

At this time every year, ministers are expected to say something about the birth of Jesus. We're expected to talk about the Christmas story. And most Unitarian Universalist ministers are expected to talk about a miracle birth without using the term Christ, or Savior. And we are expected to talk about the man named Jesus, in terms sanctified enough to satisfy the Christians among us, but without using words that are too religious; words that might offend the non-believers in the crowd.

As I pondered the task this year, I wondered what I had to say that was new and different, what could I say that was fresh and compelling. The answer did not readily present itself! So I thought for a bit about the birth of Jesus and wondered about its meaning.

It occurred to me that the meaning of this famous birth had to do with a new beginning. Not just the new beginning of the person named Jesus, but an epochal new beginning. A new beginning for those who later became known as Christians and a new beginning for the world.

At a very fundamental level, that birth changed our sense of time, our relationship with time. It changed the way we mark time. BC and AD., standing for Before Christ and what many of us believe is After Death. AD however does not mean after death, but rather Anno Domini, meaning in the year of our Lord, or year of the Lord. In more modern times that line of demarcation was changed to include a non-Christian worldview. Now, its more often referred to as CE, Common Era and BCE, before the Common Era.

But more than time, the birth of Jesus has come to represent a more important new beginning. Like most things of significance, its true meaning doesn't become known until much after its occurrence. It was years after his birth, years after his death in fact, that the religion of Christianity became known. And with it, a new way of thinking, a codified belief system, driving a new beginning.

Growing out of the much older religious belief system of Judaism, Christianity extends the notion of a covenant between God and His people, to an emissary of God, in human form, representing salvation and everlasting life. But such salvation did not come for free, you needed to be a believer. You were expected to adhere to a particular set of beliefs.

It's the beliefs I want to focus on this morning, not everlasting life and the here-after. Those beliefs, accepted as foundational to Christianity are pretty impressive, with profound implications. Certainly we need to start by acknowledging the fact that beliefs do not always manifest in behavior. And not all Christians behave in a manner consistent with espoused beliefs.

Love thy neighbor is one of those foundational beliefs. Loving thy neighbor as yourself, in those days, was not necessarily difficult. People lived in clans. Your neighbor was much like yourself and therefore not difficult to love. The twist that comes from Jesus is to love thy enemy, to turn the other cheek.

That's pretty radical. That's countercultural...both then and now! That was a time when people were stoned; when one was an enemy or disdained, simply because they were of a different clan or different religion, or were someone of a different social station.

Come to think of it, that doesn't sound very different some two thousand years later. If only such beliefs could be turned into behavior. Much of Christian history would look very different. Much of written history would be a different story. The world around us today would be and feel very different.

In those days, being told to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" would sound strange indeed. Perhaps because we've all heard the phrase so often, it may sound much less strange to us today. But probably no more believable. I'm afraid, having heard the words often has not made us any better at living out the true meaning of that phrase.

The basic message that came from the birth of Jesus is love, forgiveness, compassion, reaching out to the poor, the most neglected, and a message of giving up violence. The birth of the Christ child, the birth of the man named Jesus, opened up a door for all of humanity. It opened a door, gave us a peek at what was possible. It laid the foundation for a better world. It called individuals to a higher plane of existence.

That message is no less novel today than two thousand years ago. The world is no less in need of that message today. The door that had been opened two millennia ago, remains only ajar, inviting a glimpse of an available new way. How sad, how unfortunate, that a formula so potent, so decent has been allowed to atrophy on the vine.

Christians and non-Christians alike, would do well to pay heed to messages from long ago. Perhaps modernity has led us to trust intelligence, logic and thought above all else. Perhaps the tangible, perceived benefits of avarice, gluttony and power have blinded us to a saner existence, in harmony with nature's laws.

Perhaps, humankind is simply too weak, too self-oriented, too focused on immediate gratification to be able to live to such a high calling. Certainly one could find much to support such a claim. But I'm inclined to believe that such a conclusion is only partially correct. I do suspect we as individuals tend to be too self-serving to live to such a high calling.

But, we are stronger together than when we act alone. We are on more solid ground when we have others to whom we are accountable. I suspect that's why families, clans, tribes and nation states came into being. While each of these units is stronger than any individual, they can only be as strong as the foundational beliefs on which they are built.

Pope Francis has caused quite a stir by saying much the same. I've found it odd that some in our nation who boast of their Christian, fundamentalist beliefs seem quite taken aback by this Pope, the first from the Southern Hemisphere. This Pope, in his own words, reminds us of the difficulty of a rich man entering the kingdom of heaven.

He's openly criticized "a deified market" and "a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power". He's said there is no proof that so-called trickle down economics works as defended. He's launched a head-long attack on unfettered capitalism and the greed of consumerism. I'd like to offer my own gentle nudge away from an unyielding bent to buy, in these last few days of maximum consumption.

Pope Francis has been eloquent in what appears to be a concerted effort to reimagine the foundational beliefs Jesus espoused. He has washed the feet of the homeless. He's abandoned the ornate trappings of the institutional church. He's downplayed the political/ideological war on gays and lesbians, the poor and the unemployed that has masqueraded as religious, moral arguments.

I do not believe a belief in the godhead of Jesus is required to accept the power, beauty and morality of Jesus's message. Catholicism or Christianity more broadly, are not the only religious belief systems that espouse non-violence, sacrifice, concern for the poor, sick and needy. All the major religions of the world, in some form or another espouse these beliefs. As does Unitarian Universalism.

I'm not here trying to sell God or a Christian worldview. I'm trying to provide us a different vision, a different reference point, a different interpretation of the Christmas story. I want us to recognize a different conception of the connected web of existence, a different construction of the inherent dignity of all human beings.

I want us to tap into a deeper meaning of life, where we can see that our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of us all is not because we are good, noble, big-hearted people. We did not figure this out on our own.

Ours, like other religions are responding to a fundamental truth—stated or hinted at in every major religion. Many religions tell us we are all God's children. Others use different words to convey the same or similar message. But each, in its own way attempts to move us beyond mental constructions to an emotional/psychic/energetic experience of our connection to each other and the ALL.

In the end, for me, the Christmas story is a portal to a better way of life. A way of life based on love, forgiveness and compassion, not just as a beliefs but as a lived values. May these sentiments outweigh the giving and receiving of gifts during this Christmas season.

May it be so, ashe and amen.