**Stealing Jesus©**

By Reverend Kathleen C. Rolenz

She looked deep into my eyes and asked the question that I had been dreading. “Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?” At that moment, I was literally in hell. Let me back up for a moment and tell you how I got into hell and how I got out of it.

 The year was 2005, and my husband and I were on sabbatical, researching worship styles and experiences all over the country – that eventually resulted in writing the book, “Worship that Works.” In October, we were visiting All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, the largest UU congregation in the country. The minister of that congregation, the Reverend Marlin Lavanhar, asked us if we’d like to experience part of Tulsa Halloween culture and not knowing what we were getting into, we said “sure!” So, he took us to the Haunted Hell House, run by a fundamentalist Christian congregation to remind those who go through it, the wages of sin. It featured graphic depictions of teenagers sprawled out on the road with buckets of blood around them; the effects of drunken driving; a young woman holding a baby doll weeping hysterically over an abortion; teens keeled over from an overdose with fake needles stuck in their arms; you get the idea. So, all that was very interesting until we got to the end of the tour when were let out into a tent like structure with dozens of young people grabbing the hand of every person that went through the “haunted house,” and asking them if they have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior.

 “Well, have you,” this young, blonde woman asked me—very sweetly, I might add. “I’m a Unitarian Universalist minister,” I said, as if that would be enough explanation for her,” and I tried pulling my hand away, but she held me tight, “But, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?” “I’m a Christian” , thinking that would surely release me from her grasp. “But what kind of Christian?” she asked. “That doesn’t mean you’ve accepted him into your heart. Will you….” And again, she repeated the phrase that I finally figured out she really wanted me to say before letting me go. Fortunately, just that minute, could have been divine intervention, something distracted her and I slipped from her grasp, stealing away into the crowd and then out of the tent.

 I tell you that story because-- it troubled me, and I’ve learned to pay attention to the things that trouble me It troubled me because as I looked into that young woman’s eyes, I saw there a fierce need to convince me that her understanding of who Jesus was, what he meant and what he could mean to me was tied up in that simple formula: “Accept him as my Lord and Savior.” It troubles me because even though I said I was a minister, it wasn’t good enough; even though I admitted to being a Christian; it wasn’t good enough as if somehow everything had to be boiled down to one formulaic creed in order to pass a kind of test . Looking into her eyes, I could tell that she believed that she owned Jesus. I left the tent that night feeling assaulted, not by the horrible images of sin and suffering in the Haunted Hell House, as bad as they were, but by the presumption of this young woman that Jesus was hers, and hers alone.

 Coming back home to my own church after our sabbatical trip, I led a class called “New to UU” an introduction to the church and to Unitarian Universalism. I asked people to say their name and to tell us about their religious upbringing. My co- facilitator went first. “I’m John, I’ve been a member of this church since 1975 and I’m a recovering Catholic.” Everybody laughed except for one of the participants, who winced and looked down at the floor. During the break, I asked her about it. She said, “I grew up Catholic. Most of my family is still Catholic. But for me, Catholicism is not a disease to recover from. And while I don’t believe I can “be” Catholic in the same way they are, there are things I don’t want to have to give up to become a Unitarian Universalist.” “Like what,” I asked her. “Jesus. Do I have to give up Jesus to become a UU?”

 Her question troubled me too, and when something troubles me- I’ve learned to pay attention. I wanted to tell her of course you don’t’ have to give up Jesus to be a Unitarian Universalist, but in the back of my mind, I thought “well, in theory – no--but in practice, yes, you kinda do.”

 So, what I want to look at this morning is the Unitarian Universalist relationship to Jesus and Christianity. The religious right has stolen Jesus for themselves and because of their heist has been so successful, it’s hard to imagine him having a meaningful and relevant place in 21st century Unitarian Universalism. But – I think it’s time we stole him back and in a few minutes I’m going to tell you why and how.

 In this culture, you just can’t avoid Jesus because in one way or another – he’s everywhere. It was Flannery O’Connor who once said, “We live in a Christ-haunted culture” and we hear or see Christ – or at least someone’s religious understanding of Christ in a myriad of ways. Our neighbor wants to share the gospel with us; our mother-in-law asks if we know the Lord. Or like Stephen Dunn, you see the messages coming out of the mouths of babes, when your children are invited to Arts and Crafts Week at the Smithville Methodist Church and you realize that your daughter is singing “Jesus Loves Me, this I know” and you don’t have a counter narrative. Somehow Spirit of Life just doesn’t carry the same punch.

 Maybe like Mr. Dunn, you have heard or seen all those messages but don’t really know how you feel about them. Perhaps like him you are in this in-between place in your own heart and mind about Jesus – wondering if it’s worth searching for him , wondering whether you can find a little bit of something that you can believe about Jesus that would give you something to say your kids.

 When I came to understand that I was a Christian Unitarian Universalist, I had to do some deeper exploring about what that means, because having been raised in a secular home, I had no pre-conceived notions about him. When I was first drawn to looking for Jesus myself, I couldn’t start with the ghost, or the spirit. I had to start with body. I had to start with the historical figure and understand his life and what we really know about him and what he taught. So who was he and what could he mean for me – for us – living in the 21st century? I felt that the Jesus I wanted to follow had been stolen from me – but the question is, from whom? Well, there is a long list but let’s take a walk together through a short list of people and places where Jesus has been stolen away from us.

 I think the stealing began with the Apostle Paul, for one. Now although I love Paul’s earnestness, he reminds me of that young woman I met in the tent. But, Paul also ignored the simple and inclusive teachings of Jesus about the meaning of the Kingdom of God being within you and instead teaches an exclusive doctrine of justification by faith in Jesus as a representation of God, a teaching that has shaped the direction of the institutional Christian church and taken it farther and farther away from the direct teachings of Jesus the man. He was one of the earliest proponents of atonement theology – that Jesus death on the cross was central to human redemption. He successfully created that narrative that the Christian church not only inherited, but calcified into dogma.

 Who else stole Jesus? The Holy Roman Empire did—in the form of Constantine and his mother, Helen. From the beginning of the 4th century, the religion about Jesus became the official state religion of the reunited Holy Roman Empire under the leadership of Emperor Constantine. In less than a year’s time, Christianity went from being reviled as a persecuted minority religion to being hailed as the official religion of the Emperor. For Constantine, stealing Jesus in this way was hardly radical. Every empire known to humanity up until that time had been built with an official state religion, and all he did was change brands. For his mother, Helen, her dream and her agenda was to have the Christians control the Holy Land, eventually accomplished some six hundred years later.

 The then powerful Catholic Church stole Jesus in their own way, making the keys to the kingdom *within* that Jesus had offered, into the keys to a heaven *up there* that the church controlled. As they controlled access to heaven, the church grew in power and influence to the point where it was an equal to the empire builders that had adopted it.

 But then in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Roman Catholic empire itself was challenged by a new upstart, Martin Luther, and he too stole Jesus! Luther led a Protestant Reformation that taught a new way to believe in Jesus, as a son of God who could never be understood by reason and had to be accepted and believed by faith alone. The Protestants stole what was left of the human Jesus.

 But there was a radical remnant of Protestant congregationalists who continued the search for a Jesus they could believe in despite the opposition of both Protestants and Catholics. That radical remnant eventually became known as the anti-Trinitarians – and they stole Jesus back by returning to the scriptures, and to the books about Jesus that the church had first banned and exiled. This radical remnant had to do what each of us is called to do in our own lives – and that is to steal Jesus back from those who hold him and treat him like their personal property.

 What did that radical remnant find? They found a living breathing human being who had spoken of a relationship with God and with human community and with yourself that could change the world. They found the Jesus who broke bread with the poor and who defied the powerful. They found the Jesus who stood with the outcasts and who inspired the faint of heart. They found the Jesus who really did live in history and can be glimpsed in the scriptures – but even though they knew they had found this Christ in history, they wanted to know where they could find this Jesus today. If Jesus was stolen two thousand years ago and over and over again throughout history, where can he be found today?

Lest I let us – as Unitarian Universalists off the hook – I think in the 20th century, we not only attempted to steal Jesus back from the fundamentalists, we’ve hidden him away, removing any mention of him from our worship services and being skeptical of those who are inspired by him. Our Unitarian Universalists have framed a story about Jesus, the carpenter’s son as a great rabbi and teacher, but if you want claim him not as “the” savior, but ‘your savior” there is not much room in our faith for such a proclamation. We couldn’t truthfully tell that woman in the New to UU class that she can have Jesus and be a UU without having to defend her beliefs to see if they hold up under our intellectual scrutiny. I think we’ve got to steal Jesus back - not to put him at the center of our faith; but to create an open heart for the religious diversity we so often promote and claim as our own.

 In all fairness, I think it was a necessary corrective for the Unitarians and Universalists of the early part of the 20th century to set Jesus aside, to allow for new insights of science that led to a kind of secular spirituality. I think we had to steal Jesus away from holding a prominent place in our faith to allow for other voices as well—the ethical atheist; the mystical rationalists, the nature-inspired spiritualists, the peace-loving Buddhists. We also had to distance ourselves from Christianity as fundamentalism came to the foreground with its heavy dose of dogma and its impossible demands. All that is to the good, I think, and to be honest, I don’t’ think Jesus would have minded.

At the same time, everybody seemed to be looking for the stolen Jesus. Everybody wants a piece of Jesus; everybody wants to claim that their Jesus is here, until Jesus is everywhere and no where. Jesus face winds up being seen in a paint splatter on somebody’s garage or in the face of a tortilla or a grilled cheese sandwich.

 It reminds me of the story of the man who went to a revival and submitted to baptism by being totally immersed in the water. So he’s pushed down and then dragged back up and asked: “well, did you find Jesus?” No, he responded. So they dunked him again and pulled him up. Well, they repeat, did you find Jesus? No, he replies. They dunked him again and upon bringing him up, once again asked, *did you find Jesus*? Gasping for breath he finally says, *no, are you sure this is where he fell in?”*

 I want to take us back to the scripture again, back to the passage in Mark where Jesus and his disciples are walking down the road. We don’t know what prompted him to ask the question, but at some point in the conversation he is curious—and says-- “who do people say that I am?” Do you ever wonder that about yourself sometimes—if who you think you are is the same as others say you are? I think Jesus was looking for a real witness here—somebody to tell him the truth; the difference between the store clerk who says “girl you look great in that dress,” and your best friend who says “I will unfriend you on facebook if you wear that in public,” he was looking for an honest word, but what he got back was gossip, really. Some say you are John the Baptist—they answer; when everybody knows that John the Baptist can’t do what Jesus does.

 But then they say—oh, you must be Elijah, one of the great prophets of the Hebrews; the prophet who battled the wicked authorities of his day; who was zealous for the Lord, who had a dramatic smackdown with the worshippers of Baael or Baal; Elisha come back to life who would lead the people triumphant against the occupation by Rome; their words filling the air with such hope for here was their main man—the ONE—but Jesus just let their assumptions about him fall into the silence as they kept walking.

 And then, while walking on that road, he asked the question that reverberates forward through time to this pulpit and this place—from his mouth to your ears—and who do *YOU* say that I am? And you know what? He doesn’t answer that question for you. And his disciples scrambling to come up with an answer until Peter offers his best guess “the Messiah,” which in Hebrew is Meshiahh (meh-she-ahhch), simply means “the anointed one; he who is smeared with the oil of gladness; or one understanding is ***“he in whom the Spirit has come Alive.”*** And then, shush he says—don’t go running about talking about me—shush---shush. he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him, the text says, because sometimes when the spirit touches you, you wanna lift your hands and shout; and sometimes when you encounter the Holy you experience such a moment of spiritual aliveness that it feels too intimate for words. I think that’s what Jesus’s presence provided for people; an experience of spiritual aliveness that they were transformed by his presence, by his words, by his touch. It is no wonder that we keep wrestling with these words of Jesus and struggling with who he is and what he did and is he the Son of Man or the Son of God or the Messiah or Your Personal Lord and Savior or a nice-guy-rabbi—or a King or a prophet or a peddler of parables and tall tales or a saint or a seer—but what I hear in his words is it that none of these labels matter because he turns his direct gaze onto you and asks you “who do YOU say that I am?
 As Unitarian Universalists we have to claim that power to define Jesus for ourselves. We’ve got to stop being embarrassed that we don’t have a creed or a single sentence summary that is the equivalent of Jesus Christ is my personal lord and savior—the end; we’ve got to completely negate the voices that would tell us we are not faithful enough to Jesus’ message because we are no longer an exclusively Christian faith. We’ve got to recognize that Jesus’ message has been stolen and held hostage for so long and by so many groups that have used him for their own advantage, that I think it is high time we stole it back. We have got to steal back his message that all Beings are Beloved; each one of us is a Hologram of the Holy; that every single life can be a Gospel of Goodness. We’ve got to take that message into the streets and into our city to say that religious liberals have been to the tomb as well and have found there a Subversive Resurrection; and we have been forever changed by our encounter with the man from Nazareth and that we are forever challenged by the truths that he lived and died for; and ***that i***s a Jesus that is worth stealing back.