



“Unitarian Universalist Theology II: Ecclesiology
(The Theology of Church)”
Rev. Krista Taves
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Introduction to Reading:

Our reading this morning comes from the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, a Unitarian Universalist minister who specializes in ecclesiology, meaning the theology of church. Wesley believes that our Unitarian Universalist ecclesiology is rich and spiritually nourishing, as well as misunderstood and under-appreciated. According to Rev. Wesley, we ground ourselves in a powerful living ecclesiology when we ground ourselves in covenant, which she defines as walking together in the spirit of mutual love. In this reading, she playfully explores what Jesus might have said about covenant to the early Christians, and then translates that for our modern world:

Reading

Adapted from Alice Blair Wesley, “The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of our Covenant” 2002.

“Jesus basically said, “Look, you are obsessed with Caesar and his power. Sure the government controls much of your life. But no human ruler can control all life. You want to know what is holy? What we can count on? What we ought to be most faithful to? How we ought to shape our own lives, insofar as we can? Look at the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. Look at how seeds sprout and grow.

Above all, look at the ordinary, everyday, human love, of parents for their children and children for their parents. Look inside your own heart at your ability to change, to go from treating others as crassly and meanly as Caesar treats you, to the more normal, healthy ways of a loving spirit.

Lord knows, it is not always easy to figure out what are the ways of love! But even in this empire, we can form covenanted congregations we decide to enter, and help each other live in a context far larger than the puny Roman Empire which – however strong it looks – will fade as all empires do. Caesar will not like our congregations and meeting to worship and to help one another discern what love requires of us! He will persecute us for presuming to claim our loyalty is to something bigger and more important than he is. But, unless we let him intimidate us, he cannot stop us from organizing to worship and to learn to live freely in accord with the laws of love.”

What would Jesus’ message sound like if addressed to our time? I think, something like this: “Look, I know some of you think all the power that matters is in the human hands of Wall Street traders, the grossly deceiving advertising industry and the grossly shallow entertainment industry. Well, if you are obsessed with that piece of the world, if all you do is go to work, watch television and seek out entertainment, you might think that piece of the world is the whole world. Well, it’s not. There is a great deal more to life than working for huge corporations, finding some new distraction or buying more things. Be gathered into communities of love. Find, together, what is more meaningful, more loving, more worthy of your attention, and be empowered in devotion to these things. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened to you. The truth will make you free.”

Sermon

I can remember the evening I got my first email. It was October 1998, I had an aging computer, and had hooked up an obsolete modem given to me by a friend. Somehow, don’t ask me how, I had succeeded in

opening an account, downloading the software I had been given, and dialing in. You would need to appreciate the level of my technological illiteracy to understand how incredible that was. And the miracle continued! I was able to open something my friend had called an “inbox.” He had promised there would be an email waiting for me if I got that far. My poor obsolete modem was so slow that the email opened one letter at a time. “Heh Krista. Welcome to the nineties!”

And for some reason, as those words unfolded on the screen, I began to shake. Why was I shaking as I sat there in front of a relatively insignificant email? I shook the same way when I got a faster modem a few months later and joined my first yahoogroup. I could hardly sleep that night! A new frontier had opened up that I never knew existed and the possibilities seemed endless. And to top it off, I didn’t have to leave my house to get there! For those of you who are extroverts, you have no idea how the internet revolutionized life for us introverts! No one interrupts you! You get to think and process with no pressure to respond quickly. You can edit and edit and edit until it’s just right. But best of all, you can actually look like the life of the party on a message board!

But it was more than that. More than an introvert finding her way on the internet. Deep down, I knew that my life had changed and would never be the same because of getting online. I had joined something much larger than me, filled with others who were doing the same thing. This was a radical new way of reaching out to other people. I bet people felt the same way about the telegram, the telephone, and the postal service, when they first became available. They, too, revolutionized how we reached out to one another. They changed how we created community. They exposed one more time how hungry we are for each other and that as a species we will go to great lengths to find ways to do what we’ve done since we evolved into who we are – be together.

Would it surprise you to know that the beginning of what we now call “church”, was no different? Like the postal service, the telegram, the telephone, and the internet, it was born of the human need to be in community, to connect to something greater than ourselves. It also opened up possibilities never before imagined and revolutionized how human beings came together.

Two thousand years ago, when the women and men who had followed Jesus in life regrouped after his execution, they were feeling isolated and confused, wondering who they were now that the one they hoped would lead them into the kingdom of heaven on earth was gone. When he had lived, they knew who they were and there was an exciting radicalness, in how they understood themselves, other people, and the God they worshipped. And when they got off track or lost their focus, there was their leader, helping them to find their way back. Being with Jesus wasn’t easy. He was always telling maddeningly complex parables, breaking taboos, and challenging them to reconsider everything they had ever known. Add to that the pressure they came under from religious and secular authorities, it was a tough road to walk. But in spite of that, perhaps because of that, being with him had filled them with a living creativity many had never felt before. They had never felt so alive, so vibrant, like what they did really made a difference. So when he died so soon and so tragically, it seemed like a horribly cruel joke. How could this happen? Without him, who were they? What did his message amount to? Did what they had experienced mean anything anymore?

Some simply could not find their grounding without him and moved on. But many stayed. They had left everything behind for this man, and all they had now was each other and their memory of him. They weren’t quite sure what to do about that but in the void left by his death, these women and men found comfort in each other, and slowly began to reclaim the beauty and truth in what they had experienced together with the man they came to call their Messiah.

It wasn’t always easy. They differed in how they remembered him. They differed in how they understood his message. Sometimes in their grief and confusion they said harsh words to each other, judged each other, questioned each other, made false assumptions about each other. At one time it looked like the two people who emerged as their leaders would never find common ground. Each was certain that his way was the only way and that the others were dangerously mistaken.

But in the end, no one left. For all the harsh words and ultimatums, they agreed that even in their differences, they still held in their hearts the same resurrecting love. What they had received and created together was too special to squander. They were there to raise each other up, to help each other live faithfully, to stand by each other when things got hard. Mostly, they were there to help each other focus on what was important, not have their lives bled away by the forces that denied life. So, they stayed, because they believed that the man who had brought them together lived on in the hearts of every single one of them and that by honoring each other they honored their Messiah and his grace-filled message. Out of this gathering of like-minded souls, Christianity and its primary vehicle, the church, were born and the world would never be the same. This religion and the churches that formed through it revolutionized the way human beings came together.

Now what I've given you is a very simple history of a complex time, and I'm almost certain that more orthodox Christians might not quite appreciate the way I've laid it out, and that's because every Christian denomination interprets the history of the early Christians in a slightly different way to reinforce the way they understand church. But basically, this is our ecclesiological heritage, and by ecclesiology I mean the theology of church, the theology of what holds us together. It is the 2000 year heritage of any religion that has its roots in the early Christian movement. Even though there are thousands of different kinds of churches with so many shades of ecclesiology, this is still our heritage. For the Catholics, with their hierarchical top-down structure starting with the pope at the top and the people at the bottom, for the Methodists with their dioceses, bishops and councils, and for the Mennonites, Baptists and Quakers with their priesthood of all believers, this is all their heritage. And, even though Unitarian Universalism has become much more than the liberal Christian denominations we started as, this is also our 2000 year heritage. This is the theological basis of our covenantal ecclesiology: that church is people coming together in mutual love and working out how they will stand together in the mysteries of life, the universe, and eternity in service of the higher good.

Would you suspect that the first day I stepped into a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I shook the same way I shook the evening I got my first email. Being the introvert I am, I slipped in two minutes after the start of the service so no one could talk to me, and sat in the back row, right by the door so I could leave as soon as the service ended. And then I started looking for any reason not to like it. Any reason to say, "These people couldn't possibly understand me. They aren't going to accept me. They aren't going to be able to handle the truths I believe in. They aren't going to like my questions or anyone else's. And I'm even not going to like the words in the hymnal!" Oh, the list went on. I was completely prepared to be disappointed so that I would have a reason not to make myself vulnerable to the possibility of trusting a church. And it didn't happen. In the very first words of welcome, it didn't happen. In the hymns, it didn't happen. In the reading and prayers it didn't happen. In the sermon it didn't happen, and by the time we reached the closing words, I was weeping because I had never felt so comfortable in a church and the comfort both soothed me and scared the living daylights out of me because it exposed this deep unmet need of being in community, of being with and trusting people who were oriented to something much larger than ourselves that was not a God I could never obey, but a spirit of life and love that invited me in to the dance of life. That spirit is our Messiah, the one that we manifest in our being when we seek to fulfill the bonds of mutual love with one another and to live in harmony with our world.

I came to church because I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. I was tired of being disillusioned with life. My life was being chipped away by things that were draining my core life energy. Unhealthy relationships. Bad choices. Selfishness. Depression. To use the language in our reading by Alice Blair Wesley, I was focused on Caesar, seeing only Caesar, and Caesar felt powerful and invasive. All the things I had made into false gods that I thought could sustain me had been crucified, one by one, until it felt like there was nothing left to hang on to. I have no idea what possessed me to think that my pain could be brought into a church. Perhaps it is because that 2000 year ecclesiology was embedded into my DNA, telling me that in these strange institutions which millions of people of have poured their hearts into over the last 2000 years, we can find our salvation, we can recover hope for our lives and for the world.

And I have to say, this was no extraordinary church. These were just kind ordinary people. Asking questions like me. Doubting like me. Tired. Wanting to find hope. Wanting to trust the world. Wanting to have their minds and spirits stimulated. Wanting to reclaim beauty and truth. Looking for friendship. Wanting a connection with the divine, however they understood it. Wanting that for their children. Kind

ordinary people who had experienced their share of disagreements and chose to continue walking together in the bonds of mutual love. Dare I say that every one of us had probably watched the false gods we'd created dashed by Caesar, and we came to church looking for something real, something trustworthy to hold on to.

These kind ordinary people let me slip out the back door as the minister read the closing words. These kind ordinary people shook my hand when I came back the next week, two minutes early this time. And when I came back the third Sunday, their kind ordinary minister said to me, "I know you. You keep coming back and every time I'm glad you're here. See you next week." And in my busy over-filled and spiritually devoid life I started to carve out a place for this ordinary church.

I had no idea that a 2000 year ecclesiology was grounding us in an embrace of mutual love. Unitarian Universalism feels so modern sometimes that we forget we have a rich history extending back thousands of years. The ecclesiology of Unitarian Universalism looks at our Christian heritage and sees in it the overarching truth that we are equals, that we should aim to treat each other in a way that acknowledges the sacredness in each human heart. We should listen to each other as if every word contains possibilities of the revelation. And when we fail, we can see grace in those who come back to the table and try again. And for those who do not, we can only trust that grace will come to them in other ways. We are being held by an ecclesiology that says we are the ones who build the kingdom of heaven on earth. Not a distant Messiah, for even those of us who believe in the Messiah will, like those early Christians, say that the Messiah is made real through us and that we become the message in our words and in our actions. We become Messiahs to each other and witness to each other that we can always be resurrected. There is always hope for us and always hope for our hurting world.

So on this morning, we sit in this ordinary church, with ordinary people, with our ordinary children listening to this ordinary minister. We've come from our ordinary lives to be together this morning, to strengthen ourselves and each other with kindness for the journeys of our lives. For some of you, this is what you've done for years. For others, you are just beginning to explore if this might be a spiritual home for you. What brought you here? You could have done any number of things this ordinary morning. And yet here you are, giving us the gift of your precious time. And so I close with the words of Alice Blair Wesley:

"Be gathered into communities of love. Find, together, what is more meaningful, more loving, more worthy of your attention, and be empowered in devotion to these things. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened to you. The truth will make you free."

May it be so.