

## If Jesus Were a Woman...

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

I know I asked a hard thing of you this week. Asking Unitarian Universalists to think about Jesus is a hard thing. Even at Christmas time...it's a hard thing to ask.

So, I'll start with a joke...to make it a bit easier on us.

"There was a devoted Catholic woman...all her life, she attended mass and prayed the rosary...she lived a long life and when she got to heaven, she was anxious to speak to Mary, the mother of Jesus. She had a question that had bothered her for a long time.

Mary, why in all of your portraits, in all of your statues...why do you look so sad?

Mary was quiet...and then she smiled...and said, "Because I always wanted a girl!"

Biblical scholarship, in fact, tells us that Jesus had two older step brothers, as well as younger brothers and some sisters. So Mary was mother to a large family of siblings.

Does it matter if we UU's think about Jesus or not? After all some of us were raised Jewish or Unitarian Universalist and may have never read the Christian Bible or learned to sing "Jesus Loves Me".

For some of us UUCR may be our first religious community and we're searching for a more meditative or activist approach to faith. It may seem that Jesus just isn't very relevant.

And some of us may be here, within the broad embrace of UU theological diversity, precisely because we were asked to think too much about Jesus in our early religious life.

And does it matter if the historical Jesus of Nazareth was a man?

Most of us here this morning probably consider ourselves feminists. Many of us have studied the first, second and third wave of feminism. Some of us have lived through radical changes in women's roles. Some of us are living roles as single mothers, doctors, scientists, department heads, ministers, state Senators, athletes, lesbian partners and world traveling grandmothers –roles that are still new.

And in many parts of the world, women are still held back- from education, autonomy and freedom of choice about all aspects of their lives. In much of the world, women are still identified solely in terms of their relationship to men.

Issues of gender identities and sex roles are still crucial- are still affecting billions of women and girls. Sex trafficking, rape and incest and domestic violence are some of the most obvious brutalities to which girls and women are exposed.

And issues of masculine identities and expectations are still inhibiting full actualization of men and boys-still forcing young men into roles defined by power and threat of violence. Bullying, gangs, war, suicide, and pornography brutalize the souls and bodies of boys and men the world over.

For all of us, growing our souls as people is still limited by the myths of religion and by the literature and philosophy of our culture. All of us remain- wounded and imprisoned, held captive- to some extent, by the violence of patriarchy.

So yes, we absolutely need to reclaim the Goddess myths, the Gaia story and yes, we need to ask hard and potentially mind-binding questions. What if Jesus were a woman?

The Christian story as it has come to down to us carries at its core a story of human sacrifice. The sacrifice of a son.

Would it have been any different if it had been a daughter?

It's hard to imagine. Starting from the birth of the baby in Bethlehem, it's hard to imagine how different the story would be if Jesus had been a daughter. It wouldn't be the same story at all...and yet, I can imagine some important similarities.

You've heard of that book, popular a few years back...a self-help, let's get along better book called..."Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus" .....are we really from different planets?

I found a poem that uses the metaphor of different planets...a poem by Black female poet, Lucille Clifton...in which she imagines Jesus as Superman...titled;

Note, Passed to Superman

Note, passed to Superman

*Sweet Jesus, Superman,*

*If I had seen you                      dressed in your blue suit*

*I would have known you.*

*Maybe that choirboy Clark      can stand around*

*Listening to stories                      but not you, not with*

*Metropolis to save*

*And every crook in town              filthy with kryptonite.*

*Lord, man of steel*

*I understand the cape,*

*The leggings, the                      whole ball of wax,*

*You can trust me,*

*There is no planet stranger      than the one I'm from.*

Thank you Lucille Clifton, this is an image of Jesus I can relate to. A strangely dressed, androgenous person without obvious powers or strengths.

Jesus as an outsider, as different, as sweet and yet aware of all that needs saving – sweet, Superman Jesus ready to act.

Clifton seems to be saying...we outsiders have to stick together...we who seem so vulnerable (and wasn't Jesus vulnerable?) we need to trust our inner strength...need to trust each other...all strangers from another planet.

The Bible speaks often of strangers...strangers in a strange land. Strangers on the road of life. Strangers who will lift one another up when we fall...strangers who will risk our lives on the battle field...or when a crisis draws us together.

I heard on the radio a few weeks ago, the story of a town or city somewhere in the United States...crisis had struck this town.

There had been a series of teenage suicides...all at a particular railroad crossing. One death seemed to lead to another. Families were grieving. Town and school officials were concerned. Counseling was made available for all students, all teens who asked for help.

The city council was meeting to discuss new safety measures.

Still parents were concerned and anxious to do something...something now- that would save the lives of their children.

Something that would let all the teens know that they were loved and that they could count on adult support.

A few parents began to show up at the railroad crossing after dark. They took turns...and stayed through most of the night.

Other parents brought coffee in the morning. The word got out, more parents showed up...a roster was created...fathers and mothers kept watch...night after night...they kept watch...kept a fire burning, became a light in the darkness.

They didn't know each other. They were strangers...living in their strange houses...they all felt vulnerable...they all felt helpless.

But in their witness through the nights...those parents were heroes...were supermen and superwomen...like Jesus, they offered a saving grace to the whole community.

That's what it would be like, I think, if Jesus were a woman...we wouldn't be ashamed of our vulnerabilities...we wouldn't be afraid to save a life...even the life of a stranger.

Needless to say, I couldn't find a scholarly book, or any book at all, suggesting that Jesus may have been a woman.

But I did find a fresh perspective on Jesus' life in this wonderful book called "Rabbi Jesus: The Jewish Life and Teachings that Inspired Christianity." The author, Bruce Chilton is Professor of Religion at Bard College and Anglican Priest at Free Church of St. John in Barrytown NY. Chilton has been on the faculty of Yale Divinity School and Oxford. He has published many books on Christian history, both popular and academic.

According to Chilton, the determining factor in Jesus' ministry was his status as an outsider. Because he was born before Mary and Joseph were married, his paternity was always in some question. And paternity and lineage was of crucial importance in ancient Judaism.

Joseph claimed him as his son, and under his father's protection, Jesus went along with his brothers, to synagogue in Galilee. But Joseph died when Jesus was 12 years old...and his status as outsider was felt ever more strongly after that.

Around this time, during the festival of Sukkoth Mary took her family on pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. There to offer sacrifice and receive blessings. The Temple was the largest religious structure in the world at that time, known far and wide for its wealth and magnificence...the focal point of worship for all Israelites.

Jesus was so affected by the sacred power of the Temple that he disappeared into the crowd and his family returned to Galilee without him.

Professor Chilton speculates on the basis of the History written by Josephus, and other sources, that Jesus stayed in Jerusalem for a time learning about Temple worship, but also about the itinerant Rabbi's who practiced various forms of Jewish mysticism in and around Jerusalem. He found his way to the Jordan River and to the immersion ministry of John the Baptist.

Jesus, was illiterate, but quickly learned the Talmid of John...the holy words spoken as followers were immersed in the waters of the Jordan. Jesus became a disciple of John (because he was so young, John called Jesus, the Lamb of God)and from him learned the mystical meditation that focused on God's Kingdom and images of power from Hebrew prophets...specifically, the image from Ezekiel of the fiery Chariot.

These images became the focus of Jesus' own meditation and the source of his spiritual power. From John he also came to think of God as Spirit or Breath.

When John was killed by Herod Antipas...Jesus was 18 years old...and like the other disciples...he scattered and ran back to Galilee...back to his mother's house. Returning as a mystic and teacher...Jesus was now a stranger even in Galilee.

As he taught around the fields and towns of Galilee...the importance of Torah and Temple became less central to his practice of Judaism. His focus grew and remained on the image of the Kingdom of God...that he had learned from John. And as he traveled he was invited to eat with the fishermen and peasants.

Throughout his ministry, his message centered on purity...on what was needed to gain access to God. In this he made a radical departure from Jewish Law and custom...replacing Animal Sacrifice and Temple worship as the way of purity....and instead focusing on Table Fellowship as the way of purity...as the holy way.

He taught that the holy was already present in Galilee and in the hearts of good people...he taught that it was unnecessary to follow the purity laws. In his healing and exorcism and in his teaching...he claimed, far from the Temple...to invoke the Divine Presence. His reputation for breaking barriers grew and he was nearly stoned to death in Nazareth.

By the time he returned to Jerusalem, he had gathered a crowd of several hundred...and they entered the Temple walls where animals were being sold for sacrifice...this was new, formerly the selling had happened outside, not inside, the Temple. This was the moment when Jesus and his followers upset the tables of the money changers...it was a riot. The tables were made of stone...the Temple Guard were unprepared, there were crowds of people and animals...Jesus made his point and left. It was a protest, a riot, a challenge.

It could not be ignored.

But ...if Jesus had been a woman...she would not have been able to enter the Temple at all...she could have taught in Galilee, she could have traveled in the countryside...she could have attracted followers....and her message would have been similar to Jesus' message...Fellowship At Meals and an understanding of the Spirit within...she too would have healed and blessed and taught without need of Temple sacrifice or Torah Law...but she would not have drawn the attention of the Temple High Priest, or the regional governor...or of Herod.

She would have had many women among her followers...She would have helped to prepare the food and lay the table...she would have nursed the sick, even as she healed...she would have been midwife for the birth of many sons and daughters.

And she would have been nursing and tending children of her own.

Step back and consider...how valued Life is in the theology of ancient Judaism. Family lineage, a longing for children, even into old age for Sarah...the abundance of large families like Joseph and of the tribes of Hagar...the dependence on family for blessing such as shown in the struggle between Jacob and Esau, the loyalty of family support as in the story of Ruth and Naomi.

And in the ministry of Jesus...there is again and again an affirmation of women, a blessing from the woman who washed his feet and dried them with her hair...the hospitality of Mary and Martha...the constancy of Mary of Magda. The women at the Tomb. There is little doubt that there were women among the disciples of Jesus.

And did God not value his son above all else...do not all the religions of the book affirm the divine spirit in all of God's children? Does God not cherish Life as the one true gift?

Why not, a mother as savior? Why not a Rabbi who embodies the male and the female? Why not an inclusive faith that blurs the boundaries of gender and sexual difference...and blesses all peoples.

For the greatest religious and moral value is be a blessing for Life...to save one another for living...to trust ourselves to life...to affirm our vulnerability...and to Live.

It is written, that Jesus died so that we might live.

Perhaps if Jesus were a woman...she might give birth so that we could live. She might nurse and shelter and feed and sing and dance...so that we might live.

But in the end..teh gender, the sexual orientation of Jesus doesn't really matter...

And it is certain that in those days of Caesar Augustus...in order to break boundaries, in order to center religious practice in the heart of the gathering to break bread, in order to bring the marginal, the woman, the Samaritan and the stranger...all who were kept from the Temple...to bring all to the table, in order for the story of this Jewish Rabbi to be told and retold, it had to become a public story, a story with a Superman, the story of a son.

A Superwoman Jesus, (not important enough to be a threat to any hierarchy, religious or political) she would have lived a long life. She would have touched the hearts of many and taught a spiritual practice of Love and Compassion. She would have stood witness to Life, through many dark nights at the side of many cradles and railroad tracks. Her story would be told and retold among the women, to the daughters and granddaughters, nieces and sisters, and in some homes even to the sons and brothers.

Her story would not be lost, her story has not been lost.

The story, the saving presence of both male and female is part of the mystery of Jesus, part of the mystery of Spirit, part of the mystery of the breath of Life.

This story has not been lost. This story lives in us.

May It Be So/Amen