

AN ALL-TOO-HUMAN JESUS

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Back when I was a child, I loved church. I loved it. I loved watching the choir process down the center aisle of the sanctuary and up into the choir loft. My heart filled with joy whenever my favorite hymns were chosen and I sang out gladly. I delighted in learning all the special rules about how to pass the offering plate and how to take communion. I sang in the children's choirs and I rang in the bell choirs. I was a faithful attendee; rarely missing a Sunday from the time I was two until the post-confirmation years of high school. I even dreamed of becoming a minister someday. I loved church.

Yet, as much as I loved this magical, awe-inspiring, mystery-filled, wondrous experience of weekly worship; when I look back, I can only remember one sermon. Yes, that's right, only one. I know I heard many more; I can access mental images of various ministers preaching from the pulpit; yet, I can remember only one topic. It was "...And Jesus Laughed." Long before Robert Fulghum published his story about a laughing Jesus¹, I listened to my childhood minister preach about what she imagined was missing from the Biblical text: laughter. As she retold story after story from the gospels, she filled in each story with a new ending: "... and Jesus laughed". Found there, in the laughter, was the human Jesus; the accessible Jesus; the Jesus I could understand.

This human Jesus has long been the subject of theological debate. His divinity, as the second person of the Trinity, was not firmly established until the 4th century during the Council of Nicaea, when a priest named Arius lost an important early debate about the exact nature of Jesus. Ever since, Unitarians and many Universalists, and their forbears, have argued for an increasingly human Jesus. For some, these debates were, quite literally, a matter of life and death. Michael Servetus, for example, was sentenced to death and burned at the stake for the arguments he set forth in a work titled: "On the Errors of the Trinity."

Today, in the 21st century, the debate for Unitarian Universalists is finally over. We are each free to believe in a fully-human Jesus if we so choose. And most of us do so choose. It is this choice I would like to explore with you today. However, before I continue, I remind us all, that if we take the theology of Universalism seriously enough, if we truly believe that there are many valid paths in search of God, then we

¹ For those of you reading this sermon online, the associated reading was excerpted from Robert Fulghum's "Liturgical Laughter" found in [What On Earth Have I Done?](#)

must also accept and respect the opposite choice, that of Trinitarianism. On the marvelously paradoxical path that is Universalism, there may now be, and probably are, some Trinitarian Unitarian Universalists amongst us! (If you happen to be one, I'd love to hear from you!)

So who is this laughing Jesus? I imagine that Robert Fulghum is correct; that Jesus was a man who would have enjoyed a good joke, even at his own expense. Personally, I happen to be fond of those bloopers which appear online every so often and purport to have been published in real church newsletters and bulletins. The following sermon schedule is one of my favorites. It reads: "This morning's sermon: 'Jesus Walks on Water'. Tonight's sermon: 'Searching for Jesus.'"

Now, in all seriousness, I invite you to join me in a search for Jesus; an all-too-human Jesus...

Much like Robert Fulghum, I too have a picture of Jesus, one which I keep on a shelf in my office here at First Parish; one which I've brought over here, to the sanctuary, to share with all of you today.² It is a digital reconstruction of how Jesus most likely appeared during his lifetime. It is an image which was published in an issue of *Popular Mechanics* a few years ago. A team of forensic anthropologists working in conjunction with some Israeli archaeologists studied three 1st century skulls taken from near Jerusalem. These three skulls were scanned into a computer and the information gained was used to create a single, composite mold of a human skull. To this mold were added standard facial markers, much like you might see on a TV crime show, followed by layers of simulated muscle and skin. After much work and study, this is the final result.

Unlike the popular Western image of a tall, blue-eyed, long-haired white guy; this Jesus, unsurprisingly, looks like – he could be Jewish! His hair and eyes are dark, his hair is tightly curled and short, he wears his beard trimmed. His skin is weathered from spending many hours out of doors in a hot climate. Like his contemporaries, he is short and thin, at about 5'1" high and 110 pounds. Despite his small size, he is strong and wiry, with muscles well-developed from carpentry work. When I look at this image, I wonder: Who is this man?

These days, there is an ongoing discussion amongst seminarians and their professors. They ask: "Who is the Jesus of history?" and "Who is the Christ of faith?" If the truth be told, neither question is of especial interest to me, for these questions seem to point to an artificial distinction; as if the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith could not possibly be one and the same person. A far more interesting question for me is: Who was the *human* Jesus? For this Jesus, the human Jesus, was the one for whom our Unitarian and many of our Universalist ancestors argued so mightily and at such a high cost. The human Jesus is the one whom our faith tradition asks us to reclaim.

² For those of you reading online, simply Google: *Popular Mechanics* Jesus and you will be able to view the image.

When I read the Gospels, searching for the human Jesus, sifting out questions about historical fact and cultural context and the validity of miracles and the meaning of faith; when I allow all else to fall away, save the simple humanity of Jesus, this is what I see:

I see a little boy who, when traveling into the big city of Jerusalem, followed his childhood curiosity, thoughtlessly wandered off, and was lost to his parents. When his, by then frantic, parents finally found him in the Temple, he naively said only: “Where else would I be?” and wondered at all the fuss.

I see a wise young man who was said to be descended, through his father Joseph, from the royal lineage of King David; a young man who was expected to become a King himself; a young man upon whom crushingly great expectations were placed.

I see a young man who, upon hearing of these great expectations, began to believe in himself, only to be disappointed upon returning home to a disbelieving and disapproving audience.

I see a young man who was ever-questioning the conventional social and religious wisdom of his day; a man who spoke to women publicly and likely did not marry; a man who was frequently heard saying: “You have heard it said... Now I say unto you...”

I see a man of deep and abiding Jewish faith; a man who frequently withdrew from the presence of others in order to kneel in private prayer; a man who had a personal relationship with God.

I see a man who sometimes got frustrated and impatient with his students when they were slow to learn, especially with the select few who had been given extra lessons. Nevertheless, I see a man whose dedication to teaching never ceased; a man for whom each daily encounter became a potential lesson; a teachable moment.

This man I see loved children and welcomed their presence. This man was imperfect; he made mistakes and allowed himself to learn from the wisdom of others, even when the other was of a social standing lower than his own.

This man got angry and sometimes destroyed property, even in the holiest of places, the Temple. All for a good cause, of course, at least to his mind.

The man I see listened to his mother. He knew how to throw a good party. He consoled his friends. He knew how it felt to be mocked. He knew how it felt to be betrayed, he questioned even the loyalty of the God he knew so well and loved so much, by asking: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” in the last moments of his life.

This man, this human man, knew what it was to hunger and to thirst, to sweat and to bleed.

And the legacy of this man, this human man, the one for whom our faith tradition has argued so vociferously, is, I fear, greater than we might realize. For when we see Jesus as human; as fully, simply,

merely, solely human; all is possible. For when we see Jesus as a great teacher; as worthy of emulation; the bar, so to speak, is set high for our own behavior. With an all-too-human Jesus, we become capable of accomplishing anything in our lives that Jesus managed to accomplish in his. No short cuts. No excuses. No rationalizing Jesus' greater achievements with a divine nature.

I suspect that we often receive these messages unconsciously, without really thinking them through. As Unitarian Universalists, we have inherited an old and long tradition of spiritual practice through self-examination and self-improvement. I wonder, sometimes, what this does to us psychologically. We have heard that Jesus walked on water. Though we may dismiss this idea as a miracle story; we also know that there are some who, to this day, successfully walk on fire, without getting burned, as a testament to their faith. Do we expect any less of ourselves? Do we expect any less of each other?

With these questions in mind, I return to the teachings of Jesus himself. Once, when Jesus was asked which of the commandments was the greatest of all, he replied this way: "The most important one is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

"Love your neighbor as yourself." Implicit in this commandment is the idea that we must love ourselves. In order to do this, I believe, we must first learn to forgive ourselves. As the New Year approaches and we prepare to make our New Year's Resolutions, this is the legacy of the human Jesus which I hope we will carry forward with us. We, like Jesus, are fully human. We wander off, get lost, feel the pressure of too-great expectations, and are disappointed when others do not expect enough of us. We question, we struggle to understand and build our faith, we feel frustration and impatience. At our best, we learn from the teachable moments found in daily life. We allow ourselves to be imperfect and to learn from others. We get angry. Sometimes, we break things. We try to remember the importance of having a good time. We console our friends. We feel betrayed and question the loyalty of others. We get hungry. We get thirsty. We sweat. We bleed. And in all of this gloriously human imperfection, we forgive ourselves, we love ourselves, we move on and try again in the New Year. Most of all, we remember to laugh; *we laugh...* This is the legacy of an all-too-human Jesus.

Amen and Blessed Be.