

WWJD?

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The Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

Reflection on the Theme by Kelly Kanyid

“What Would Jesus Do” - WWJD. For me this phrase and acronym calls forth ancient images of bracelets worn by Christian teenagers, circa 1997. I was 15, a freshman in a conservative high school, and possibly the only non-believer I knew. At the time I thought the bracelets were sort of cheesy and likely an attempt at curtailing some of the more egregious teenage impulses. That’s about as much as I ever thought about Jesus or about what he would or wouldn’t do in a given situation. In fact, to this day I just don’t know much about Jesus beyond what has resonated in popular culture. I have a general idea of who he was and what he was about, but not much more.

I was raised “spiritually feral” which means I was simply allowed to explore and believe whatever made the most sense to me. And what has always made the most sense to me is the worthiness of all people, that we should live and let live, and that nature is a miracle. I never could fit that on a bracelet, though these days I do wear a chalice pendant to remind myself of the opportunity I have to live my values. That’s probably what those WWJD bracelets were all about, too.

In many ways, I find that my Christian friends and loved ones tend to hold the same values I do. In fact, when I’m out in the community, whether it’s documenting ICE activities in our neighborhoods or volunteering at one of Vancouver’s Free Fridge and Pantry sites, it’s often Christians I’m doing that work alongside. Their spiritual framework looks very different from mine, and we disagree a lot about what happens when a body dies, but we all agree about how to live - with as much love and kindness as we can. They believe that “Jesus is love,” and they try to be an embodiment of that love. I draw much of my own philosophy from the writings of Humanist and author, Kurt Vonnegut, who noted that each of us might have as many as “a hundred years here,” and that one of the only rules is that “you’ve got to be kind.”

If my Christian friends and I disagree about the path, we do seem to find ourselves at the same destination time and time again - a place where love is at the center.

Sermon by Eric LaBrant

> First visit to UUCV

> Carol Alice comment

It's not an exaggeration to use the term abuse. UUCV hosts a group called Exiting High Demand Religions, which I'm part of, for folks who have escaped some of the more extreme religious communities, and the patterns of intimidation, isolation, and even assault are real.

If you've lived through that, you're welcome to join that group, but I also want to encourage you to take whatever space you need this morning. It won't hurt my feelings if you need to step out at some point to get some air. Trauma's a bear.

If you're new, the tone of this service isn't typical for UUCV. Jesus is not a central figure in Unitarian Universalism, because we HAVE no central figures per se. A non-prophet church as it were.

For practicing UU's, being truly accepting of folks from all faith traditions requires acknowledging and challenging individual bias we might be harboring. While Christianity and Nationalism have largely merged in the United States, they've also largely left behind the inconveniently-liberal teachings of Jesus. It's the actual words attributed to Jesus himself that I want to explore this morning, and push past the political and social rhetoric being circulated in 2026.

For folks who weren't raised in a God-fearing Bible-believing born-again church, this might be a new experience, and I invite you to enjoy it for what it is. Those good ol' camp revival sermons are meant to prompt us to dedicate ourselves to our core values, to get us stirred up and motivated to act on them, and to remind us that a living faith is

not contained by these walls, but calls us outside into the hurting world.

I'll pause here for a quick introduction, or reintroduction, to what the Bible actually is in 2026 America.

The term "Bible" comes from a Greek term that literally just means "the little books." The Protestant Bible in current use today is a collection of 66 texts, referred to as books. The Catholic Bible has 73. That list of what's included and what's not, has been changed a lot over time by committee decisions, political pressure, and alignment with various agendas.

The Old Testament is the first 39 books, and can be thought of as "the stuff that happens before Jesus." Portions of its text date to around 1000 BCE, though some of its stories originate with Sumerian texts as old as 2300 BCE. The Old Testament ends roughly 400 years before the birth of Jesus is thought to have taken place. For context, that's right around the time Plato was active in Greece, and the Odyssey was about 300 years old by then.

The New Testament consists of 27 books that begin at the birth of Jesus, also called Jesus Christ or The Christ, who becomes the central character from then on. Christ is a Greek title that means Anointed One, not a last name. In life, his full name would have been closer to Yeshua bar Yosef or Yeshua Nasraya depending on the setting. The first 4 books of the New Testament are called the Gospels, and are focused on the life of Jesus, while books after that discuss events within the church after his earthly ministry concludes.

According to the Gospels, after 3 years of ministry Jesus was violently arrested and put to death by crucifixion, which is where the symbol of the cross is from. According to most Christian traditions, Jesus came back to life after three days, ministered a bit more, then ascended to heaven. Side note, while crosses are extremely popular symbols for Christians on everything from jewelry to pickup trucks, there's no reason to

think that Jesus liked crosses.

The Bible has been through numerous revisions and translations. Books weren't separated into chapters until the year 1227. Verses weren't added until 1551, and were relatively new in 1604 when King James of England commissioned an English translation of the Bible -- the same King James who sponsored Shakespeare's theatre company. That's why quotes from Shakespeare can sound a bit like the King James Bible. That version of the Bible alone has been through multiple revisions and changes.

The first red-letter edition of the New Testament was printed in 1899, putting the actual words of Jesus in red to make them stand out against the black lettering in the rest of the Bible. That's our focus this morning. It's not new to cherry-pick the parts of the Bible that support a political agenda, but the actual teachings of Jesus remain relevant, challenging, and dare I say, liberal.

Allow me to set the record straight on a couple things.

First off, Jesus never said "Unto thine own self be true." In fact it's not in the Bible at all. That was from Hamlet. Jesus never mentions America or guns. Sorry, Nationalists.

More relevant to 2026 though, he never discusses abortion or birth control. He never condemned homosexuality or non-binary gender. At all. Make no mistake, abortion and induced miscarriage were well known during the time that Jesus would have lived. Homosexuality and non-binary gender were well-known and visible. He simply didn't mention it much. Jesus did talk a lot about food. Figs, grapes, bread, fish, olives, as well as spices like mustard, cumin, mint, and dill, to give a sense of what was important enough to bring up for discussion.

Jesus also never instructed us to hate anything or anyone. Not even sin or Satan. In fact, references to hating sin don't come until some 400 years after the Bible was written.

Here's what Jesus DID talk about. (pause)

From the Book of Matthew, Chapter 5, Verses 3 through 12.

“Blessed are the spiritually empty. God's domain belongs to them.

Blessed are those who mourn. They do not mourn alone.

Blessed are the gentle. They will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. They will be fed until they are full.

Blessed are those who show mercy. Mercy will be shown to them.

Blessed are those with clarity of purpose. They will see God.

Blessed are those who build peace. They will be called children of God.

Blessed are those attacked for seeking justice. God's domain belongs to them.

Blessed are you when people insult you, attack you, and lie about you, because of me.

Celebrate and be glad, for great are your wages in heaven. That's how they treated others who spoke truth to power.”

Jesus preached kindness and peace, but he was by no means passive.

He openly condemned use of religion as a tool for those in power to profit off the poor, and storming through the temple in Jerusalem and flipping over the tables of vendors there.

He actively and openly engaged with society's untouchables. Samaritans, who were thought of similarly to our undocumented neighbors today. Tax collectors, who were a bit like today's mafia. Prostitutes. Criminals. Folks we might normally avoid. Jesus actively sought them out and humanized them to others.

Jesus was pretty bluntly unimpressed by folks who were publicly religious, and far more likely to be seen with those who didn't come from a long or popular faith tradition, the “spiritually feral” as Kelly described in her reflection.

It was the kind of compassion that we would still find challenging today.

Luke chapter 22 verses 49-51, in which Jesus is about to be arrested to be put to death, reads: "Those standing with him saw what was coming and said, "Sir, should we use our swords?" One of them swung and cut off the right ear of the high priest's servant. But Jesus said, "Stop. No more of this." And he touched the man's ear and healed him."

A modern version might be if an ICE agent, mid kidnapping, were injured. Without aiding or excusing the horrific evil they're perpetrating, can we see the humanity of the agent themselves and render first aid? Ohhhhhh that's challenging isn't it? If we're serious about the inherent dignity and worth of every person, does that include an ICE agent?

Showing up in this world we have the opportunity to bring something fundamentally different. The right is serving up authoritarianism and bigotry. The political left is serving up moral outrage and disgust. Showing up firmly focused on the inherent dignity and worth of every person in a way that cuts across all of those battle lines is DIFFERENT.

The ministry of Jesus was described in very tangible, real-world terms. It wasn't just abstract teachings or moral platitudes.

Matthew 14 verses 15-21:

"As evening fell, the disciples came to him and said, "This place is empty, and it's already late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves." But Jesus said, "They don't need to leave. YOU feed them." "All we have," they said, "is five loaves and two fish." "Bring them to me," he said. Then he told the crowds to sit down for dinner. He took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to the sky, spoke a blessing over them, broke the bread, and gave it to the disciples — and the disciples gave it to the crowds. Everyone ate until they were full. What was left over filled twelve baskets. Five thousand men had eaten, plus women and children."

Sometimes liberals can get wrapped up in systems and policy. Public transit and infrastructure policy are important, but sometimes your neighbor just needs a lift to the doctor. There's nothing wrong with thinking big picture about food insecurity and community cooking classes. But Jesus doesn't respond to hungry people with discussions about systemic inequity or a workshop on meal planning, he handed out literal bread and fish. The hungry person standing in front of us needs PROTEIN. "YOU feed them!"

These are just a few examples of the ministry of Jesus and how it aligns with UU values. If we're able to separate the teachings of Jesus from those using the symbol of the cross and other parts of the Bible to excuse bad behavior, we can find encouragement in his actual words.

There are thousands of folks right here in our community who identify as Christian and hear the words of Jesus as a powerful call to show care for one another and the world we live in. There are Methodist worshippers HERE in Vancouver who voted to split from their denomination rather than turn their backs on the LGBTQ community. There are Lutherans and Episcopalians who are fighting for peace and justice RIGHT NOW because they feel called to by the words of Jesus. We can witness that kind of faith firsthand at protests and rallies, and the Vancouver Peace and Justice fair. Calls to bigotry and cruelty are in direct opposition to what Jesus actually said and demonstrated.

Central to the teachings of Jesus is the idea that love and justice can be so powerful, so compelling, that they're contagious! The teachings of Jesus call us to be so radical in our willingness to show kindness to those our society looks down on, that it's shocking! That it makes folks sit up and ask, what's going on? What happened to you?

There's a tradition in some Christian circles, that folks should be so shocked by the courage and kindness, the radical justice they see, that they can't help but ask what's

going on. UUs don't proselytize or send missionaries, but we can carry that kind of fire in our spirits.

Our chalice is AFLAME! We come here to feed and fuel that flame, but it should be contagious beyond these walls! We should be so relentless in our celebration of diversity and our championing of justice, that folks can't help but ask what's going on, and how they can be part of it. The message of love is TRANSFORMATIONAL! And we're the messengers!

People should be able to visit a community, and just walking around get a sense that the UU's have been there. That wounds have been cared for. That foreigners are welcomed, that the hungry are fed, that peace is being built, that those who mourn are being comforted.

I'll close this morning with a passage from Matthew, Chapter 25, verses 31-40. These are the words of Jesus, as he's telling a story. If my voice gets a little wobbly, it's because I've been on the receiving end of this kind of radical acceptance and kindness. And it is life-changing. And it is contagious.

"When the Son of Man comes in implacable majesty, with all the angels alongside him, he will sit on his majestic throne. All peoples will be gathered before him, and he will separate them from each other as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will put the sheep in the place of honor on his right, and the goats on his left.

The King will say to those on his right: 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Take possession of the domain made ready for you since the founding of the world. Because I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a foreigner, and you welcomed me. I had no clothes, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'

Then those who acted justly will answer him: 'Sir, when did we see you hungry and feed

you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you as a foreigner, and welcome you? Or without clothes, and clothe you? Or when did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?'

In reply, the King will answer: 'I declare to you: whatever you did for one of these siblings of mine — even the most marginalized — you did for me.'

(pause)

This world is struggling with fear and bigotry, hunger and dehumanization. If we push past the politics and rhetoric, there is a call right there in red letters, the actual words of Jesus, to carry love and justice to those who need it most.

The goal this morning is to get us fired up in the service of love and justice, and I want to invite you to take a moment before you leave, to dedicate, or rededicate, yourself to carrying the light of love and justice out into our community, out into a world that is cold and hurting, to folks who have been marginalized, demonized, and oppressed. That flame is POWERFUL, enough to throw warmth and light ALL THE WAY into the coldest and darkest corners of a world crying out for justice.

We come together to deepen our spiritual experience, to grow beloved community, and what? (pause) And ACT on our values in the wider world! We can come here to get warmed up and fuel our fire, but the world that needs that warmth, now more than ever, is OUT THERE! YOU feed them! THAT is what Jesus would do.