

Easter Sunday, Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, April 1st, 2018.
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman

What did Jesus teach? And how would we know?

We have some knowledge of the place and times from literature, history and archaeology. We know that life could be difficult when one lived at the crossroads of history, especially under the Roman Imperial system with its endless demand for taxes, revenues, and slaves.

The historical record concerning a prophet named Jesus of Nazareth is scanty, almost non-existent, apart from the gospels, and the witness of the gospels is one or two generations removed from events.

The nature of the ancient writings is that they work with far different concepts and conventions about truth telling than we might expect of historians today; the gospels work with story metaphor, legend, and parable. Truth was conveyed within the metaphor; that was far more important to the ancients, in matters of religion especially, than attribution, observable data, or replicable experiments.

Time was fluid, in ancient story telling; for example, a prophecy concerning the fall of the temple might very likely have been written after the fall, to explain it, and not before. Prophecy is not necessarily about the future, in ancient writings.

For example, scholars tell us that the letters of Paul are the earliest witness to the life of Jesus that we have, and Paul himself did not know Jesus in his lifetime. Further, many of the letters attributed to Paul, scholars tell us, were not in fact written by Paul himself, but by someone else, someone who reckoned that if Paul had not said these things, Paul should have said them; accordingly, it would be fine and fitting to simply name them as written by Paul. There was no copyright law in the ancient world, and folks were somewhat laissez-faire about intellectual property and persnickety details around attribution. It was a different time; I would not judge those who lived then by the standards of our own times.

Albert Schweitzer—musician, scholar, and medical missionary, spent some time studying our search for the historical Jesus. Schweitzer warned us that when we look for Jesus it is as if we looked down into a deep well. The shadowed image at the bottom of the well is as much our own reflection as it is the image of Jesus.

What did Jesus teach? It is highly probable that he did teach apocalypse—the sudden overturning of the world. Jesus was a man of his times and in his times that was not so inconceivable. Earthquake alone was a relatively frequent over-turner of all things in the ancient world. An excavation I worked on in Jordan back in 1995 showed evidence of at least three devastating earthquakes—a great aid to dating the ruins.

Reinforcing steel has made the world a better, safer place. I love re-bar; in times of earthquake, reinforced building techniques save lives.

The world ends for someone every day, especially when the Roman Empire is after you for taxes. I find it deeply moving that some of Jesus' basic teachings are about food, a place at the table, and release from enslavement for debt. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Walk with me, through the valley of the shadow. Some might say that Jesus' teachings are the Lord's Prayer, the Twenty-third Psalm and the Sermon on the Mount: blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. And I believe these hands of ours are the only hands God has, dear friends.

Some might say that Jesus stood firmly in the line of the old Hebrew prophets, intensifying their call for justice, mercy and humility: forgive seventy times seven; run to meet the prodigal half way.

There is a book I have carried with me all through my ministry. The title is "Compassion and Forgiveness: Inheriting the Wisdom of Our Spiritual Traditions". The book consists of ten chapters, from various interfaith communities in Canada. The core message I took from their wisdom was that forgiveness is something we do for ourselves. Cheap grace is not helpful; one cannot demand to be forgiven, though one might hope for it. Some things are unforgiveable, or at least unforgettable.

There was a little book I saw once, about domestic violence; the title was "Please Don't Bring Me Flowers". Or as my Great-Aunt Celie used to say, "You forget, and I'll forget, but I'll remember. Forgiveness does not mean it doesn't matter, and you get to hurt me again. Forgiveness does not mean we don't need to change our ways. Forgiveness, to me, means I protect myself against the repetition of the wrong, and then, in time, I let it go.

I let go of the intensity of my anger, as if I were writing off a bad debt. That is the root meaning of the word in English: to forgive, to write off a bad debt, to let it go. En français, pardonner, to pardon; pardons are given to the guilty, as well as the innocent.

Forgiveness and pardoning—new beginnings, for all.

If I have been offended, I try to let it go, rather than live my life imprisoned by my anger. And when I have been the offender—my life will be better if I admit my error, make what redress is possible, if possible, and amend my ways.

Atonement—at-one-ment. Repentance—re-thinking. I seem to recall that in the Hebrew the word is literally about turning, about altering one's path and walking in a new direction.

Atonement and forgiveness are not for private life alone. Our public life also has a great need for repentance and repair; the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has much to teach us.

Erna Paris' book "Long Shadows" spoke to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. The TRC process there was not perfect, but it enabled many people to "draw a line" under the past, and begin anew. At the least, their sorrows and their losses had been heard; there was some dignity and redemption in that.

The surprise learning in Paris' study of the South African TRC, is that the people who gained indemnity by full confession of their misdeeds under Apartheid, also gained some release from the burden of guilt they had carried. In other words, we are haunted as much by what we have done as by what we have endured.

Forgiveness is only part of a long process: one recognizes that one has missed the mark, and one makes admission of that; one makes redress as well as one is able, and one corrects one's path towards a new beginning. No-one, no-one, can ask us to do that before we are good and ready. And in time, we may forgive because we do this for ourselves, like writing off a bad debt. We do not permit what we have endured to define our lives. We look ahead.

My prediction is that perhaps in my lifetime Canada will make some meaningful and significant reparation for the scandal of the Residential Schools. It won't help those who suffered, but it might help those who walk into the future. And it will make me feel better, as a Canadian.

My prediction is that perhaps before I die, our neighbour to the south, west, and north will draft a constitutional amendment of reparation acknowledging the theft of labour by enslavement, of Africans forcibly conveyed to the New World.

I live in hope.

When we forgive, we free ourselves, we respect those whom we have offended, and we make some small step towards to the healing of the world.

What did Jesus teach?

We read in the gospel of Luke: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (*Luke 4:18. Oxford, New English Bible*)

The year of the Lord's favour is a year of Jubilee, a time for the forgiveness of debt, and freedom for those enslaved for debt.

These words from Luke echo forth from the great scroll of Isaiah. Jesus is proclaiming the radical demand of the Hebrew prophets for justice, compassion, and love. Jesus' core teaching is the teaching of the prophets of old: that to love the holy is to love your neighbor, that faith without works is dead, that every person is our neighbour, that all are persons of worth and dignity.

This teaching is a call to resist evil, to engage goodness, to live courageously. One might say that in the face of despair it is a call to practice resurrection. Some might say that Jesus directed us towards the holy like a finger pointing to the moon.

The parables of Jesus are paradoxical stories that point to a way of living well, with compassion, generosity, helpfulness, loving kindness, and justice.

Do you remember the parable of the good Samaritan: that the stranger who cares for you is more your neighbour than the kindred who passes you by? That story reminds us that Jesus' prophecy is not just to the Jewish people, but also to the nations: the roads of the Roman Empire opened a lot of doors, a lot of highways.

Do you remember the story of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman? This foreign woman asks Jesus for a word, but he denies her, saying that the word is only for his own people. The Syro-Phoenician woman shames him, saying: even the dogs get the scraps from the table. She is reminding him of the prophet Isaiah's call, that the people of the holy one should be a light unto the nations, that the people of the holy one should live justly, not just for themselves, but for all peoples. Jesus is shown to learn that no one, no one, is denied a place at the table.

Do you remember the story of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery? Let those without sin, those who have never missed the mark in their own lives as moral and ethical makers of choice, cast the first stone. There is a religion of Jesus, and a religion about Jesus.

We have good reason to dislike, even to fear, what has been done in the name of Jesus. We also have good reason to embrace the prophetic call for compassion, mercy, and justice when it is lifted up in his name, and also when that good news is lifted up for its own sake. We know that the golden rule can be found lifted up in almost all cultures of the world, a precept of basic civility: do not do unto another what you would not want done to yourself.

Basic civility.

Every one of us is precious. Let us love our neighbour as ourself. Share. Make peace. Be strong. Let us be tender with one another. And in the face of daily despair let us lend our lives to a metaphor of resurrection and new life.

That, I believe, is what Jesus was teaching.

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Bibliography:

Erna Paris, "Long Shadows: Truth, Lies and History", 2000.

"Compassion and Forgiveness: Inheriting the Wisdom of Our Spiritual Traditions",
ed. Gregory Dunwoody, Echo Spiritual Publications, Winnipeg, 2000.

The phrase "prophecy is not about the future" comes to me from Dr. Laurel Bowman of the
University of Victoria.

The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman was brought to my attention by the Rev. Meg Roberts.

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