

What Jesus Meant

A Worship Service by the Rev. JEFF BRIERE

*Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
November 11, 2007*

ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS

Good morning. Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Maddie Kertay and I am President-Elect of the congregation. If you would like a bulletin printed in a larger typeface, please let the usher know. Our worship service will begin shortly, but before we get to that, 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. The Fellowship Hour is organized by Adam Couch and he could use your help afterwards to clean and straighten up the place. Please see me if you can help out.

This week, Diane Davison hosts a creative card workshop tomorrow night, Spirit of Life meets Tuesday night, the Board meets Wednesday night, the choir rehearses Thursday night. Also on Thursday, if you are interested in embroidery and other stitching, please join me and others for some sublime stitching. See me after the service for details on that. And Wednesday Night Out is at Sugar Ribs, west of the Ridge Cut.

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. Let's begin our worship service this morning with a round, number 396, "I Know this Rose Will Open."

ROUND 396, I Know this Rose Will Open

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; 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 need two weeks to cover his topic, "What Jesus Meant." For music, we welcome Erin Erdos and Erica Leung from Lee University and they bring us pieces from three contemporaneous 19th century composers.

PRELUDE—Ballade, by Albert Perilhou

KINDLING THE CHALICE

To kindle the chalice this morning, I bring you a meditation from two contemporaneous 19th century poets. They have something to say about left and right, conservative and liberal and moving to the center. First, a few lines from William Butler Yeats who was born in 1865 and died in 1939. This is taken from his poem, *The Second Coming*.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Elinor Wylie lived from 1885 to 1928 and her poetry and novels were critically acclaimed and enjoyed popularity in both the United States and England. These lines are taken from her poem, *Nonsense Rhymes*, but there is much sense here.

Whatever's good or bad or both
Is surely better than the none;
There's grace in either love or loathe;
Sunlight, or freckles on the sun.

The worst and best are both inclined
To snap like vixens at the truth;
But, O, beware the middle mind
That purrs and never shows a tooth.

Beware the smooth ambiguous smile
That never pulls the lips apart;
Salt of pure and pepper of vile
Must season the extremer heart.

A pinch of fair, a pinch of foul.
And bad and good make best of all;
Beware the moderated soul
That climbs no fractional inch to fall.

STORY: A Bad Dream

Once upon a time, the King of Chattanooga had three ministers, and their names were Huey, Dewey and Louie. All three were wise men who could interpret dreams, yet one day the king surprised them with an especially difficult question.

Usually the king woke up, had breakfast and then asked his ministers about the dreams he had the night before. If he dreamed of the ocean, what did that mean; if he dreamed of flying, what did that mean and so on and so forth. But one day, the king woke up, had breakfast and did not ask his ministers about his dreams. He went all morning without asking Huey, Dewey and Louie any questions. *But*, right after lunch, the king called for his ministers and he asked them what he would dream about *that night* when he was asleep! Not *last* night, but *that* night. Well, that was quite a puzzler!

He asked Huey, "What am I going to dream about tonight?"

Huey thought about this for awhile. "Your Majesty," he finally said, "you will dream that Honda and Toyota will both build auto plants in Chattanooga everyone will have a good job."

Not a bad dream, the king thought, but he asked Dewey, "What am I going to dream about tonight?" Dewey took his time before answering, "In Your Majesty's dream, each city council member lives in their own district and Rhonda Thurman is the superintendent of the school system."

A little strange, but still not bad, thought the king, but he asked Louie, "What am I going to dream about tonight?" Louie did not take his time thinking about this, but answered at once. "Your Majesty, you will dream that you are being chased by 666 calico pussycats, that you are sitting backwards on a zebra as he trots across Chickamauga Lake, that you have a third eye between the other two

and that Fred Thompson is President.”

“What an awful dream!” said the king. “Well, we’ll see tonight.” And requesting all three ministers to appear before him in the morning, he dismissed them for the day.

As they left the king’s presence, Huey and Dewey laughed at the Louie. “How can anyone possibly have such a dream? A zebra? Ha Ha! Fred Thompson? Oh, come on!”

The king, however, did not think at all of the dreams foretold by the Huey and Dewey, because he could not forget the strange dream as foretold by Louie. He thought about it and he worried about it and he thought about it all day long. He thought about it and worried about it and thought about it after dinner, and the more he tried to forget it, the more it nagged at him, until by the time he lay down to sleep he was so obsessed with it that he fell asleep thinking about it.

And you know what? He dreamed all about it that night.

His dream was so vivid, it woke him up, but he wasn’t afraid, because he realized that he had worried so much about this strange dream that he actually dreamed it.

When the three ministers arrived in the morning, the king told them his dream, and he commended Louie, because Louie taught them all that whatever nags at you in the day will nag at you in your dreams.

This is important to understand. If you have worries, if you are concerned about something, if you are scared about something, you need to confront your fears. You should honestly work on your problems, even if you don’t make any progress. If you think you’ll just sleep on it and maybe it will go away, it won’t. It will be there tomorrow and maybe it will give you weird dreams.

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.* Today, November 11th, was once widely known as Armistice Day, and it was first celebrated to recognize the end of hostilities on the Western Front of World War I. The agreement to end fighting—the armistice—was signed at the eleventh hour, on the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918.

After World War II, Armistice Day became Veteran’s Day, a day to honor the service of soldiers and sailors and airmen. Today the sentiments we evoke on this day are often conflated with those we evoke on Memorial Day, which is not entirely regrettable, but a little inaccurate.

It is however, different than the original point of this special day, which was to celebrate the *end* of the fighting—not the necessity of it, not the glory in it, not the people involved, not the victory—but the end of it all.

The number of World War I casualties, both military and civilian, is estimated at over 40 million—about 20 million deaths and 21 million wounded.

The estimated loss of human life caused by World War II is roughly 47 million civilians, including 20 million deaths due to war related famine and disease. The military toll, is about 25 million, and includes about 5 million prisoners of war who died in captivity.

For the Korean War, the total numbers of casualties suffered by all parties involved will probably never be known. In Vietnam and Cambodia, nearly five million people died or were wounded between 1954 and 1975 from causes directly attributed to the war and.

We are still counting in Iraq, but recent estimates of violent death since the invasion in 2003 put casualties around 1.2 million.

My prayers today are not for the dead or wounded, although they deserve all the honor that we can give them. My prayers are for those soldiers, sailors and airmen who came home. I am not, myself, haunted by my experiences in Vietnam nor at any other time of my service in the army. But I know that others, especially those who were young when they served, are often unable to balance the reality of their lives with the irrational and terrifying events of their service.

And so today I pray for those who came home, either in whole or in part, who came home and understand the real reason of Armistice Day. *Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.* In these moments of silence, let us hold close to our hearts all those who served and let us pray for a new Armistice Day.



MINISTER. For all veterans, I offer this poem by Carl Sandburg.

The little girl saw her first troop parade and asked,

GINNY. What are those?

CARL. Soldiers.

GINNY. What are soldiers?

CARL. They are for war. They fight and each tries to kill as many of the other side as he can.

MINISTER. The girl held still and studied.

GINNY. Do you know...I know something?

CARL. Yes, what is it you know?

GINNY. Sometime they'll give a war and nobody will come.

MINISTER. In the sanctuary you will notice some tables set up with long streamers and markers. As you feel so moved, please go to the table and write on one of the streamers the name of someone who has served: Living or dead, active or retired, regular or reserve; a soldier who was wounded, a sailor who fell in action, a Marine stationed overseas, an airman who flies dangerous missions, a veteran who came home.

After the names are written, we will raise these streamers in honor and in memory and in the hope of a new and long-lasting armistice. And someday, we'll have peace like a river.

HYMN 100, Peace Like a River

OFFERTORY—Morceau de Concours, by Gabriel Fauré

I remember when my son John was learning to play baseball. He became bored with T-ball and wanted to play baseball like the big boys. One Saturday morning he went next door to an empty lot and practiced his batting.

He threw the ball into the air, took a healthy swing and missed. "Steee-riike one," he screamed. Again he tossed the ball in the air, but a little higher, so as to give himself more time to hit it. But once again, he missed. "Steee-riike two," he declared. Repeating the action one more time, John fanned so hard, as Kate would say, that he almost screwed himself right into the ground. He hollered, "Steee-riike three! You're out."

I stood there and waited to see how he would handle the disappointment. He saw me, wiped his forehead, and then proudly

declared, “What a pitcher!”

Ever struck out? There is a tendency to tear yourself down, get hard on yourself, or give up when the final strike has been called.

Take a lesson from John. Focus on the good. Even in the worst situation, everyone still has value. The trick is to find it.

The trick now is to find your wallet or purse as we collect the morning offering now for the support and ministry of this church. Please be generous as the plate comes your way and we’ll hit a home run. 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. 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. Kate, 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 Jesus Meant

There’s two types of people in this world.

You know, whenever I hear someone say, “There’s two types of people in this world,” I think, “Uh–Oh. Here it comes. Another

generalization.”

I haven’t seen all the people in the world, so I don’t know about their types. But I have seen enough in this town to make a generalization: In this town, I have noticed that there are two types of people: The church-going folks and all the rest. And of the church-going, about 90% are of the conservative persuasion. And of those, about 75% are Southern Baptists. These figures are my educated guesses. If you know the actual figures, please let me know. But whatever their numbers, it seems to me that we have more Southern Baptists than any other type of religious group. It seems there’s a Southern Baptist church on every corner.

And as a result, when a religious viewpoint is offered, it most often comes from a Southern Baptist minister. The only exception I have noticed happened a few weeks ago, when the newspaper printed an essay by Rabbi Joshua Lief. Rabbi Lief opined that as part of the Christmas display of lights around the Walnut Street bridge, a Nativity scene was appropriate. But he cautioned Christians that theirs is not the only tradition in town and other citizens, such as those who populate his congregation, are offended by the heavy-handed influence that Christians can unwittingly wield.

I know what he’s talking about. Because the conservative Christian influence is so pervasive around here, sometimes it feels as if we only know one side of Christianity, and I know that Christianity is like a Baskin–Robbins ice cream store: There are many flavors of Christianity available. You’re not obliged to have vanilla every day.

Two weeks ago, if you attended this church on Sunday morning, you would have met Marcia Swearingen, a woman who pretty well represents the conservative position in Christianity. Last week, we heard from Rev. David Carnish, a liberal Baptist, if that’s not an oxymoron. He represents the other end of the Christian spectrum. Although I hear that Marcia may have been close to going over-the-top, I brought those two people into this sanctuary not to

scare us, but to give us the big picture of Christianity. I hope to add to that picture this week and next.

It seems to me that around this town, we only get one picture of Jesus, who is called the Christ. And that's unfortunate, because there's not only one way to see Jesus. This morning, and next Sunday, I hope to present a more human and humane Jesus, a more inclusive Jesus; a Jesus that you'd be proud to call your own.

And I can do this because interpreting Jesus is not an activity reserved for Christians alone, but for all people. Martin Luther gave us this authority when he preached the private interpretation of the Bible. Everyone, he said, in 1517, is entitled to read the Bible and draw from it such wisdom and inspiration as they can in their own way. Martin Luther, the man who gave us all the flavors we enjoy today. Like rocky road—the Unitarian Universalist flavor.

A few years ago, a group of scholars got together and used their collective wisdom and all the scholarly tools they could find to determine what exactly Jesus said. They are known as the Jesus Seminar. After much study, they decided that a lot of what is attributed to Jesus was added by editors and storytellers. You can read their report in the book, *The Five Gospels*.

And this might give you some idea of what Jesus actually said—as far as can be determined with today's resources. Truthfully, with the way records were kept two thousand years ago, we cannot know with certainty what Jesus said or did or anything about him. But we can get pretty close.

On the other hand, if you take the four gospels at face value, and relieve yourself of any notions of an organized religion, any claims to divinity, then you can determine pretty easily *what Jesus meant*. Regardless of what he said or didn't say, you can examine the gospels and figure out what Jesus meant—what he meant to his followers and what he meant to everyone else. For this sermon, I am

indebted to Garry Wills, who wrote this slim book, *What Jesus Meant*.

As a philosopher, Jesus was no Plato. He's about as good as Mark Twain. There is one area in which Jesus was a revolutionary, and I'll get to that in a few minutes. So why bother with Jesus? It's because of claims made by his followers that he is divine, that he lived after he died and that he held the key to eternal happiness, that he's part of the trinity and so forth—all the articles of Christian *faith*.

With or without the faith, I think you can figure out what Jesus meant. And what he meant is valuable, I believe. Ultimately, it doesn't matter if he said it or not, it's still good stuff.

To understand what Jesus meant, let's shake out of the gospels all that we can know and all that is implied about Jesus, his background and milieu. According to the gospels—remember we are taking the gospels at face value—according to the gospels, Jesus was lower class, the son of a carpenter, a tradesman. It's doubtful he had any formal schooling. It's doubtful he could read and he wrote nothing for his followers to consult after he died.

He was homeless. He slept where he could and ate what was given to him. He didn't have any savings, no income and he wasn't in touch with his family all that often. He chose his friends from lower class people and in one case, a tax collector, which was a despised occupation. He depended on others to shelter him, especially women.

He was subversive, constantly arguing with temporal and religious authorities. He was a fugitive, traveling mostly in the country side and eluding capture for two years. He was in constant danger of being kidnaped, arrested, stoned, assassinated or thrown off a cliff.

He was scandalous, consorting with the unclean, the poor, the lame, the sick, the outcasts, even women. He was a threat to power,

beginning as a rumor that Herod heard, born under Herod's death sentence and escaping only to live on the run for his public life.

He was called an agent of the devil—or the devil himself—a promoter of immorality, a consort of Samaritans, a mocker of Jewish law, a glutton, a drunkard, a companion of loose women, and a schismatic, intent on wrecking Jewish tradition and religion.

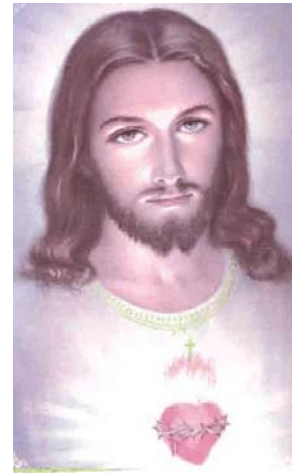
Jesus was a displaced person. His parents were displaced by an occupying imperial authority, they had no relatives to stay with when they traveled, they are forced to make a barn into a maternity ward, a hay trough into a cradle. Jesus was born into an oppressed people, forced out of his parent's city and excluded from common shelter.

He defied his parents at a rather young age and ran away from home. Not content with running away, he rebuked his parents for their concern when they went looking for him. Any similarity to rebellious teenagers is entirely appropriate.

He came out of the desert—along with John the Baptist, his origin was not privileged, but ascetic. Every gospel places the beginning of Jesus's public ministry in the context of John the Baptist's reform movement. Jesus allies himself with a wild man, clad in rags and animal skins who forages the land for sustenance.

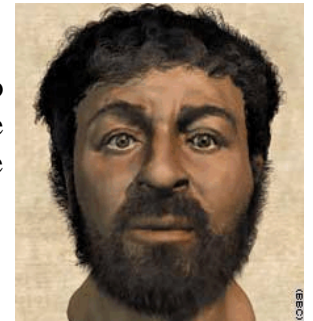
Before beginning his itinerant preaching, Jesus is challenged three times, first, to prove he is more than a magician, second, to prove that he can resist the temptations of the world and third, to prove that he cannot die. He rejects all three challenges as being unworthy and in a sense, rejects any notion of a "cheap salvation." Salvation, this episode implies, is very difficult, but Jesus is up to the task.

We really don't have any idea what Jesus looked like. Portraiture was not a highly developed art in those days and he couldn't afford to have his likeness preserved, anyway. But that hasn't dissuaded artists from creating his likeness.



This is one I recall from my days as a Catholic boy.

In 2002, some anthropologists attempted to reconstruct the appearance of the average Jewish man of 2000 years ago. Here is the artist's sketch they produced.



In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the opera by Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice, Pilate has a strange dream and he sings about it in these words:

I dreamt I met a Galilean;
A most amazing man.
He had that look
you very rarely find,
The haunting, hunted kind.

I asked him to say
what had happened
How it all began.
I asked again;
he never said a word
As if he hadn't heard.

So what did he look like? Probably much like those he gathered

around him: poor, ragged, under-nourished, hurt. It is said that the marginalized and the outcasts do not seek out someone from the “In Crowd” for their role model and hero. Gandhi and Mother Theresa were not good examples of healthy humans. So Jesus probably did not resemble Jack LaLanne or Arnold Schwarzenegger. He wasn’t your hale and hearty fellow.

Jesus walked through social barriers to consort with everyone. *Everyone!* Now here’s guy after my own heart. Everyone is in and no one is out. There are no classes of clean and unclean for Jesus.

It’s hard for us to understand how certain classes, genders, occupations and conditions were unclean to Jews in those days. But pretend you are a first-century observant Jew. There are many tasks you can not perform on the Sabbath. There are many foods you can not eat. There are many people you can not abide: Lepers, prostitutes, women in general, tax collectors, Samaritans, the crippled, the possessed, the lame, the uncircumcised—the *outsider*—all these people you must avoid, because if you come into contact with them, or are in the same room with them, or pass by them in the street, you, as a clean person, are made instantly unclean.

The nearest experience that I can imagine is how AIDS victims were treated before science understood how the disease was spread. In those days, doctors and health care workers wore rubber gloves and masks to treat people with AIDS. We worried that sneezes, coughs and mosquitos spread the disease. Physicians and nurses are still careful, but we don’t shun AIDS patients like we did in the early 80’s.

Jesus was unclean as were his followers, because they mingled with the unclean. To Jesus there were no classes of clean and unclean; everyone was clean. Jesus indicated that trust, not ritual waters is what cleansed people. Purity comes from within; from the heart. For Jesus, internal purity is something more important than external cleanliness. External religious practices, like ritual bathing, are useless.

Thinking about this, I was reminded of the Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, who preached that the external trappings of Christianity will change over time, but the heart of Christianity, the essence, will persevere. He preached that in 1825.

Jesus was radical. His biography reads more like a member of the Weather Underground than a religious icon—a first century Che Guevara. Wealth, for instance, is a problem. *A problem!* Can you imagine? Wealth a problem?

Time and again, Jesus inveighs against those who are wealthy. They will not enter heaven, they have too many possessions, they are focused on the wrong goal. Those opposed to Jesus are wealthy. The bad examples in his parables are wealthy people. The wealthy have to sell all they own before they can join the other apostles. The wealthy are beyond the pale. And compared with the folks who lived when Jesus lived, everyone in this sanctuary is wealthy beyond belief.

Power is a problem. Temporal or spiritual power is a problem for those who would follow Jesus. The gospels make it clear that riches are the enemy of the spirit, but they offer an even more urgent warning against those who would grab power, lord it over the people and especially those who would abuse spiritual power. The pharisees, priests, scribes and elders come under withering attack from Jesus for their hypocrisy, their corruption, their selective interpretation of the law and their lack of concern for the people.

Jesus was egalitarian—to a fault, his followers believed. The men who were his disciples could not understand his ways concerning women: He traveled openly around the countryside with women; he spoke directly to women; he ate dinner with women and women were at his crucifixion and his burial.

Moving outside the gospels, the historical record and the letters of Paul indicate that women played a much greater role in the

administration of the early church than they did in later times. It's well-known that there were no "priests" in the early church, no hierarchy, no privileged class, no "us and them." Everyone had equal status. The early church followed the model that Jesus established: egalitarian.

In his shortest parable, Jesus reveals just how much a revolutionary he is. He said, "Love your enemies. Help those who persecute you. Praise those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you." No ifs, ands or buts. Those words are clear, to the point and unqualified. And they have been summarily ignored since they first landed on the ears of the Apostles.

About this most central idea of Jesus, Garry Wills says, "Tremendous ingenuity has been expended to compromise these uncompromising words. This Jesus is too much for us. The church's later treatment of the gospels is one long effort to rescue us from the extremism of Jesus."

Think about this carefully. Conjure in your imagination your enemy. This may be hard for us in the 21st century. "Enemy" is a strong word, usually reserved for life-and-death situations. So instead of enemy, imagine that person who is opposed to what you believe in and what you stand for.

This might help.



Our Vice President, Dick Cheney.

Now, Jesus tells me I should love this guy. I'm trying, Jesus, but I ain't there yet. Help him? I can't do that. Praise him? Definitely not. Pray for him? Now I can do that. He needs my prayers.

The thing is, it's nearly impossible for me to love Dick Cheney because I don't know him. Or rather I know only the dark side of him, and it's doubtful that I'll ever know the warm and fuzzy Dick Cheney. But if I did, there's a better chance I'd love him.

And here's what makes Jesus a revolutionary philosopher. Remember I said I'd get to this point, right? Jesus said that I should love Dick Cheney anyway. Friend or foe, known or unknown, President or Vice, love the people—not the people in general, but each individual person.

And in my experience no human being has ever been able to do that. I haven't met every human being, so one may exist somewhere, sometime who loves everyone. I hope so.

Human beings find it very hard to love their enemies. Two pillars of Christian theology, Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas proposed and developed the doctrine of a "just war." The popes invoked it to raise an army for three crusades against Muslims. For years, the church ran a continental torture chamber called the Inquisition. In Europe and in America, strange women were killed in the name of Jesus because they were thought to be agents of the devil. And of course, the Christian Church hasn't exactly treated Jews with compassion and kindness.

At one point in his interrogation of Jesus, Pilate asks him if he is a king. Jesus replies that his reign is not of the present order. Indeed, his statements lead me to believe he lived in a parallel universe, an alternative reality to the one in which we live. "Love your enemies. Help those who persecute you. Praise those who curse you. Pray for



Or this.

those who abuse you.” No ifs, ands or buts.

Perhaps Jesus did actually come from another reality. For this world, he advised his followers to be unconcerned about where they would sleep, what they would eat and so forth. He said God would take care of them. He told them to prepare for the next world instead.

And when they asked how they should prepare, Jesus replied that those who welcome him as a visitor, feed him, clothe him, give him drink, nurse him when he is ill and visit him in prison—those people who do all that are preparing well; they did their homework. What Jesus meant, of course, is that anyone who had done those things for any other person had done them for Jesus as well.

And what does that mean? Using negative examples, Garry Wills says, “It means that adults who molest children are molesting Jesus. Televangelists who cheat widows of their savings are cheating Jesus. Those killing members of other religions because of their religion are killing Jesus. Those who despise the poor are despising Jesus. Those neglecting the homeless are neglecting Jesus. Those persecuting gay men and women are persecuting Jesus.”

Now all that will matter to those who profess the Christian faith, because you sure don’t want to be doing all that to the leader of your religion. But with or without the faith, what Jesus meant is as valuable today as it was 2000 years ago.

There is no doubt that what Jesus is reported to have said is often ignored, made more acceptable, safer, less risky, less revolutionary and sometimes twisted for repugnant purposes. And ultimately, those who try to co-opt Jesus for their own purposes will fade away, like the external trappings of religion that annoyed Jesus

But what Jesus meant is different. What Jesus meant will endure.

Next week, we will examine what Jesus meant about religion, about

heaven and hell and what he meant when he talked about God. Right now, Erin and Erica offer us their last selection, a piece by Karl Joachim Andersen entitled *Scherzino*.

INTERLUDE—Scherzino, by Karl Joachim Andersen

BENEDICTION SONG: Turn the World Around