

# **Ten Things I Like About Jesus**

**a reflection  
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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Today I am going to share with you ten things I like about Jesus. Let me begin my reflection by telling you, very briefly, about what theologians call my “Christology.” I believe Jesus was a man, not a god – and that he really lived, and really died. But like John MacKinnon, I also believe that – had there never been such a person as the historical Jesus – people would have invented him nonetheless. I also believe, like Elaine Pagels, that Jesus was engaged in perhaps the ultimate religious quest – seeking to understand what it means to be human, and to understand the relationship between the human and the holy.

And I find truth, too, in the picture of the dual Jesus painted by Kahlil Gibran, who wrote, “Once, every hundred years, Jesus of Nazareth meets with the Jesus of Christianity, in a secluded garden in the hills of Lebanon. They walk together, and talk for a long time – and, at the end of the conversation, Jesus of Nazareth goes away, saying to the Jesus of Christianity, ‘My friend, I fear we will never, ever agree.’ ”

As Unitarian Universalists, we approach any discussion of Jesus with certain givens: For one thing, although we as a religious movement have our roots in the Christian tradition, in the past century or so we have come to a place where, we must admit, there are some things on which we will never, ever agree. We believe – and, on our good days, even celebrate – that there are many different, and valid, ways to look at, interpret, and be in relationship with this man called Jesus. And so, we seek to be open-minded not only in our own personal Christology, but in our acceptance of the differing beliefs of others.

Yet when we hear the old children's hymn "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," despite its ostensibly comforting message, we grow uncomfortable at its implications. We wonder that so many, in today's world, can accept this kind of fundamentalism – a disturbingly literalistic, and simplistic, interpretation of the already limited perspective on Jesus that's presented in the Bible.

So how, with integrity, can a thoughtful person who seeks to find a more profound meaning in the life and death of the great Palestinian prophet, make sense it all? How can we "wade in the water" of relationship with this remarkable man without drowning in a sea of bad theology?

Well, we have one example, from our own Unitarian tradition. I've told you on more than one occasion the story of Thomas Jefferson, who, during his presidency, did his best to separate the wheat from the chaff by taking the four gospels available to him – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – and literally cutting out the supernatural and the superstitious. The resulting volume – called "The Jefferson Bible" – is a little-known but remarkable piece of early American historical trivia.

But we of the 21st century have available to us many other teachings about Jesus that Jefferson could not have dreamed of – the Nag Hammadi discovery and the Dead Sea scrolls, among others – many of which represent a Gnostic understanding of Jesus and his ministry. Fundamentalists notwithstanding, our ideas about Jesus today are shaped by many more sources, and by listening to many more voices, than "Jesus loves me, this I know."

Now you may be wondering why I chose to preach about Jesus this morning. After all, I don't consider myself a Christian, and though Heritage, as a Unitarian Universalist church, stands in the historic lineage of Judeo-Christianity, we seldom even mention Jesus during Sunday services here. We do not consider a "personal relationship" with Jesus to be "the only way." Yet, it is important for us to remember that it is one way – and a way that we might find meaningful, if we take the right approach.

In short, the answer to the question, "Why this service today?" is that I thought it was time I gave Jesus some thought. And so, I have come up with a list of ten things I like about Jesus. Here they are:

First, and foremost, Jesus was a universalist. He practiced an inclusive, rather than an exclusive, ministry – the very definition of universalism. Those who were scorned by society, those who were excluded from power, those who experienced living outside the strict codes of conduct of the Mediterranean world of his day – be they the poor, the sick, the young, women, lepers, prostitutes, the blind, Samaritans or those of other races or classes – these are the people Jesus cared for. These are the people Jesus sought to save – in a very real-world sense of that word. With intentionality, he subverted the dominant paradigms of his time – for the purpose of including everyone in what one of our UU Sunday School curriculae calls “The Kingdom of Equals.”

I say “with intentionality,” because what almost all the accounts of his life tell us is that Yeshua – for that was his real name – sought very public venues in which to do his most radical teaching. My personal favorite comes, ironically, from my least favorite gospel: John. In Chapter 8:3-11, while preaching at Mount Olivet, the following happens:

“The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in their midst, they said to him: ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now, in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?’

“This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, ‘Let him who is without sin among you, be the first to throw a stone at her.’ ”

If he had done nothing else at all, Jesus’ universalism, his message of all-inclusive love and care for the human race and the human condition, his example of unconditional forgiveness, would have been enough, for generations to come, to emulate.

The second thing I want to lift up about Jesus is, to me, a natural corollary to the first. All of us are familiar with what has been called “The Golden Rule” – that teaching in which Jesus says to his followers, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” There, in succinct form, Jesus says, in entirety of “the Law and the Prophets” – that is, even if you were to throw out everything else in scripture, everything in the holy writings of his people

– if you could but manage to live by this rule, your life, and the lives of those around you, would be transformed into something holy.

And though the Golden Rule appears in many, many stories about Jesus, both within and outside the Bible – as well as in remarkably similar form in the teachings of nearly every religion of the world – I especially like the version that appears in Matthew, because it is part of a longer passage that harkens back to my first point, in which Jesus begins by saying, “Don’t pass judgment, lest you yourself be judged.”

Elsewhere in that same sermon comes the third thing I like about Jesus – his insistence on living in the present moment. Whether or not he picked up this aspect of his teaching from a purported journey to the East and the influence of Buddhism matters not; what is important is the idea that we cannot, “by worrying, add a single hour to our life;” in fact, more likely, quite the opposite. We now know what Jesus only surmised – that worrying actually takes time off our lives, through the adverse effects on our body of cortisol and other stress hormones.

Jesus wondered aloud in Luke, “You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky, so why do you not know how to live in the present time?” A sense of mindfulness, of being fully present, in the moment, will lift many of our burdens from our shoulders. This is a profound insight into the human condition, truly the result of a religious quest.

It is also perhaps the most difficult of all his admonishments to accomplish. “Don’t fret,” says Jesus simply in Matthew – and sometimes, when I read that, I feel like I’m being told, “Just say no.” The truth is, I often seem to be living by the motto, “I fret; therefore I am.” But even if it takes all the world’s great teachers, Jesus and Buddha and even Nancy Reagan, eventually, I pray, I will get it, and eventually I will be able to “consider the lilies, how they grow... even Solomon at the height of his glory was never dressed as beautifully as they.”

Part and parcel of his openness to grace is the fact that Jesus took time for himself. He went on retreats. When the stress of his ministry began to get the best of him, he left the crowds and the disciples and went out alone, to meditate, to reflect, to recharge his spiritual batteries. What better model could one provide for anyone in the caring professions, than what we are taught in seminary to think of as “self-care.” Everyone, regardless of her or

his Myers-Briggs type, sometimes needs alone-time, particularly, like Jesus, when we are about to make a major life decision, or embark on a different path, or undertake an important mission.

Let us all – and here, again, I am speaking also to myself – remember Jesus’ example of taking time for ourselves, so that we can then be more present, for others.

The fifth thing I like about Jesus is something that may strike you as odd, because it’s based on an omission rather than on something he said or did. I just love the fact that Jesus never once, in any known quote or story about him, mentioned homosexuality. Almost all of the bigotry and fear being directed at gay and lesbian people today is done so with some kind of Christian justification – yet the man on whom Christianity is supposedly based never uttered a single syllable about – much less against – gays.

In fact, his preaching most frequently railed against those who took a judgmental, holier-than-thou attitude toward the oppressed groups in his culture. This, as much as than anything else, provoked Jesus’ enemies – this, and his unrelenting insistence on point number one – universalist inclusion.

So if we are to give any kind of honest treatment to Jesus’ ministry, to what he stood for, we should be wary of anything that gives us a feeling of self-satisfied superiority, anything that smacks of casting judgment on others. It is safe to assume that, were he alive today, Jesus would be focusing much of his attention on those groups of people whose rights, whose very humanity, are being trampled in our time. Everything he did spoke of erasing divisions and creating equality. Keep this in mind next time you hear Christianity being used to justify homophobia.

I have already alluded to the huge volume of material professing to quote from, narrate, or describe the life and teachings of Jesus. We know, of course, that none of this material was recorded during his own lifetime, and in fact, much of what is considered scriptural or contemporary came into written form a few generations afterward. But this is actually another of the things I like about Jesus: That he can’t be contained in any one story. There are, of course, the four gospels most people are familiar with – those contained in today’s Bible – and even those don’t agree with one another on many key points. There are also the scores and scores of other gospels, not in the Bible, that contain some similar, and many different, events in the life

of Jesus and sayings attributed to him. And, too, there are the much later commentaries – nearly two thousand years' worth of them – that seek to make sense of this complex figure.

You can choose to consider this a problem, or a reason to dismiss the whole business, or – may I suggest – you can take another approach. Isn't it cool that here is a guy who truly, literally, cannot be contained in one story? In hundreds of stories?

Yet, there are things about Jesus that shine through all the stories, all the commentaries, all the speculation. Let me shift now to certain aspects of Jesus' personality that I find particularly meaningful. The seventh thing I like about Jesus is that he had doubts. Like me, like you, he had doubts. There was the famous scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, of course, when Jesus expresses his misgivings about the meaning of his ministry. But throughout many of the depictions of this remarkable prophet, this charismatic political leader and religious teacher, we see evidence that Jesus had reservations about what he was doing. He doubted that people were getting his message (and here, I would venture, his doubts were very well-founded!). He wondered aloud if he was making a difference. He feared that he might be dying in vain, that he might be causing too much pain to others. In short, despite his powerful personality and strength of will, he sometimes wasn't so sure of himself – and this, I must admit, I find very attractive about him.

Along the same lines, I like the fact that he had a temper. Again, perhaps because this is something I, too, am working on, I like it that Jesus had what we might today call “anger management issues.” We all know the story of the moneychangers in the temple, when Jesus burst onto the scene in Jerusalem, and threw what amounts to a temper tantrum – but this isn't the only story of his anger. In many tales from both the Bible and outside the canon, Jesus' frustration at those around him – those who didn't see what was so obvious to him – frequently bubbled over. Of course, the spin on these stories would have us agree that, in each case, Jesus' anger was justified – but more subtle in the depiction is the fact that such outbursts make Jesus a far more realistic figure – much more like me and you – and thus, someone we can relate to.

Which brings us to the ninth thing I like about Jesus – that he loved. With the huge popularity of Dan Brown's “DaVinci Code,” the general public is

just beginning to catch wind of this fact – but those who have studied the Bible and other stories about Jesus have known all along that Jesus had feelings of affection – most notably and particularly for Mary Magdalene. And in this, too, he becomes more real. More subject to the ups and downs of relationship and of life, more able to experience the joys and sorrows of human existence. Again, more like you and me.

And that, after all, is the most important thing about Jesus. Despite the Bunyan-esque, larger-than-life mythology that has since developed around him, Jesus was human. That is not only the tenth good thing about Jesus – it's the thing that matters most.

For if this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was not really a man, but rather a god – if you somehow accept the convoluted concept of consubstantiality that holds he was somehow both fully human and fully God – if Jesus was not literally and completely human – and only human – just like me and you, then how might we ever aspire to be like him? To live like him?

It is the very fact that he was human, that makes Jesus a model for our own lives. By virtue of our shared humanity, we can know this man's struggles with anger and doubt; we can know his feelings of love and heartbreak, passion and compassion. We can understand that, like us, he was on a religious quest – not already holding all the answers, not knowing or having already come from the final destination – but rather working out, one day at a time, with fear and trembling, the meaning of the journey.

Let us be on such a religious quest. And let us share the journey, with one another – today, and in the days to come.

Amen.