

What Jesus Failed to Say  
Rev. Dave Hunter  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville  
June 10, 2007

Recently, just a few weeks ago, Kerry and I were in the library at Butterfield Trail Village. That's where the Unitarian Universalist residents of Butterfield have their monthly meeting. I'm always curious to see the books that people live with, and as we were leaving to have lunch together, I couldn't help but glance at the nearby shelves. And there I discovered a book that I had been told about in the my Church History course in seminary but had never actually seen: *In His Steps*, by Charles Sheldon. If you've heard folks ask the question, "What would Jesus do?" or if you've seen a bumper sticker or a bracelet with the initials WWJD, Sheldon's 1897 novel, *In His Steps*, is the source.

That motto, by the way, "What would Jesus do?", was the inspiration for the poster I carried recently, during some friendly picketing. "Who would Jesus bomb?", it read.

Reading *In His Steps* reminded me of how little we know about Jesus, and of how difficult it would be to figure out what Jesus *would* do, if, somehow, he were among us, in 21st century Fayetteville. I led the Sunday afternoon worship service at Butterfield a week ago, and my sermon was based on *In His Steps* and the question, What Would Jesus Do? This morning's sermon is a different one, though related.

If Jesus had known how seriously people would take him, 2000 years later, he might have been more careful about what he said, and he might have been more careful to make sure that his words were recorded. I got to thinking about all the things that Jesus failed to say, or failed to say clearly.

While trying to decide, yesterday evening, which of the many things that Jesus failed to say I should discuss this morning, that is, while procrastinating, I decided to check and see what had got caught in my spam filter lately. You're not going to believe this, but there, among the various attempts to gain access to our bank account or to sell us products that you won't find at Wal-Mart, was a letter from Jesus Christ himself, or at least that's what it purported to be.

I read it, and I decided that he had said what I wanted to say *better* than I could, and with much greater authority, so I'm just going to read his letter to you. It's saved me a lot of time and bother.

\* \* \*

Dear friends, *it starts*, I think it's time for me to set some things straight. Here are a few things – there are five of them, actually – that I've been thinking about lately.

First, I feel a need to remind you that my most basic message was “God loves everyone, and you should too.” It’s that simple, but then you quibble over who is *everyone*? Next, for all I know, you’ll quibble over what the meaning of *is* is. Here’s the easy approach: everyone means everyone.

I didn’t say anything about black people and white people and people from East Asia or people from Latin America. Didn’t need to: everyone means everyone. You don’t have to ask where they were born. You don’t have to consider what color they are. Everyone means everyone.

That means that if you’re wondering whether someone on the other side of the globe can have the same feelings that you do, yes, they can. The mother whose child has AIDS feels just as bad, just as sad, as you would, if your child had AIDS. The mother whose ten-year-old son is kidnaped and forced to become part of an army feels the same anger, the same despair, that you would feel if your ten-year-old were forced to become a child soldier.

I didn’t say anything about gays, but did I really need to? “God loves everyone, and you should too.” Whether you’re gay or straight doesn’t matter. Everyone means everyone. Haven’t you read what it says in Genesis, for Christ’s sake? “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’” (Genesis 1:26) Do you see a footnote there? I don’t see a footnote. There’s no fine print that says, this doesn’t apply if you’re gay. Everyone means everyone.

Now the next part may need some clarification. The next verse in Genesis says, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27) This sentence has sometimes been read too narrowly: “Male and female he created them.” Now, usually that means that someone is either male or they’re female. But sometimes it means literally that someone is created “male and female,” that is, *both*. Or sometimes they’ll look male but they’re really female, or they’ll look female but they’re really male. Does this sound confusing? It’s really not. Just remember: “God loves everyone, and you should too” and “Everyone means everyone.”

That was the first thing I wanted to set straight. Here’s another. You’ll remember that I felt that the old notion of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Matt. 5:38, referring to Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 24:20) should be retired. I suggested, instead, that you give pacifism a chance. Here’s how Matthew puts it:

38 ¶ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;

40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;

41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matt. 5:38-41)

Well, I missed an opportunity for another needed revision. This is my second point. As I just discussed, the first chapter of Genesis describes God's creation of humanity. God blessed his newly created humans and gave them this instruction: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Genesis 1:28)

Just as I said that *an eye for an eye* is superseded by *turn the other cheek*, I should have said that *be fruitful, subdue the earth, and have dominion over the earth's creatures* is superseded by *live in harmony with your world, you are part of an interdependent web of existence*.

Now you can argue that the Genesis passage on dominion and subjugation didn't give man license to destroy the world around him, that the idea was supposed to be more one of stewardship – that the world belongs to God, and humans are supposed to be the good stewards who take care of God's creation. That's a plausible argument, but I think it would have been more effective if I had just told folks to coexist with the world around them, preserve its species and its varieties, don't take more than your fair share of the planet's space and resources, act like adults, make sure the planet is no worse off when you leave it than when you arrived, and think of the world that your grandchildren will inherit. Is that too much to ask?

Back when things were getting started, it was necessary for people to be fruitful and to multiply. Their very survival depended on it. But enough already. After centuries of being fruitful and multiplying, it's time to show a little restraint. Living in harmony with your world means, among other things, that you don't overwhelm the world with your numbers. There's room enough on earth for all the species, but not if one species gets too greedy.

Back when Genesis was written, or even when *In His Steps* was written, no one knew about global warming. But now we know. That makes this message of being gentle to Mother Earth and kind to *all* her children much more urgent.

So here's the new rule; this is my second point: live in harmony with your world, you are part of an interdependent web of existence. And, by the way, don't presume that you're the most important part.

OK, on to the third point. What I'm reported to have said about the kingdom of God has apparently caused considerable confusion over the years. Some argue that I'm talking about heaven, others that I'm talking about life on earth after some expected intervention by God. Some think that what I have in mind is strictly within the individual, that it has nothing to do with society, others are persuaded that the ideal of the kingdom of God is meant to motivate men and women to improve conditions on the earth. Some think the kingdom of God is here already, for those who are open to it; others expect it very soon; still others don't expect it for a very long time, if ever.

If you read what Mark, Matthew, and Luke wrote about me, you'll find they use the expressions "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven" 81 times [Power Bible search], but there's no consistent meaning. John, on the other hand, discusses the kingdom of God in only one short passage, but God only knows what he's talking about. (John 3:1-8)

Actually, I can't remember now what I did mean by that phrase, "kingdom of God." It could be my memory is bad, or maybe I never used that expression, maybe it was an idea that came up later.

But now that I think about it, I can explain that the kingdom of God can only be here, on this planet earth; it can come as soon as humanity decides to live in peace and justice, but no sooner; and it's for humanity to make it happen, not God.

So that's my third point – the kingdom of God – the realm of peace and justice – it can only be here, and it's up to *you*.

Here's the fourth point. *Use your head.* Why do you think God gave you a brain? I may have had a few good ideas, but trying to figure out what *I* would do in some situation is no substitute for *your* figuring out what *you* should do. Take my principles as a starting point, not as a straight jacket. I lived in what became known as the first century – I'm not sure why it's called that – circumstances could be different 2000 years later. I was part of a people with a long and proud history, but with rules and traditions and structures that many felt had become too rigid. A new imagination was needed. I was part of a people that had found themselves in the midst of the Roman Empire and were experiencing oppression different in kind and greater in intensity than we had ever felt before.

People don't really know what I actually said – and it's too long ago, I don't remember myself. Because life is so different now, 2000 years later, people don't know how to apply what I'm reported to have said. But here's the catch – they imagine that I must have said something very wise, and therefore they assume that I agree with them – what a happy coincidence! I become a blank slate. I'm a canvas on which others paint their own views.

Do you know why so often I taught in parables? The lesson of the parable usually isn't obvious. The listener is forced to think about what it might mean. I was trying to get people to think for themselves.

Consider the parable of the Prodigal Son. I assume you're familiar with it. How would you feel if you were the prodigal son's older brother? You'd be just as annoyed as he was. But can you begin to appreciate your father's relief when his son returns? Do you have any sense of the love that the father feels for his son, the son who was lost, but now is found, alive and safe?

But let's not let Dad off the hook – how stupid to give your immature younger son his inheritance. Didn't you realize what disaster was in store for him?

And eventually someone will think of the mother: “Why wasn’t I consulted when our son made his crazy request?”

And I hope someone will remember the servants: “What, another banquet? This was supposed to be my afternoon off.” Well, actually, the servants here were probably slaves. Slavery has been eliminated around the world, hasn’t it?

And that fatted calf had expected to live to see another day. (see Luke 15:11-32)

Beyond the parables, I also exaggerated a lot. Folks are a lot more likely to remember “sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor” (Matt. 19:21 // Mark 10:21) than they are “sell one fifth of your possessions and give half the money to the poor.” Shedding *all* your stuff is extreme, but the idea of it should get you to thinking.

You’ve been waiting to hear what I would say about abortion, haven’t you? It’s never mentioned in the reports of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. In fact, the word “abortion” appears nowhere in the Bible, and the practice is nowhere discussed. I held off mentioning it until now, because I wanted to explain the four points first: they’re all relevant.

The first point, you’ll recall, was *love everyone, and everyone means everyone*. Perhaps, then, everyone includes the unborn fetus.

But remember that the second point was to live in harmony with your world. Don’t take more than your share; let other species thrive, too. That suggests that policies that encourage population growth may not be such a good idea.

The third point was about the kingdom of God. I explained that the idea was to create a realm of peace and justice. Perhaps justice requires that women should have the dominant voice with respect to how their bodies are used.

The fourth point was to use your head. You’ve got to figure things out for yourselves. You cannot expect someone who lived 2000 years ago to answer all the tough questions for you.

So, with respect to abortion, I would say that the ball is in your court.

After that digression, I’m ready to move on to the last point, number 5. I find it astounding that I have to say this. There’s been a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about this issue over the years. I’m not sure how it got started. Let me set the record straight: I never said I was God, I’m *not* God.

Now it’s true I felt very close to God. God was as real to me as my parents or my friends, and people noticed this. But no one thought that I was God. We Jews are monotheists. The very idea that there could be a second god or that a human being could be God is blasphemous.

The idea that I was God must be something that someone thought of after I was gone. Imagine the responsibility! It's the last thing I'd want.

I'm not God, and I don't do miracles. I certainly helped quite a few people – people who were ostracized from society, I gave them their self respect, but that was nothing you'd want to call *a miracle*.

I didn't walk on water (Matt. 14:22-33), or turn water into wine. (John 2:1-11) I didn't feed a multitude. (Matt. 14:13-21, 15:29-38 // Luke 9:10-17) I didn't bring Lazarus back from the dead. (John 11:1-44)

A new god usually means a new religion, and I became the central figure in something that came to be called Christianity – what an odd name. I felt flattered, of course, but it just felt to me as though folks were going overboard. It's OK, I suppose, but I deserve neither the credit nor the blame for this so-called Christianity. I don't really care if people remember me or not. But having said that, I must admit that I feel somewhat miffed when people only remember me as a god and forget my human life.

\* \* \*

That's where the letter ended. Let me run through his five points one more time.

- (1) “God loves everyone, and you should too” and “Everyone means everyone.”
- (2) Live in harmony with your world, you are part – and only a part – of an interdependent web of existence.
- (3) The kingdom of God – the realm of peace and justice – it can only be here, and it's up to *you*.
- (4) Use your head. Use your *own* head. That's why God gave you one.
- (5) Finally, Jesus reminded us that he is *not* God, no matter what you may have heard.

Whoever forwarded the letter to me added on a personal note after the end of the letter:

We have found the actual cross on which Jesus was crucified, and we are therefore looking for a business agent to handle the sales of splinters from the cross in the United States. We are confident that we will be able to sell ten million splinters in the U.S. at \$10 each. Half of this money will be yours. All you need to do for now is to send \$1000 to pay for certain legal and administrative expenses and as a sign of your good faith.

The address they included appears to be in Nigeria. I haven't decided yet how to respond. Perhaps you can advise me during coffee hour.