’t always admit it, and you can’t always tell.”

His comment moved me to think back 15 years to my first paid position in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, as their Director of Religious Education. I asked the minister of that church, “How am I, a Christian, going to serve a non Christian congregation?” “Act like a Christian,” he said. His humbling words turned out to be a very useful rudder as I entered the wide waters of Unitarian Universalist theological diversity.

These days I’m not so sure I know what it means to act like a Christian anymore. I know that many of the most vocal people who say they are Christians are downright scary. I’m with Carl Sandburg, who, in 1915, wrote these words in his poem to the conservative Christian evangelist Billy Sunday:

"You come along... tearing your shirt... yelling
about Jesus.
I want to know... what the hell... you
know about Jesus.

Jesus had a way of talking softly and everybody
except a few bankers and higher-ups among the
con men of Jerusalem liked to have this Jesus
around because he never made any fake passes
and everything he said went and he helped the
sick and gave the people hope.

You come along squirting words at us, shaking
your fist and calling us damn fools so fierce the
froth of your own spit slobbers over your lips --
always blabbing we're all going to hell straight
off and you know all about it.

I've read Jesus' words. I know what he said. You
don't throw any scare into me. I've got your
number. I know how much you know about Jesus."

I’ve thought of Carl Sandburg’s poem so many times. When I hear some Christians talk about Jesus, and what exactly they say the Bible says, and who is going to heaven and who to hell, I think of blabbing and frothing Billy Sunday.

When Gary and I settled upon the idea of "Blessing" for this month's theme in the Society, I knew I wanted to explore with you the blessings known as "The Beatitudes," as given by Jesus in, among other places, the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament Gospel of Matthew. But the Billy Sundays in our culture can obscure the blessings to be discovered in the Christian tradition. And I find that quite a few Unitarian Universalists - like that disgruntled parishioner suspicious of Christian clergy - just don't want to hear about Jesus. Over the years that I've been in the ministry I have listened to folks relate painful histories about being in Christian schools where they were called to task and even physically beaten for simply asking questions; I've heard many people tell of trying to bend themselves out of shape in order to conform to so-called Christian values - out of guilt, or out of fear - until they finally grew up or gave up and escaped from the pressure. I have known people suffering from painful rejection by Christian family and friends who refuse to love them because they don't live by or believe in the same tenets. Perhaps you have known these folks too - perhaps you have had a similar experience.

Like you, I've registered the terrible consequences of Christian imperialism - everything from the destructive claim of "dominion over the Earth," to the decimation of cultures and peoples has been perpetrated in the name of Christ. There are too many Billy Sundays in this world, and they are powerful. Gandhi once commented: "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Of course we know there are many kinds of Christians, and always have been. There are wing nuts and sensible people in every religion. Often the sensible people are not as vocal or visible. There are loving, creative, sensible Christians within our own denomination and here in this congregation today. Unitarian Universalism is the only Protestant denomination which does not require folks to say they believe in a creed in order to become a member. There is no statement of belief to which we must adhere before becoming a part of this, or any other, Unitarian Universalist Society. You do not even have to "believe in" the Principles and Purposes in order to join.

When I became a Unitarian Universalist, this was the deciding factor for me. I did not have to recite a creed saying I believed in God, or Jesus, the immaculate conception, or flying elephants. I came into this denomination through the UU Christians, and I initially experienced Unitarian Universalism as a haven for noncredal, thinking, liberal Christians like myself, whose definition of what it means to be a Christian is ever-evolving and open-ended.

I soon discovered that in UU congregations, we can talk about Zoroastrianism, Krishna and Albert Einstein and folks generally respond with receptive interest. But when we talk about Jesus, discomfort, suspicion, pain, and resentment are likely to surface for many of us. The problems we UUs discern in Christianity - whether they arise from negative experiences in our past or negative associations in our present - are legitimate. If the negative associations we have with Christianity overpower our abilities to glean wisdom, truth and sustaining beauty from the teachings of Jesus, we have ceded a major

piece of territory to Billy Sunday and his ilk. We render ourselves powerless to provide an alternative.

UU minister David McFarland writes:

“The Bible is like Santa Claus and sex. Children hear about it on the playground or on the street, whether or not their parents discuss it with them. As an adult, if you don’t enjoy it and wish to abstain, you can successfully avoid it only by taking extreme measures such as total social deprivation or profound isolation. The Bible is holy scripture because it is the living document and foundation of many important faiths, including Unitarian Universalism. To abandon the Bible would mean alienation from one of the world’s most important influences on religious thought - liberal and otherwise. Our UU Principles and Purposes are saturated with biblical concepts and ideals. Our concept of respect for the web of existence, for instance, emanates from a stream of thought that flows through the Psalms and the Prophets from that same God of Genesis who declared the goodness of creation.

...Unitarian Universalism has been influenced and will continue to be influenced by the Bible. UU congregations that seek a vital, relevant, liberal religious voice will read, study, interpret, and invoke the Bible with honesty and integrity, with a soft heart and a hard head. This is our heritage. This is our calling.”

In this spirit, then, I hope that over time to explore with you blessings of insight and sustenance found within the Christian tradition, no less than others which come our way through varied traditions and experiences.

What does it mean to give and receive a blessing? Carl Sandburg wrote in his poem:

“This Jesus guy was good to look at, smelled good,
listened good. He threw out something fresh
and beautiful from the skin of his body and the
touch of his hands wherever he passed along.....
[People] felt cleaner because he came along.”

Think of some moments, if you will, when you have felt blessed. These could be experiences when you simply become aware that you are loved. A blessing can come in the form of good news, confirming that you or a loved one is healthy. It can come as the knowledge that is revealed to us in hard times, when we discover we are supported by a foundation that runs deeper than we had previously imagined. A blessing can be the gesture of one person touching the hand of another. Blessings rise up to us in the earthy smell of the leaves we kick through on the paths in the Autumn. It is a blessing to have work we love to do, or work that pays the bills, and it is a blessing to come home at the end of a long day. Whatever the content of the blessing that comes to mind for you, I would simply ask you to think about what it feels like to know you are blessed.

“People felt cleaner because Jesus came along” said Sandburg. With an almost physical sensation, blessings wash over us and move through us, affirming and renewing our life energy.

Perhaps you have been in the presence of someone who you experienced as “holy.” The Dalai Lama, surely, is “good to look at.” When a holy person, or a person who is highly evolved, looks at you or me, I’m told, they see us as we are in our souls. All the transient faults, karma, quirks and shameful flaws fall away from us because, ultimately, they are not real. The holy person is good to look at because their gaze reflects us back as whole, healthy, complete people, each one of us uniquely embodying creative love. This is the blessing their gaze confers. The Book of Genesis says that on the sixth day “God saw every thing he had made, and behold, it was very good.” I imagine the blessing of Jesus’ gaze held this same creative power for individuals “Behold - you are good.”

Over the weekend I had the opportunity to visit the Shelburne Museum for the first time. I saw there the exhibit of art by Mary Cassatt, and her beautiful renditions of mothers and children. Psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott spoke of the loving gaze that passes from mother to child: “What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting [wrote Winnicott] that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself.” A baby boy looks into his caregiver’s face and sees himself mirrored back in love. It is the blessing of the mother’s loving gaze that orients the baby and begins the process of constellating that infant’s awareness. The child’s strength of being is nurtured in the caregiver’s arms, at the same time that physical strength is given with nourishment. Mary Cassatt captured that dynamic in her pictures. This is, perhaps, the first blessing any one of us experiences.

Similarly, our second Unitarian Universalist principle calls us to practice “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.” When we are truly able to clear ourselves of judgment, and allow the spirit of acceptance to fill our hearts, we may behold others with an attitude of compassionate acceptance. This takes work. It isn’t easy to forget all the things we think we know about another person. The accepting and encouraging love of a mother or caregiver for a child arises naturally. The holy person blesses others with encouraging acceptance as a practiced and accomplished way of life. Most of us must work to be conduits of blessing. But in those moments when blessings flow through us, we ourselves are blessed.

The most simple formulation of the blessings spoken by Jesus are found in a gospel that was never written down. Contemporary Biblical scholars believe this “gospel,” which they named “Q” for the German word “Quelle,” or source, was a collection of Jesus’ sayings which circulated among people in the early Jesus movement. In ancient culture, where few folks could read or write - especially among the poor - people committed Jesus’ teachings and words to memory, and passed them to others verbally as the community of Jesus’ followers increased. Embellishment and narrative stories connecting the sayings of Jesus developed along the way. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke incorporate teachings from this sayings source. The gnostic Gospel of

Thomas, which did not make it into the Christian canon, also contains teachings from Q. Scholars hypothesize the collection of sayings known now as "Q" began this way [from Burton Mack, Q, The Lost Sayings Source]:

"These are the teachings of Jesus.
Seeing the crowds, he said to his disciples,
Blessed are you poor; God's kingdom belongs to you.
Blessed are you who are hungry; you will have a feast.
Blessed are you who weep now; you will laugh."

For centuries, Christians and non Christians have tried to understand these sayings.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, changed the first blessing so that it might be more easily understood. "Blessed are you poor" became, in Matthew's rendition, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." In the 13th Century, Meister Eckhart provided a beautiful interpretation of Matthew's phrase - "poor in spirit" means, he said, those who have gotten rid of every image of God which limits their consciousness. They become "poor" and empty in spirit, and thus prepare a space in themselves into which the blessed presence of God can flow. This, said Eckhart, is what it means to experience the kingdom of God. In the 20th century, Buddhist scholars came along and said Meister Eckhart's rendition of this blessing sounds like the emptying of consciousness which constitutes mindful awareness.

In the 2nd century, the writer of the Gospel of Thomas modified Jesus' saying, "Blessed are you who are hungry, you will have a feast" to this phrasing: "Blessed are those who go hungry, so the stomach of the one in want may be filled." We can envision the different populations who heard this blessing - Jesus spoke directly to "the hungry," however you may understand that appellation. One hundred years later, the author of the Gospel of Thomas is speaking to folks who "go without" so those who are hungry may be filled. Those who heard Thomas' version were called to compassionate action, just as many of us are moved today to go without in order to contribute goods, time and energy to a cause or vision we believe in.

In this morning's reading by the 20th century Lebanese author Kahlil Gibran [from Jesus: The Son of Man], Jesus' saying "Blessed are you who weep now; you will laugh" became "Blessed are they who remember their pain and in their pain await their joy." Gibran elaborated upon this blessing in his book, The Prophet. "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain."

To my way of thinking, the beauty of the human spirit as it is engaged in dialogue with the divine is revealed in these various interpretations. There is not a right way and a wrong way to hear the blessings spoken by Jesus. The only question is whether we are willing to listen and receive them into our hearts.

To close, I'd like to share with you a version of the Beatitudes that comes from another ancient text. This text, the Peshitta, is a version of the New Testament that was written

in the language that Jesus and his followers spoke - Aramaic. Aramaic is a language which is related to both Arabic and Hebrew. The traditional New Testament that has been used in the West was written in Greek; the Greek philosophical world view is reflected in the language of this New Testament with which most of us are familiar. The Peshitta, on the other hand, reflects Rabbinic Judaism and Mesopotamian culture. The word Peshitta itself means "simple, sincere or true." Some say the Peshitta New Testament is the oldest text extant; others date it to the 4th century.

In his book Prayers of the Cosmos, Neil Douglas-Klotz writes "Aramaic can express many layers of meaning. Words are organized and defined on a poetic root-and-pattern system, so that each word may have several meanings, at first seemingly unrelated, but upon contemplation revealing an inner connection. The same word may be translated, for instance, as 'name,' 'light,' 'sound,' or 'experience.' ...In addition, the Aramaic language is close to the earth, rich in images of planting and harvesting, full of views of the natural wonder of the cosmos. 'Heaven' in Aramaic ceases to be a metaphysical concept and presents the image of 'light and sound shining through all creation."

Douglas-Klotz' translation of the Peshitta's version of the Beatitudes is our Responsive Reading. As we read them, may the blessings of Jesus resonate with each one of us in whatever ways are nurturing and enlightening.

Responsive Reading The Beatitudes (A Possible New Translation from the Aramaic) by Neil Douglas-Klotz, Prayers of the Cosmos

Tuned to the Source are those who live by breathing Unity; their "I can!" is included in God's.

Blessed are those in emotional turmoil; they shall be united inside by love.

Integrated, resisting corruption are those who have dissolved heavy morality within; they shall be open to receive the splendor of earth's fruits.

Aligned with the One are those who wait up at night, weakened and dried out inside by the unnatural state of the world; they shall receive satisfaction.

Blessed are those who, from their inner wombs, birth mercy; they shall feel its warm arms embrace them.

Healthy are those whose passion is electrified by deep, abiding purpose; they shall regard the power that moves and shows itself in all things.

Blessed are those who plant peace each season; they shall be named the children of God.

Blessings to those who are dislocated for the cause of justice; their new home is the province of the universe.

Health when your strength is sucked out, when you are disunited and falsely classified as a waste of time, for my sake...

Then, do everything extreme, including letting your ego disappear, for this is the secret of claiming your expanded home in the universe.

For so they shamed those before you: It is the sign of the prophets and prophetesses to feel the disunity around them intensely.