

To be human is divine

Written by Peggy Clarke, 2005

I'm going to talk a little about Jesus and the history of declaring him God and then the Unitarian rejection of that declaration. Then, I want to declare Jesus, God. But, this sermon isn't really about Jesus. I'm using him as a jumping off place, so I'm hoping no one will get caught on the diving board. (Know what I mean?)

Of course, Unitarians rejected the Christian doctrine that Jesus was god, and for good reason. Nonetheless, I want to reclaim it. This isn't to say that I don't appreciate the traditional Unitarian theology about Jesus. But, I want to turn it upside down. Every truth needs to be poked and prodded from time to time to see what new shape it might take.

We know surprisingly little about Jesus' life. What we do know comes from second or third hand sources, making the information more about what people want us to think than about what was real at the time. Nonetheless, the fact that there were followers who risked their lives to carry Jesus' message after his death tells us that both the message and the messenger were quite powerful. Unlike most traditional images of Jesus, I suspect he was bold and dynamic. I reject that popular image of him with dirty blonde hair and big blue eyes staring gently in that meditative stance. In order to be imprisoned and executed as a political prisoner, there has to be something a little dangerous about you, which leads me to think he was outspoken and even confrontational.

After his death, his friends carried his message far and wide at the risk of their own lives. Christianity for the next 300 years was about passing on a radical utopian message and avoiding persecution. The theology was essentially what we call apologetics- in other words, those who were doing theological reflection were largely speaking to a pagan audience, doing what they could to make the message meaningful in the context of greco-roman culture.

For more than 300 years, Christianity is about the poor, the sick and the otherwise marginalized and it's basic message is about community and compassion and it's followers were themselves on the outside of mainstream culture because of this belief system.

Constantine changed everything. He fought and won a major battle under the sign of the cross, not because he was Christian, but because the Christians had been disenfranchised by everyone else, so he made a solid political decision to befriend the outsider and get this powerful lobby on his side. Constantine, in return for their loyalty, legalizes Christianity and makes it the national religion. Within a few years, he asks the Christian leadership to make some decisions about what it means to be Christian. Makes sense- now that the entire Roman empire is Christian, not pagan, he asked a reasonable question: what does that mean?

With this request, we get the Christianity we know today- what I would call Post-Constantinian Christianity. It became a church of the rich, a church of the establishment, a place for politicians and power-grabbers, and who's at the head but the same bishops and church leaders who just a few years before were hiding and fighting for their lives. Constantine called a council for important theological and political decisions to be made, and the fact that he sent his best chariots to pick up these poor church leaders for an all-expense paid luxury vacation to have this conversation didn't go unnoticed.

I can't exaggerate this phenomenon. The worst persecution happened in 303 and 304. The bishops were dragged from their homes and beaten in the streets, their houses were burned, their wives and daughters were raped, imprisoned and literally thrown to the lions. It's no wonder that in 312 when Constantine was facing this battle that they were willing to compromise their commitment to non-violence and fight with him, and it was not lost on them that in 325 the emperor was bringing them to the capital to make policy.

And the policy they were being asked to make was simple. They needed to define Christianity and find a way to explain it to Roman citizens who were going to have to leave behind the faith of generations for this new Christian god. They had to determine what stories were official, what role Jesus played, what rituals and traditions were part of Christian life and how people were to worship. None of this had been universally accepted before—there was no Christian norm...until now. So, the question of Jesus was central and there were 2 camps—those who thought he was god and those who didn't. It's more complicated than that, but for the moment, that's good enough. Ultimately, then, it made sense to say that Jesus was god. Pagans could readily accept the idea of a god-man—there were many in their own mythology— and it elevated Jesus making many other things simpler.

This is all to say...Jesus was declared God not because it was the Christian norm or because most people believed it, but because it made Christianity more palatable to the average pagan. In fact, the decision was far more a political move than a spiritual one. Pagans understood the Father-Son God relationship. To say Jesus was god elevated this Jewish man to a status they could understand. No longer a criminal, Jesus is god.

Not everyone believed it and after the Council was over, many people reverted to earlier thinking that Jesus was not god. Over the next 125 years, it was hotly debated, but ultimately, now 450 years after Jesus' death, it was accepted nearly universally that Jesus was god.

Given this history, it's easy to see why Jesus' divinity was later rejected by rational thinkers.

By the 16th century, Christianity was in a tizzy with the Protestant Reformation and this new idea of people thinking about their faith and making personal faith statements. (Before this, people had national faith, not personal.) With this new freedom, the rejection of Jesus' divinity started to take hold in Poland and Transylvania and we see it spring up again in England and here in American Congregationalist churches in New England in the 18th and 19th centuries.

These Unitarians as they were to be called, rejected the idea that Jesus was god, claiming that there is only one God. They upheld Jesus as a role model, a good person who had a strong and necessary message about how we treat each other. They declared a humanist Christianity that focused on serving the poor and feeding the hungry and healing the sick and visiting the imprisoned and generally caring for and being responsible to each other. There was no reason to get involved with complicated trinitarian theologies or questions about salvation after life; there's certainly enough to keep us busy here and now without ever asking questions for which we'll never have the answers. This made sense to thousands of people, and here we are to prove it.

So Unitarians, and by extension, Unitarian Universalists have formally or officially rejected the idea that Jesus was God because the original reasons to declare his divinity were weak, leading us to believe that history doesn't fully support this theology; we know neither scripture nor reason support the idea. AND...To let go of it is to let go of superstition, it's to let go of redemptionist theologies calling us sinners and claiming the blood of Christ as our salvation, it's to let go of crazy nuns with rulers and socially inept priests and preachers who seem only to understand the black and white of life and never any of the shades of gray most of us live with. To say Jesus is not god is to walk away from elaborate churches with their empty "poor boxes" and homophobia and to embrace free-thinking, open minded liberalism in communities of intelligent, creative people who work for justice and non-violent solutions who teach peace and shop at farmer's markets.

There's no doubt- rejecting Jesus as god represents for many, liberation.

I get it. I understand and I agree.

But, I'd like to suggest that we think about this another way.

What if Jesus was God? What if, Jesus, that Jewish man of the ancient world, grew into the understanding that to be human- to be him- was to participate in what it means to be god?

Jesus moved out of himself into a world of those without. He was middle class, had a good job, and an education. His choices were unlimited, relatively speaking, but he spent his time in service to others. It's hard to tell how long Jesus' ministry was – could have been anywhere from 8 months to 4 years- or what he did before it- was he married, widowed...it's certainly unusual for a Jewish man at 33 to have never been married. What we know, though, is that he was moved by the suffering of others. That is, it would seem, what people found most notable about him. He embraced the outcasts. He ate with the sinners, he walked with the prostitutes, he laid his hands on the lepers. He was a wandering teacher whose message was simple- act in love for your neighbor. He lived a life breaking himself open and pouring himself out in service of the other. What moved his little circle of friends to risk their lives after his execution was this example of love in action. They, too, were willing to die – and did die – because of their commitment to creating a better world.

I would suggest, then, that is the divine spirit. Of course, we're going to disagree about the word god or divine and what it means, bla, bla, bla. Let it be enough for me to clarify my point by saying that when I speak of God, I don't mean a sugar daddy in the sky who watches us, judges us or is in any other way detached or disengaged. I'm talking about the spirit of being alive. My directed implication that there is a god is my way of saying that there is more to existence than what we see and know or can by experiment determine. Ultimately, I'm suggesting that we are greater than the sum of our parts- that there is more here than what we can discern.

Even more specifically, and maybe more radically, I'm talking about incarnation. Incarnation is the notion that god is embodied. Some believe that embodiment happened once for all time in the person of Jesus. That's not what I'm suggesting. I want to break open that idea and say that Jesus wasn't the only one; Jesus was one great example of what it means not only to be divine, but to live out of that knowledge. (Siddhartha Gautama is another example.) Jesus (like the Buddha) was awake. He grew in his life to recognize what it meant to be alive and the responsibility of being human.

The problem with current theologies on incarnation is that they have been frozen, fixed like a butterfly on a collector's board who is trying to hold grace still. Like the butterfly, incarnation has been killed by our attempt to fix it. Our literalization and minimization of incarnation to one person has created this cult of one – Christianity – rather than a cult of all.

Imagine that incarnation, the embodiment of the divine life, isn't limited to one historical person but is the quality of the creative process that transfigures each of us. It is the living presence of god awaiting only the realization of creation itself to make manifest through our very lives. We, as the bodies of God, are capable of profound acts of love and healing. We know we are god if we pay attention to our best selves when we hand out blankets on city streets on winter nights and design sustainable structures in which we live and work and manage group homes for the mentally impaired and teach each other to stretch our minds and imaginations and return lost animals and nurture young plants and invite each other to tables filled with locally grown food, all in acts of love and companionship with each other and the earth.

To be human is to be god, to participate in the mystery of incarnation, to be the one through whom life is unfolded. Jesus was not an exception to the rule, he was one of many who have the capacity to break ourselves open and pour ourselves out in service to each other.

And so, we have the responsibility to ask ourselves "How can I enter into the creative process of my self? How do I make god manifest in the world? How am I born to my creative spirit? How am I the incarnation?"

Were this a weekend retreat, I might even go deeper and ask where we lost claim to being in the image of god. What has blocked us from recognizing our true faces? But, we don't have that kind of time.

What I'm saying is this...The power of incarnation is loose in creation; we must realize it ourselves and lay claim or pro-claim ourselves as co-creators of human and planetary

existence. We need to claim our connection to the earth, our mother and sister, and we need to claim our connection to each other, the continuation of ourselves, also embodied, also divine, also holy.

To be human is divine. It is to connect to and be moved by the torment of the other.

To be human is to be divine. It is to be part of a communal, cosmic reality that brings forth the consciousness of all the earth.

To be human is what it means to be divine.