

“Who Is Jesus”

“Who Is Jesus?” This is the question I took as my charge, when Jennifer Elliott purchased this sermon at the Heart’s Desire Auction last February. Specifically, I wondered, who is Jesus to the liberal Christian? And who is the liberal Christian? How does Jesus hold such power for those who do not hold a supernatural view of him – but still call themselves Christians?

Many of us are refugees from an oppressive, literal, fundamentalist Christianity – a Christianity that developed in the magical thinking of the 1st century. It’s hard, if not impossible, for us to find compatibility with that brand of Christianity.

But there is another form of Christianity – a liberal Christianity – with which we have a great deal in common – the kind of Christianity with which I grew up. My father, a Methodist minister, was a liberal Christian. So was my mother’s father, my father’s advisor at Boston University School of Theology, a liberal Methodist seminary.

I am not a Christian. I don’t think I ever was, except in the default sense of growing up in a Christian household. I didn’t understand what liberal Christianity meant - until I reread John Shelby Spong’s *This Hebrew Lord* – the seminal 1973 work by the controversial Episcopal bishop. Kate’s mother, an Episcopalian, gave it to her then. We both read it, but it was only in rereading it recently that I really got it.

Spong writes of an epiphany - meeting with a congregant in his Richmond church who said that he understood the concept of God, a power greater than one’s self, but couldn’t buy the traditional idea of Jesus as God – virgin birth, miracles, resurrection, the whole package. Spong realized that *he* couldn’t either and must either reach a new understanding of Jesus or leave the ministry. The epiphany changed his life. He discovered a new Jesus and a strengthened faith in the power of his life and message.

My father had a similar epiphany, at about the same time, I imagine, in the early 60s, and it, too, changed his life. Both are perfect examples of the power of the true Christian message, and both explain why neither Spong nor my father, as liberal as their theologies were/are, could become a Unitarian Universalist.

A few years ago a number of us from UUMAN heard Spong speak at Unity Church. After his talk, I told him that I had been reading the early Unitarian thinkers – Channing, Emerson, and Parker – the three prophets, we call them - and that I heard *them* in his words. He acknowledged his respect for them – and told me that he had served as a guest lecturer at Starr King School for

the Ministry – the UU seminary in Berkeley – but he also said that he could never abandon Christianity for UUism; there was just too much there for him. What was that, I wondered? What was it for my father – the radical priest, I call him – born in 1921 in a hardscrabble steel town near Wheeling, West Virginia – who walked the tracks near his home with his father during the Depression looking for coal that had fallen off coal trains to heat the house – the father who died of pneumonia in the early thirties, contracted in the bitter winter weather of Buffalo, NY, where he'd gone in search of work, because he couldn't afford to ride the streetcar?

His mother – my grandmother - went to work in a factory to support her three kids. And she got religion. Believing she would be reunited with her husband in heaven kept her going.

Her son, Bill, the star student, went off to college with the goal of becoming a minister and then fled West Virginia and his mother's religion for a liberal Boston seminary. He served rural congregations in New England for eighteen years and then moved to the city – Boston – where he discovered a whole new world of social problems and social justice movements – the civil rights movement – poverty and homelessness, runaway teenagers, draft evaders, teenage prostitution. In this new place, in mid-life, he struggled with who he was, what he wanted to do, where he wanted to go in his life, with his purpose, and, in the process, I believe, he discovered the essence of Jesus' message, the same message Bishop Spong discovered. I'll never know for sure; I never discussed it with him directly. He died seven years later at the age of 49.

Spong's story was different – a comfortable upbringing – educated at a fancy eastern university - like my father, on a track for the ministry from a very early age - seminary at Duke, and then, as a star, a rapid rise through the ranks of the Episcopal Church, until he found himself in the prestigious pulpit in Richmond – and there the encounter with the parishioner who struggled with the story of Jesus.

Spong proceeded, then, to search for Jesus in the historical period in which he had emerged – among his fellow Hebrews – a proud people with a rich tradition – with a sense of possibilities – a notion of the promised land – and greatness- having lived in bondage – a conquered people – with a rich prophetic tradition – that included a notion of a messiah who would lead them.

Spong zeroed in on an obscure prophet - 2nd Isaiah – who first wrote during the Babylonian captivity – in the 6th century B.C.E. – a prophet with a new vision for the Jewish people – a new sense of the covenant with God – not of conquest and material riches, but, in Spong's words, of a “servant people through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed, made whole,

set free” – lead by a messiah who would be “the suffering servant” – gentle, self-effacing, persecuted, sentenced to death, executed – but who would accomplish the task, nonetheless, of “bringing all people into unity with God, with each other, and with themselves,” in Spong’s words, again.

Spong tells us that Jesus identified with this prophecy and consciously set out to fulfill it – right up to the crucifixion - recognizing and accepting his mission/purpose/calling in the Baptism - committing to the way of love in his time in the wilderness – and finally accepting the necessity of his death in the Garden of Gethsemane.

For Spong Jesus is the quintessential example of a life lived in love - the one who demonstrated the true nature of God – the power of love, that is – who showed us how to become whole human beings – how to rise above sin – which, to the Hebrews, meant being *separated* from our true nature - *mired* in the anxiety and insecurity of the human condition – *flawed, weak, mortal* – in *need* of love and acceptance – sin meaning, in essence, *without wholeness*. Jesus demonstrated that we become whole by *accepting* that condition – accepting who we are with all our flaws – becoming “at rest”, the ancient Hebrews called it – and *then* by courageously *facing the future*, freed from our insecurity and anxiety – a condition the Hebrews called “peace” – to overcome the power of death – to be reborn – in a sense - as free, whole people.

Spong discovers this Jesus and - in true disciple fashion – follows the Master – living out the story – much as the first disciples did – leaving the comfort of Richmond - moving to Newark – spreading the word.

In the closing pages of his book, he says this about the Jesus he found: “For our day, perhaps, it would be sufficient to say that in Jesus of Nazareth we see in a human life the secret of the universe, the life-giving power of perfect love. To know this love is to know the deepest ground of being. It is to know God. It is to be at one with life’s ultimate source, where freedom, rest, peace, and joy are the inevitable by-products.....The mark of the Christian is not piety but love; not religious zeal but out-going sensitivity. It is having the power to know and accept the selves we are and the courage to be the selves we are.”

Getting closer to home, he says, “I cannot stand in awe of the freedom and wholeness in this Christ and not seek to break every tie that binds me or any other human being into anything less than full humanity. My worship *demand*s that I be willing to contend against prejudice, bigotry, fear, or whatever else warps and denies another’s personhood. Worship of this Christ is thus for me a call to life, to love, to compassion, to sensitivity, and to the quest for justice. It is a

call to the risks of involvement and confrontation with every other human being.”

Similarly, my father’s Jesus emerges both from his words and his life. My brother came across this little pamphlet last summer; it contains the order of service for his funeral, a eulogy, and the sermons he preached in his one year at Montview Presbyterian Church in Denver.

In a sermon preached July 11, 1971, one week before his death, titled *The Life Urge*, he talks about the apparent contradiction of the idea of achieving new life through death, quoting the 6th chapter of Romans, which reads, “If we have, as it were, shared his death, let us rise and live our new lives with Him”. Or “Those who have shared in his *death* surely will so share in His resurrection, and, if we were dead men with Him, we can believe that we shall surely be newly alive with Him.”

He explores the idea of what it means to be alive and what it means to be dead - that awareness of death and mortality is part of the human condition - that the post-WW II world was a scary one – and getting scarier - that the way to life is not to hide from death, mortality, and the scariness of the world – either through escape – or numbing ourselves to it – or denying it, seeking power, glory, status – but to accept it.

He says, “You might say that searching for security, hiding from the surprising, hiding from the new, hiding from the difficult task, hiding from uncovering the possibilities that will create a human future, hiding from the dangerous – is really the death urge – is really the death urge winning out over the life urge.”

And he gives an example from a time in the early 60s when he went to St. Augustine – as one of those “outside agitators” – to help the black community in their desegregation struggle. He says:

“I recall once in the South seeing a black man standing before a sheriff. And the sheriff, who had caught us on an errand, was trying to force information out of this man about the black community’s plans for the next day or so. The sheriff was saying, “You talk boy or I’ll kill ya. I’ll beat the information out of you. You know, boy, I can take your life.” And this black man stood eyeball to eyeball with the sheriff and said, “There is nothing you can do to me, and you surely can’t take my life, ‘cause I’ve already given it to the movement – to free my people.”

“What can a man say to that?” Dad says. “What can a man do with that? Do you see that the people who get their dying out of the way don’t have any problem with their

living? The death urge is all tied up with the life urge. When we are free to give our lives away, there is no power whatsoever to keep us from the newness of life that comes in Christ and that comes in a cross.”

And he goes on to say, “Now the threat of death is real. But the promise of life is more real than that. And that is what our Lord promises when we really decide to give our lives to whatever it is we give them to – for the secret of our Christian faith is that to live is to die – or that the dying itself is the living.”

And, finally, he says, “Christ’s victory is really our victory and that is what we celebrate here each Sunday morning – that new life rushes in to take the place of that life which is expended and poured out and given in the name of Christ on behalf of all humanity – and there is no faith, no story, there is nothing like it under the sun. There is no other word about humanness itself except that the way to experience your power as a human being is only when you are expending it and pouring it out.”

I guess you could say that my father was an evangelist for this understanding of Jesus. I think I now understand why. I didn’t when I was 20. An epiphany had changed his life. He had been reborn, in a sense.

Dad died early on Sunday morning, July 18, 1971, of a massive heart attack. A few hours later the senior minister of his church, in the service, offered an impromptu tribute to him.

He spoke of “his amazing love of people”, of all the time he spent with the broken, the down-hearted, and the outcasts, hauling winos and alcoholics off to the hospital in Boston, winos who would take him for everything he had, always borrowing money from him, of his actually borrowing money to loan to people who didn’t have any.

He spoke of a time in Boston, when dad came across a hippie, lying on the ground, being attacked by a group of bullies, beating him with their belts, and of dad throwing himself on top of the hippie and taking the blows himself, because he was a Christian, he said – a story that was new to me.

And he closed by saying this: “He poured out his life, as he told all of us to do. He poured out all the energy and all the spirit and all the vitality that was in him; and when death came to Bill Hudson, it didn’t find anything there. Death was cheated! It found nothing but an empty goblet, because Bill was gone. He was all poured out for his Lord and for us.”

When I read Spong's interpretation of the Jesus narrative, I understand where my father's passion came from. They were contemporaries, coming to maturity as ministers in the turbulent 60s - products of their age. For neither of these men was there 1st century magic in the Jesus story – no virgin birth, no miracles, no bodily resurrection and return. But, in the upheaval of that time, in their crises of middle age, both of their lives were changed by a story they found more compelling than anything else, by an example of a life so well-lived, so authentic, so real, that they couldn't help but follow.

Christians are not the only compassionate people. When I think of compassion, I am more apt to think of Thich Nhat Hanh – of Buddhism. But the power of the life and message of Jesus, as told by a rational 20th century Christian is hard to deny. It holds powerful lessons for us.

For 450 years the strain of religious thought that has become Unitarian Universalism has evolved from traditional Trinitarian Christianity to Unitarian Christianity to a liberal religion that no longer honors Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah or the Christ. But the central tenet of our faith – *the inherent worth and dignity of every person* – flows *directly* from the life and teachings of this great man, whose conscious purpose, in the words of Bishop Spong, was “to reveal God as the life-giving power of love” - a new idea at the time - and who demonstrated a new way of being in the world. This way of being in the world – accepting of one's self and each other, open to new truths and possibilities, concerned for justice and equity, living authentically, seeking the true self – is at the core of who we are and want to be as religious people. We are enriched to recognize the power of the historical Jesus – a truly remarkable man. We stand proudly beside those for whom his example is so compelling that they continue to call him Lord, Master, and, yes, the Christ.

May it be so.

David R. Hudson

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