



*“This is a little embarrassing to admit, but everything that happens happens for no reason.”*

### *What Else Jesus Meant*

*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE*

*Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga*

*November 18, 2007*

Good morning. Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Nicole Barnhart and I serve on the Board of Trustees. If you would like a bulletin printed in a larger typeface, please let the usher know. Our worship service will begin shortly, but first, here are a few announcements: Our religious education program is led by Jamie Sullivan and she could use your help. Please see Jamie or me and we'll tell you how you can make a difference. After the service today we'll enjoy a Soup & Bread Potluck. Everyone is invited. Fellowship events are organized by Adam Couch and he could use your help afterwards to clean and straighten up the place.

Because of all they must accomplish, the children should go directly downstairs to their classes today. The Interfaith Homeless Network is negotiating with the city for a new facility on Baldwin Avenue. On Tuesday you can voice your opinion about this plan when the City Council meets at 1000 Lindsay Street. Meet other supporters outside at 5:30 pm. The men's group meets tomorrow night, Spirit of Life meets Tuesday night, and Wednesday Night Out is at Phoenix World Café on MLK.

You and your family are invited to the Grateful Gobbler Walk on Thanksgiving morning. This family activity benefits the homeless and for more information, please see our chief gobbler, Nancy Anderson.

After all that walking, you can enjoy Thanksgiving dinner at the church. Kate and Jeff Briere will prepare terrific turkey, super stuffing and glorious gravy. We'll begin serving at 3 o'clock. Please sign up on the chart posted on the window next to the kitchen so we know how many people will be chowing down and what you'll bring to share.

A complete listing of announcements is available on our web site and if you'd like to receive a weekly notice of activities via e-mail, please see Chris in the office. Please rise now and greet your neighbors. And make a special effort to find someone you don't know and make that person feel welcome. *[Meet & greet]* Let's begin our worship service this morning with the song we all learned last week, "Turn the World Around."

*SONG: Turn the World Around*

*WELCOME*

Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted.

Please note the emergency exit over here to my right; now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode;" childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery, and the arm chairs here in the Sanctuary are for those who need a little support when standing.

Today our minister, the Rev. Jeff Briere, leads the service and he'll his topic is, "What Else Jesus Meant." For music, Marcia begins with a composition by John Mehegan.

*PRELUDE—No. 2*

*KINDLING THE CHALICE*

Would you please help me light our chalice this morning with two readings, numbers 577 & 578 in your hymnals. The first is by Gandhi and your words are in italics. Number 577.

If someone with courage and vision can rise to lead in nonviolent action, the winter of despair can, in the twinkling of an eye, be turned

into the summer of hope.

*It is possible to live in peace.*

Nonviolence is not a garment to put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our being.

*It is possible to live in peace.*

Nonviolence, which is a quality of the heart, cannot come by an appeal to the brain. It is a plant of slow growth, growing imperceptibly, but surely.

*It is possible to live in peace.*

If a single person achieves the highest kind of love it will be sufficient to neutralize the hate of millions.

*It is possible to live in peace.*

If we are to reach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.

*It is possible to live in peace.*

The future depends on what we do in the present.

*It is possible to live in peace.*

Let's move right into 578, *This Great Lesson*, the words of Olympia Brown. Please read with me.

We can never make the world safe by fighting.

Every nation must learn that the people of all nations are children of God, and must share; the wealth of the world.

You may say this is impracticable, far away, can never be accomplished, but it is the work we are appointed to do.

Sometime, somehow, somewhere, we must ever teach this great lesson.

You may have noticed that I put out the ribbons again this week. If you know a veteran, a service member, a conscientious objector, anyone who served in whatever capacity, at some point when you feel moved, please write their names on a ribbon and in a couple weeks, we will raise them up in honor.

*STORY: The Neighbor*

One hot summer day, Jesus was resting in Coolidge Park, watching the children play in the fountain. A very intelligent but smart-aleck college professor walked by with his students in tow. To impress his students, and stroke his own ego, he thought he'd make a public display of his intellect. He approached Jesus and said, "So. You are the great teacher whose picture is all over the paper. Well, ain't that nice."

He was a little jealous of the publicity Jesus was getting and he thought he could expose him for a fool if he asked a sufficiently obtuse question. "Well, teach, I have a question for you. Tell me what I have to do to live forever."

"Have you ever thought about it?" Jesus answered. "What do you think? What did you learn in Sunday School?"

Seeing the trap Jesus set for him, he avoided it by answering, "Well, I should love God as much as I can and love my neighbor, too."

"Smart man," Jesus said. "You knew the answer all along. You remembered the two most important lessons from Sunday School."

Now the professor knew he had him. He smiled at his students and said to Jesus, "But, teach, just exactly who is my neighbor?"

Jesus looked at the professor and said, Lemme tell you a story, my friend. A convention of real estate agents from all over Tennessee was in town last week and they had a grand old time. There were workshops and seminars and networking and of course, a lot of monkey business. After the last presentation, one agent, who had one Jack Daniels too many, wandered out of the convention center and got lost.

He thought he knew the way back to his hotel, but he'd used another door and everything looked strange. Especially strange— looking were the three punks who appeared to help him find his way, but then jumped him in an alley right where King Street angles into Market. It's only a block from the Choo-Choo, but no one saw the attack. The punks cut him a couple of times, stole his wallet, his watch and his shoes, then ran away and left the conventioneer in the gutter.

A little while later, a man walked by on his way to his car. He thought the conventioneer was a drunken bum and he made a note to call the cops when he got to the safety of his car.

Shortly after that, a woman walked by and thought the conventioneer was homeless. Careful not to get too close, she spoke to him, but got no answer. Outraged that someone would have to sleep on the street, let alone in her home town, she decided to write a letter to the editor of the Times-Free Press first thing in the morning.

And about an hour later, a waitress walked by. The waitress was on her way home after a long day's work at the tavern across from the convention center. All day long, she had endured rude comments from groping conventionees who acted like Tulane sophomores on a weekend bender. All she had to show for her work was \$8.43 in tips and sore feet. It had not been a good day. She was looking forward to a hot bath and some quiet time with her boyfriend and her

cat.

She actually recognized the conventioneer. Or rather, she recognized the bright green sports coat he wore. It was just one of hundreds of bright green coats worn by the agents from Better Homes & Gardens Realty Group. She knew he didn't belong in the gutter. She leaned over and jostled the conventioneer's shoulder.

"Hey! What's the matter? What're you doing in the gutter?" She got no response. The she rolled him over and saw the bruises on his face and the cuts on his arm and chest. His bleeding had slowed, but he was pretty badly beaten up. "Omigod," she said as she pulled out her cell phone and dialed 911 for an ambulance.

She used her shirt and her socks to wrap up the worst cuts and tried to make him comfortable. Within a few minutes, an ambulance arrived and she rode with him to a 24-hour urgent care facility. While the man was being treated, the waitress tried to answer the questions of the intake receptionist. "I don't know his name or where he lives or anything about him," she said. "I just found him on the street and brought him here. He needs help."

"I know that," the receptionist said. "But I still don't have no personal information. Where am I gonna send the bill, hunh?"

"How should I know? I don't know who he is." By now the waitress was a little peeved. "Look, lady, here's *my* identification. If someone has to pay for his treatment, bill me."

"Now," Jesus said, "You tell me. Who was a neighbor to the conventioneer?"

The college professor was chagrined and answered in a small voice. "The waitress. The one who helped him."

Jesus smiled at him. "Smart man. You knew the answer all along."

## ORISON

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.* Today my prayers go out to all those who spoke in this room. May their joys increase for them and for us and may their sorrows be borne by us all, for we are surely all in this together. In a moment, we will begin our offertory, and at that time, if you wish to light a candle for a special reason, please line up right over here and Mary will assist you.

Today, I pray especially for soldiers. Not Marines, who have glorious traditions, and special duties, not sailors, who wear sharp-looking uniforms and not airmen, who zoom through the sky above the fray.

Today I pray for soldiers, the basic, everyday, run-of-the-mill soldiers. The ground-pounders. The grunts. The 11 Bravos, the infantry. Scouts and riflemen, the basic engine of the army. These guys—there are no women—these guys don't wear special colors or berets, they don't get to ride in a vehicle too often and they sometimes they sleep out in rain.

I pray for their safety, that they get a chance to rest often and that their support base is top-notch. I pray their leaders take care of them, provide them with good equipment and training and remember that they are more than numbers or pins on a map.

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.* In these moments of silence, let us hold close to our hearts all those who have suffered because of the war in Iraq.

*HYMN 169, We Shall Overcome*

*OFFERTORY—Yesterday*

Marcia, what kind of piano is that? A Steinway? Is it a good piano?

Anyone hear know about Birdland? It's a jazz club and it opened just about 59 years ago in December, 1949. Charlie Parker—the Bird—was the headliner and the club was located on Broadway, a few blocks west of 52<sup>nd</sup> Street. It's moved a couple times since then, and is now on West 44<sup>th</sup>, between 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup>.

Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bud Powell, Stan Getz, Lester Young, Erroll Garner, and many, many others played there. And in the audience were celebrities like Gary Cooper, Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, Joe Louis, Marlene Dietrich, Ava Gardner, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Sugar Ray Robinson.

If those names are unfamiliar, you might compare them to Oprah, Tom Cruise, Celine Dion and Shaquille O'Neill going to see the Rolling Stones, Allison Kraus and Snoop Dogg at a night club.

In the early days, Birdland had a terrible piano. Billy Taylor, when he was the house pianist at Birdland, talked club owner Morris Levy into buying a Steinway. Taylor complained about the poor quality of the club's old piano, and Levy told him that a Steinway was too expensive.

Billy said, "You drive a Cadillac, don't you? You not only have a car that you know is the best, but when you get ready to sell it, it's worth some money because it's a Cadillac. Same thing with a Steinway—even after years of being pounded to death down here in Birdland, it will still be worth some money because it's a Steinway. And it will sound so much better."

Levy refused. In truth, he had a tin ear. He admitted he couldn't tell the difference between one piano and another.

"Sure you can," said Billy. I'll prove it to you. Come over to Steinway hall with me tomorrow." Levy agreed to do so.

Then Billy called the Steinway company and said, "I'm going to sell a \$5000 piano for you, but you have to help me out. I want you to get the biggest, shiniest, newest, worst sounding grand piano you can find. Then make it sound even worse. Really make it sound rotten. And then put it next to an average old Steinway grand."

They did as he asked, and when Billy played the two pianos for Morris Levy the next day, Levy said, "Yes, I can hear the difference!" And he bought the Steinway.

As we collect the morning offering now for the support and ministry of this church, please be generous when the plate comes your way and as Chris makes the deposit tomorrow, she'll be able to tell the difference, too. If you have a pledge payment, please mark it that way. As always the Louis Wilhoit Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items. The collection basket for that is by the front door. If you wish to add a name to the memorial ribbon, please do so now and if you wish to light a candle, please come forward now. And thank you very much.

#### *HYMN OF THANKSGIVING*

Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience everyday. Would that we recognize what is truly valuable to us every day and be thankful for it. Marcia, please lead us in our hymn of thanksgiving. The words are in your program.

Oh, we give thanks for this precious day,  
For those gathered here and those far away,  
For this time we share with love and care,  
Oh, we give thanks for this precious day.

*SERMON: What Else Jesus Meant*

“Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.” You’ve heard that adage, I suppose. It was coined in the days when you would wash your infant in a basin of water that you drew from the well. And when baby was all clean and spiffy, you’d open the back door and throw out the water—after having carefully removed the baby.

These days, we draw water from a tap and when I was a young father, I washed my son in the kitchen sink. I don’t know, maybe that’s was a bad idea. In any case, I just pulled the plug and the bath water drained away. I didn’t have to worry about John going down the drain.

Of course the metaphorical sense of the saying is that one should retain what is valuable when discarding what is not. And that applies to religion as well as anything else. Some of what passes as religion is of dubious value and some of it is quite valuable. The trick is identifying the baby when he’s sitting in the bath water, because sometimes, it’s hard to tell which is which.

For instance, large religious buildings—this one is small—large religious buildings are usually grandiose in some way. The room is tall, the edifice, overwhelming and the feeling engendered is awe. Think of the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City, Westminster Cathedral, the Crystal Cathedral, The cathedral at Chartres, the Vatican. These religious buildings were constructed by people who wanted the building to reflect the power of their religion, the majesty, the bigger-than-life nature of their religion. Are they babies or bath water?

Another example is vestments. Think of those fancy robes and stoles and cinctures that Catholic bishops and Anglican ministers wear, the stiff white dog collar that an Episcopal minister wears, the habit a nun wears and the pulpit robe hanging in my office. Baby or bath water?

Hard to tell, you might say. But Jesus thought it was all bath water. Last week, I preached about what Jesus meant and I’ll continue with more of what he meant this week. If you take the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus at face value, you may or may not come to agree with the claims of everlasting life, salvation and divinity. But regardless of your faith, you can understand what Jesus meant by reading the gospels as if they are four short stories about a very amazing guy.

I believe that Jesus is not just for Christians. Jesus speaks to everyone. As I said last week, he consorted with everyone. I mean everyone. If he were alive today, he would hang out with Ward Crutchfield. He would hang out with Marti Rutherford. He’d spank them and tell them they were out-of-bounds, but he wouldn’t avoid them because they broke the law. Jesus professed a radical love for everyone. Period.

And I kinda resent the attempts of some Christians to appropriate his love for themselves. What I am doing here is reclaiming Jesus for myself. And for you, too, I hope.

Jesus was subversive, always arguing with authorities. He was homeless. He was poor, lower class, and he hung out with people like himself. He had no money, no home and was cut off from his family. He lived the life of a fugitive, moving around for two years before he was captured.

Jesus was scandalous, consorting with undesirables and the unclean. He was called a glutton and a drunkard and he consorted with immoral people, especially women. He was born as a displaced person and he ran away from home at a young age. His best friend was wild man, who ran around in rags and dunked people in the river.

Jesus was a radical, intent on turning the world upside-down, like the song we sang earlier. He would like nothing more than to re-distribute the wealth and power in the world so that everyone

could enjoy the benefits it brings. He said time and again that the rich and powerful could not go to heaven and would surely end up in a bad place.

And Jesus was for sure egalitarian. No hierarchy, everyone equal and having equal access to the divine.

All that was a little recap of what I said last week about what Jesus meant. He had more to say, which I will get to now. This is what else he meant.

The most memorable and challenging thing Jesus left us is this bit of advice: “Love your enemies. Help those who persecute you. Praise those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you.” Those words are clear and understandable. “Love your enemies. Help those who persecute you. Praise those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you.” No ifs, ands or buts.

And those words, some would have you believe, lie at the heart of the church that Jesus founded. That conclusion is bolstered by a line from Matthew, “You are Peter [*Petros*] and upon this rock [*petra*] I will build my church.” Traditional interpretation has it that Peter is the rock, the foundation of the church. But Jesus did not found a church. Nor start a religion. Those concepts developed from his followers, who after a couple hundred years had lost sight of the original vision of Jesus.

The Greek word usually translated “church” is *ekklēsia*, is probably better translated as “gathering.” Remember that Jesus preached a radical egalitarianism. No hierarchy, no administration. The letters of St. Paul were addressed not to some leader at Corinth or at Galatia or at Rome. They were addressed to the gatherings in those cities.

So the statement to Peter is better understood as a bit of creative wordplay and better translated as, “You are Peter and on this stone I will build up my gathering.” That scene is from Matthew’s account

and in the next chapter, whatever power Jesus gave to Peter, he also gave to all of his followers because he spoke using plural forms. He did not found a church.

Reading the gospels, it’s easy to conclude that Jesus was *against* religion. Gary Wills writes in this book, *What Jesus Meant*, that “the most striking, resented, and dangerous of Jesus’ activities was his opposition to religion as that was understood in his time. He opposed all formalisms in worship—purification rites, sacrifice, external prayer and fasting norms, the Sabbath, eating codes, the priesthood, the Temple, and the rules of Sadducees, Pharisees, and Scribes. He called authentic only the religion of the heart, the inner purity and union with God.” The words of Gary Wills.

Only the religion of the heart. This passage is from the Gospel of Matthew. “Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, because they love to pray while standing in synagogues and on street corners so that people can see them. But whenever you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to God in secret. And God, who sees in secret, will reward you. When you pray, do not babble repetitiously like the Gentiles, because they think that by their many words they will be heard.”

Not only was Jesus critical of the way people prayed, he was critical of the way they kept the Sabbath. This passage is from the Gospel of Mark. “Jesus was going through the grain fields on a Sabbath, and his disciples began to pick some heads of wheat as they made their way. So the Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is against the law on the Sabbath?’ He said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions were hungry? How he entered the house of God and ate the sacred bread, which is against the law, and also gave it to his companions?’ Then he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.’”

Jesus had a problem not only with the Sabbath, but with priests, too.

Jesus was a layman, so already there is a dynamic at work. There are no priests in his following. Jesus calls no one a priest. The word is not used to describe any of his followers and Paul does not use the word for his friends or correspondents. As has been said, Jesus was egalitarian. No hierarchy, no bureaucracy.

Jesus also had a problem with the Temple in Jerusalem. And what went on in the Temple. And Jesus had a problem with the culture of sacrifice in the Temple. More than once, he refers to replacing the Temple with something better. He really had a problem with the commercialization of the Temple culture and once got so angry that he kicked everyone out of the Temple.

In his day, a bunch of entrepreneurs hung out in the temple, trading Roman coins for shekels and thus allowing people to pay their Temple dues and buy an animal to sacrifice. They could not do that with Roman coins. When he kicked the money-changers out of the Temple, it wasn't because they were buying Roman coins low and selling shekels high. When no one can change money to pay their Temple dues or buy an animal to sacrifice, it shuts down the entire sacrificial culture of the temple.

So did Jesus begin a religion? It doesn't seem so. At least not the brand of religion that we see practiced in many places today. Gary Wills writes, "What is the kind of religion Jesus opposed? Any religion that is proud of its virtue; any that is self-righteous, quick to judge and condemn, ready to impose burdens rather than share or lift them; any that exalts its own officers, is proud of its trappings, or builds expensive monuments to itself. Any that neglects the poor and cultivates the rich, any that scorns outcasts and flatters the rulers of this world." If that sounds even a little bit like a religion you have encountered, then you can understand how Jesus opposed religion.

Jesus often used a word—the Greek is *basileia*—that has been traditionally rendered as "the Kingdom of Heaven." It's a little misleading, in that kingdom connotes a place or political structure.

The word reign—that's [r-e-i-g-n], reign, as a time of dominance by one particular power—the notion of a reign, Heaven's Reign or Heaven's Imperial Reign is a better translation of *basileia*. But what's Jesus talking about, anyway?

The arrival of Heaven's Reign is the message Jesus brings us. It's not earthly, but it's now and more is coming, he said. Time and again Jesus describes Heaven's Reign with metaphors. Every parable that begins with the phrase, "the Kingdom of God is like..." or "Heaven's Reign is like..." is a parable that gives us another perspective on his message.

You ever hear the story about the five blind men who encounter an elephant? One touches the trunk, another, the tail, a third, the tusks, another, the leg and the fifth, the ear. And when they compare notes they discover five wildly different impressions of an elephant. That's what the parables of Jesus are like when they begin with, "Heaven's Reign is like..."

And those parables are well-known: the mustard seed that begins as a very tiny little thing and turns into a giant bush; the seed sown on fertile or infertile ground; yeast, slowly working in the dough to make bread; and the man who invites strangers to a party. There are many others, each giving a different perspective on Heaven's Reign.

Note that Jesus called it *Heaven's Reign*. Not his reign, not Caesar's reign, not Karl Rove's reign, but a reign of other-worldly dimensions. Jesus did not, in my opinion, establish a church. He revealed a way to enter Heaven's Reign.

And of course, Jesus said that in order to enter Heaven's Reign, you should follow the great commandment, "Love God with all your body and soul and love your neighbor as yourself." When a man asked Jesus, "Master, who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the story I told earlier.

And so here we are. In a church. If Jesus walked through the door right now, do you suppose what do you suppose he'd think of this *ekklēsia*? Would he see a big difference between this "gathering" and the one at Brainerd Baptist Church? Or Grace Episcopal? Well, he could see the buildings were different, but otherwise, Jesus would be hard-pressed to discern a big difference between us. We would all catch hell from Jesus for the same reasons that he blasted the religion of his time. I think Jesus would be against us. Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, Unitarian, whatever. Jesus did not like churches because his religion lived here, in the heart.

Last week I admitted that I had a hard time living up to the standard Jesus set for people when he said, "Love your enemies." "Had a hard time" is a delicate way of saying that I cannot jump that high. Jesus set the bar way over my head. I cannot, at this stage of my spiritual maturity, love Dick Cheney. And I'll bet that Rev. Gene Smitherman at Grace Episcopal and Rev. Dr. Charles Roesel at Brainerd Baptist have a hard time loving Hillary Clinton. And that's because Dick Cheney and Hillary Clinton stand opposed to some things we consider extremely important.

Same for the anti-religious jag that Jesus gets on. That's hard for me. I'm a minister, like Gene Smitherman and Chuck Roesel. I don't like the idea that Jesus has a problem with my church. I didn't ask them, but I'd bet Gene and Chuck feel the same way. More so, actually. I believe they have the best intentions in the world and that they are dedicated to the needs of their people. Why would Jesus have a problem with that?

So here's where Jesus and I butt heads. Not only does he want me to love Dick Cheney, but he thinks my church is for the birds. I can see the value in loving Dick Cheney, I just cannot jump that high. As for churches, I accept the criticism that Jesus offers and respond that times have changed and this church does not make claims to eternal salvation and base them on certain rituals, beliefs, behaviors or tithing.

I know that's a lame attempt at finessing the point Jesus made. I guess it shows that Jesus still set the bar too high for me.

Religions and churches. Babies or bath water?

*BENEDICTION SONG: Rainbow Connection*

For a benediction, the children have prepared a song and they'd like to sing it for us. This song was introduced by Kermit the Frog in *The Muppet Movie*, and it has been compared to "Over the Rainbow" in the way it sets a mood and how it expresses hope for the future. This is "The Rainbow Connection."