

Sermon: Lesser Miracles and Greater Miracles – One Unitarian’s View of Jesus

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CHILDREN’S STORY by Rev. Fred Cappuccino

Our daughter Shikha is grown up now, and living on her own. When we first saw her 34 years ago in Mother Theresa's orphanage in Bangladesh she was two months old and weighed four pounds. She had tiny tiny fingers and toes, and they were brown on top and white underneath. We brought her home and she thrived.

I want to tell you a story about when she was three years old. She was a bit too long for her pajamas, so we cut holes for her little bare feet to stick out.

She sits on my lap before bedtime. She says to me, "Daddy, smell my feet - I put hand cream on them; they smell very sweet," intently shaking her head yes.

Now, usually a person's feet smell terrible. I said, "You're not playing a joke on me, are you?"

"Oh, no, Daddy. I put hand cream on them and they smell sweet." So I slowly, slowly pick up her little foot, and take a whiff.

I make a terrible face: "PHTUI! What an awful smell!" She laughs and laughs.

Then she suddenly gets very serious and says, "No, Daddy - it's the OTHER foot - I put hand cream on IT and IT smells sweet."

"You're not fooling me this time?"

"Nooooooh," she says, "Smell it. It smells very sweet."

So I slowly, cautiously, take up the other foot and smell.

I make a terrible face and say, "PHTUI! What an awful smell!"

Her laughter peals out through the house. She played another joke on her Dad.

And I know you won't believe this, but her Daddy was so dumb that she was able to fool him every single bedtime for weeks and weeks.

Every family has little stories like this. Please write one down. I'd like to see what you have written.

MEDITATION by Rev. Fred Cappuccino (1986)

May the blessing of the Full Moon be upon you -
May the silver boughs of the white pine
Blow gently in the night
And breathe comfort to your soul;

May the ascending Sun swell your spirit -

May yours be the blessing of the boulders of the forest -
The great glacial rocks -
Pressing to earth the secrets of yesteryear;

May the blessing of the soft snows be upon you -
As cleansing crystals cover the sleeping sod and twisted trees
That your going-out may be refreshed;
(or)

May the blessing of the gentle rain be upon you -
Washing the leaves and renewing the grass
That your going-out may be refreshed;

And on your returning,
May the heat of the hearth fire heal your bones -
And before the crackling embers
May your ears hear with fondness
The words of those who are gone -
And the voices of those who are not yet gone;

And may the blessing of the everlasting stars be yours -
The distant suns which belonged to your forebears' dreams,
The heavenly planets on which your sons shall one day sing,
And which your daughters
Shall one day hold
In their hands.

SERMON: Lesser Miracles and Greater Miracles - One Unitarian's View of Jesus, By Rev. Fred Cappuccino

Albert Schweitzer in his book, THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS, concluded that theologians try to mold Jesus in their own image. Yet Jesus always has a way of escaping back to his own time, and to his own very human personality.

Through the years the church has so altered and aggrandized the person of Jesus that he is hardly recognizable. I tend to be a skeptic and an unbeliever. As a matter of fact, I'm receiving memberships in an organization called, ATHEISTS FOR JESUS. I want to say that the greatest single influence in my own religious life, by far, has been this person Jesus. One way to approach the subject is to take a look at the miracles of Jesus.

Among the many legends of the reappearance of Jesus after his death is one from the book of Acts:

So when they had come together, ... he said to them, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you..." And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

At the time these legends were first written, no person had ever actually gone any further into the sky than they could climb. The writer of the book of Acts apparently thought that heaven was a place in the sky, not too far above us, and therefore it would be natural for Jesus to be taken up into the sky, and removed from sight by the clouds as he entered heaven. This puts us in mind of Thomas Hood's poem:

*I remember, I remember
The fir trees dark and high;
I used to think their slender tops
Were close against the sky;
It was a childish ignorance,
But now 'tis little joy
To know I'm farther off from heaven
Than when I was a boy.*

A cloud took him out of sight. Through the centuries Jesus has often been obscured by clouds of one kind or another.

Some skeptics have suggested the possibility that Jesus may not have been an actual person - that the stories about him may have been the figment of someone's fertile imagination. And then there is Tom Harpur's good book, *THE PAGAN CHRIST*, in which Harpur states that all of the teachings of Jesus and stories about Jesus can be found in sources from centuries earlier in Egyptian and other texts. It took me a while to adjust to that fact - but I have concluded that the idea of Jesus has relevance. If not Jesus, - some brave person faced the angry mob about to stone a woman, and said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

There is power in the myth, which states that at one time a man walked the hills of Galilee - hobnobbed with the poor - had compassion upon the weak and helpless - denounced the oppressors - and, even though he knew that powerful vested interests were opposed to his teaching, nevertheless "set his face to go to Jerusalem," even to his arrest and trial and ultimate death as a subversive on a cross.

Most people in the Christian tradition, I feel, miss the real significance of Jesus. In 1917, just before the October Revolution took place in Russia, the same day that a handful of communist leaders were planning the overthrow, in another house on the same street in Moscow, the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church were also having a meeting - to discuss the garb of the clergy.

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, the times that Jesus has been most hidden from the people were times when the ritual of the church was the most formal. In the days of slavery, the African tribes-people sometimes would be kidnapped and led in chains to the slave ship. The ship would then pass a dock on which was set up a throne whereon sat a priest of the Christian Church in long robes, who would sprinkle holy water, baptizing the human cargo en masse - in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

The real Jesus - who had shown compassion upon the crushed and the oppressed - who saw them as sons and daughters of a loving deity, and created in the image of that deity - this Jesus was obscured by clouds of ritual.

There is a story about some tourists visiting cathedrals in Rome, and the guide pointed out the skull of John the Baptist. Later on in a different cathedral, the guide, again pointed out the skull of John the Baptist. When some wise guy - probably a Unitarian - asked "What about the first head of

John the Baptist?" the guide said with a straight face, "Oh, that other one was when he was a boy."

Some of the thinking about Jesus is just as convoluted. Many Christians attempt to honour Jesus by calling him such names as "God's Only Begotten Son" - thereby elevating him onto a pedestal - so that the human element is overlooked and obscured, and his suffering becomes an unconvincing subject of philosophical speculation.

To worship Jesus - is a good way - of evading his teachings. He did not want to be worshipped - he wanted his teachings to be taken seriously, not as abstract principles, but as guides to behaviour. "Not he that calleth me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven," said Jesus, "but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Nor was Jesus overly concerned about the afterlife. He was not interested in splitting hairs about what life would be like in heaven. When asked by the Sadducees which one of a woman's seven husbands would be with her in the afterlife, he declined to get involved, saying simply that they would all be angels in heaven. He believed that how we act in THIS world is the important thing.

In thinking about the miracles of Jesus, there are several things to keep in mind. Jesus was known as a "doer of mighty works." The "wonders" and "signs" were accepted as natural explanations of all unknown phenomena. It is only in our modern age that we distinguish between natural and supernatural. So the first point is that there had to be miracles. If these early stories had no miracles at all, then we would know that they were not authentic.

Second, the miracles ascribed to Jesus were largely humanitarian: healing the sick, feeding the hungry - miracles that arose out of his compassion for humankind.

Third, the miracles of Jesus were elemental rather than sensational. According to the account, he did not stop the sun as Joshua did - he healed a man's hand.

Fourth, the farther away from the lifetime of Jesus that a particular manuscript was written, the more sensational the miracles become. There are some non-biblical gospels written a century or two after Jesus died in which he performs

miracles that are bizarrely spectacular. The boy Jesus molds a bird out of clay, then he tosses it into the air and it flies away. Another time, a playmate accidentally bumps into him, so Jesus points a finger at him and the playmate dies. Then the parents come running and the boy Jesus strikes them blind.

This principle of the expanding miraculous element is observable even within the Bible. In the earlier gospels, written some forty years after Jesus' death, he says of a child whom he restored to health, "The child is not dead, but sleeping." But in the gospel of John, written almost a century after Jesus' death, he heals Lazarus, who had been in the tomb for four days, and whose condition his sister Martha described by saying, "Lord, by this time he stinketh."

Also compare the miraculous birth. Mark, the earliest gospel, says nothing at all about the virgin birth of Jesus. Later gospels, Matthew and Luke, have a virgin birth story. But John, the latest of the four gospels, opens with, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." By the time this was written, the influence of Jesus had so increased that John omits the virgin birth story entirely and speaks of Jesus as having existed with God from the beginning of time as the Word or Logos, before the world was created.

A fifth point about miracles, which is one that traditional Christians tend to overlook, and which is quite basic, is that Jesus did not consider miracles to be the most important part of his ministry. He tried to de-emphasize them. He tried to divert people's attention from them. Repeatedly in the book of Mark he said, "Tell no one."

It seems to me that all these miracles, of healing, special form of birth and death, are all lesser miracles - they are found in many other religions, and the same principle holds true that the farther we go from the time the individual lived, the more spectacular the miracles become.

At one point when the Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign, in order that they might believe in him, Mark records that Jesus "sighed deeply within his spirit." He wanted people to follow his Way not because of the miracles, but because of the beauty and the wisdom of the path on which he walked. Perhaps this weakness of the people in wanting a sign is one reason why he was called the "man of sorrows."

This Jesus was concerned about the release of the captives - about giving sight to the blind - including those who were blind to an appreciation of their own potential.

The Jesus who walked among humans, who ate with publicans and sinners, who wept over the city, who loved little children and said, "Let the children come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven," - the same Jesus also said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Moving on to the greater miracle: when religious liberals wish to evaluate traditional Christianity, we often use a poor example of Christianity. It seems to me that we ought rather to use one of the best examples. The story of The Rev Clarence Jordan, co-founder of Koinonia Community is presented in this light. Koinonia was a group in Americus, Georgia, which was under fire for many years because of its policies of racial equality. I don't know its status today. The following is taken from a talk given by Mr Jordan in 1956 at Cincinnati, Ohio. (Now what follows is a rather long story. It is not a story about my own experience; it is Clarence Jordan's experience:)

(Quote) I grew up in the State of Georgia, and very early became aware of a tremendous struggle going on in the hearts of people... There were people professing a loyalty to Jesus, and yet there was an unrest there. He would teach people to love one another. He would teach that "red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight," and yet, that was not a reality...

As I grew up I wanted to try to reconcile that into a whole, and growing up in a rural area, I decided to go to the Agriculture college, and try to come back to my people, and unite them somehow or another, in Christian love and brotherhood. Later, as I finished University, I became aware that people do not live by bread alone, but by those words proceeding from the mouth of God. And I went to the Southern Baptist Seminary to learn what those words of God might be - all the while dreaming of the time when I could go back to Georgia and seek to set up a fellowship that would be true to those things that were taught by him.

In 1942 this became a reality when another family - Martin England and his wife and children, also had something of the same vision. And so we went down and found an old run-down 400 acre farm in the south western part of Georgia.

We had agreed upon several fundamental principles: One was that as we read the New Testament, it became clear to us that God is the father of people irrespective of their race. We agreed that we would hold to that, regardless of the consequences.

Second, we agreed that the way of Christ was not the way of non-violence alone, but the way of active good-will. We agreed to commit ourselves actively to try to love even those who were opposed to us, and to overcome their evil by doing good, and I could cite you lots of opportunities that we've had along that line.

And third, we committed ourselves to the equality of the believers - economically and otherwise, so that meant of course having a common purse - it meant the renunciation of all personal property. Into our fellowship we would accept people as equals, but we could not see how they could come in if property were dividing them, so one of the requirements for membership in our group is that you have no earthly possessions. Jesus said, "It's hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom." We haven't even had one apply, but we'd just unload him at the door. Now things - property - have a tremendous ability to separate people, and so we wanted to get rid of that divisive wall that grew up between people - between the rich and the poor...

We went to this old run-down farm and started in. We had hardly got there when we had some Negro visitors. We were very happy to have them, and we sat down and ate, and we could not control who came and went, and about the same time some white neighbours dropped in, and - they saw what was going on - right there in South Georgia, and their mouths dropped open - reminding me of the entrance to Mammoth Cave there for awhile. Well, I knew there would be some trouble after that, and a day or two later, some couple of gentlemen came - said they had been sent by the Ku Klux Klan, and they said, "We want to come right to the point with you - we want to let y' know that we don't let the sun set on folks that do things like that out here."

I put on my broadest smile, and I stuck out my hand, and said, "Well, I'm so happy to meet you! All my life I've wanted to meet some people who had power over the sun!" And I said, "We'll be watching it with great interest tonight." And sure enough, the sun did go right on down, as usual - no Joshuay there at all.

That was about 14 years ago. As time moved along, we thought, now we've got to overcome evil with good, and so we tried to outline a program of

agricultural missionary activity, that we could reach out to the people and be a blessing to them.

I remember on one occasion, I had learned in college, how to farm scientifically, and unfortunately, the mule we had, hadn't had the same course, and he didn't know anything about scientific farming. And I was trying to get him hitched up one day, and there was a neighbour watching me, and the old mule just wouldn't stand still, and I couldn't get the bridle on him, and I couldn't get the collar on him, and I couldn't get the haimstring tied, and on and on it went, and finally this old man said, "You know, I don't think a preacher ought to have to plough a mule."

I said, "Why not?"

"Well," he said, "a preacher ain't supposed to cuss."

I said, "Man, what do you think I had two years of Hebrew for?"

Well, as we moved along, we did learn a lot about agriculture - as we began to put our theory and our practice together, we became more and more skilled and we introduced scientific poultry farming in that area. We wrote off to a man in Virginia, and we told him we were trying to introduce a better strain of poultry in that area and wanted the finest chickens he had and so, he said, "Yeah, I'm interested in that." And we sent him a cheque for 50 biddies (50 baby chicks) and we devised a little homemade brooder that would take care of 50. He said, "I want to give you the chicks." So when they came, much to my amazement, instead of it being 50 chicks, it was 500!

Well, you can imagine, it was like old MacDonald's farm. It was here a chick, there a chick, everywhere a chick chick. We raised those chicks all the way from babyhood on up to - uh - ladyhood - womanhood, I guess you would call it - they were all pullets. We did have a few casualties. We lost about six one night, when I crawled into bed and crushed 'em.

But we had good luck, and later on those hens began to lay. I never saw anything shell out like they did. They'd just line up to get on the nests, and people would come from all around to see those chickens lay. They'd never seen anything like that before.

One old farmer said, "I I I want to see those patented nests y'all got down here."

I said, "Patented nests?"

"Yeah, "I I I hear y'all got some patented nests."

I said, "Well, come on out and look at 'em."

So we went out to the chicken house and he said, "Tha tha tha thahaint the kind o' nests they tol me y'all had."

I said, "What kind did they tell you we had?"

6 October 2002"Well, they said y'all had a nest here that had a sloping bottom to it, and a little chute at the back, and they said the ol' hen'd sit down and lay, and the egg'd roll down the nest and right down the chute into the basket. And then the ol' hen'd get up and look all around and wouldn't see the egg, and think she hadn't laid, and sit down and lay again."

Well, anyway, our poultry idea spread and now our section is one of the largest egg-producing centers in the state. When we moved down to Georgia 14 years ago, Georgia was importing 19 million eggs from other states, and now it's coming pretty close to meeting its supply.

Also along that time we were having our difficulties, particularly on the race question. One neighbour, about 3 or 4 miles from us was bitterly opposed to us, and fought all the way, tooth and toenail, until one day he had an outbreak of blackleg in his cattle. Now blackleg is something that kills very quickly, and the only cure for it is inoculation. The county agent was away, the veterinarians were away, so he couldn't get anybody to do it, and somebody told him we could do it.

Well, he came with his head hangin' down, very apologetically, and asked if we could do that job for 'im. Well, I went and inoculated his cattle, and when it was over he said, "Well, how much I owe yuh?"

I said, "Not a thing - not a thing."

"Well, I wanna pay yuh."

I said, "It's our privilege to do it for you."

"Yuh mean yu'd do it f'r me f'r nothin?"

"Certainly - f'r you of all people f'r nothin!"

Well, it seemed to touch him, and he couldn't understand how somebody who had opposed us as bitterly as he had would be responded to, and now he is one of our closest friends. Another group took it up soon after that, in the local Baptist Church . Up until this time, we had all been members of the church, trying to work within it, and to bring it around to an attitude of love and of brotherhood...

One time a student from India had visited us, and he became very much interested in Koinonia, and interested in Christianity, and asked if he could go to church with us. We took him to church, and people somehow mistook him for a Negro, and the church became incensed, and the following Sunday a resolution was introduced by the deacons of the church, excluding all who were members of Koinonia from membership in the Rehoboth Baptist Church.

My wife was the only one of the Koinonia people there, and the accusations were that we had eaten with Negroes, and that we had brought a member of the Negro race into that church, contrary to its practices and policies, and we had broken up its spirit of unity and Christian Fellowship. Therefore, they said, we recommend that these ones be excluded from membership. The preacher called for the vote. Finally a few people straggled to their feet, and then he called for all those opposed, and nobody stood, and he said, "I declare the motion carried."

Well, at that time everybody got quiet - and then they got a little bit more quiet - and then they got a little bit more quiet - until finally there was just kind of a suspension of animation, it seemed there, and for perhaps several minutes it was as though everyone was even afraid to breathe. And then someone started sobbing. And then another, and then another, and for about five minutes the whole church just sat there weeping. And then very quietly, one by one, they got up and tip-toed out, and got in their cars and went home.

On Wednesday, the Chairman of the Board of Deacons, who was the one who had drawn up the resolution, came down to Koinonia, called me aside, and said, "Brother Jordan, I want to talk to yuh." He said, "There's an awful lot of tension in the community, I don't know what's going to happen. There might be some physical harm befall you or your family." He said, "I've heard you're

going away speaking somewhere, and I've come down here to ask you not to leave - until things die down a little bit."

And I promised that I wouldn't leave, and then he started to go away, and I saw that he was still tremendously concerned about something, and I said, "Mr Bowen, is there anything else on your mind?"

He said, "Oh, well, nothin' special."

I said, "Well, kinda unspecially, is there anything botherin' yuh?"

"Well," he said, "Yes there is." He said, "Y' know, I haven't slept a wink since - since Sunday." He said, "I've heard the clock strike every hour of the day and night."

I said, "What's your trouble?"

"Well," he said, "I go to bed and I lay there, and roll and toss for hours, and then," he said, "If I nod or doze, somebody comes in the room, and they start singing, and it just wakes me so wide awake, and I cain't go back to sleep, and if I do doze off again, they come back and start singing. And it just wakes me up again." And he said, "I've heard the clock strike every hour."

I said, "Can you make out what it is they're singing?"

"Oh, yes," he said, and then he started weeping - just weeping profusely.

I said, "What is it?"

He says, "It's uh - it's 'Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?'" And in the midst of his tears he said, "Brother Jordan, I was there. And worse than that, I was helping to do it." And he said, "I came down here to ask you to please forgive me."

Well, I put out my hand, and I said, "Man, I grew up in this section - I know how people feel about it. I forgave you before it even happened."

He said, "Y' mean it?"

I said, "From my heart I mean it."

"Well, then, will you pray that God will forgive me?"

I said, "No, I won't pray that."

He said, "Why not?"

"Well," I said, "Because when you thought you had sinned against me, you didn't send anybody, you came yourself. And you asked for forgiveness, and you got it. Now don't send me to plead your case before God - You do it."

He said, "I'll do it. Let's do it now!" And so we knelt down, and he asked God to forgive him. And when he got up he took my hand and squeezed it tight, and he said, "Brother Jordan, "I want yuh to know I'm stickin' with yuh. Now," he said, "What must I do?" He said, "I - I must go back up there, and take my letter out of the church. I can no longer be a member of that church. (This was the Chairman of the Board of Deacons who had just turned us out, see.)

I said, "No sir, I don't want you to take your letter out of that church."

He said, "I don't want to be a member of a church that won't let you be a member of it."

I said, "Well, I appreciate that, but I want you to go back up there, and so live - as to get kicked out."

Well, he got the point. He says, "I'll do it." And he went back, and if ever there was a divine irritant, he was one. He gave 'em the works, for the next year or so, until he died. He was a very old man at that time... He certainly preached the gospel to those people - as we would never have been able to have done. (End of quote from Clarence Jordan)

That story is an example of a greater miracle. I don't believe that Jesus raised Lazarus after Lazarus had been dead for four days - nor that Jesus was born of a Virgin - nor that his body arose from the tomb on Easter morning, for these are all lesser miracles,.

There is a kind of miracle, however, in which Jesus himself evidently believed - and which is perhaps unique among the world's religions, at least in degree. And this greater miracle is the idea that human love, in its highest application, can transform another human being.

Something of this faith in the power of human love was in the minds of those who were living at Koinonia, under tremendous pressures of hate and bigotry. Something of this love was at the very core of the demonstration led by Martin Luther King at Selma , Alabama , which transformed the Southland.

This is the miracle that many people cannot believe - including many traditional Christians, who exalt the lesser miracles of Jesus' healing, his special birth, and his special death.

Now, by love, we do not mean indulgence. We do not mean a child's every whim should be satisfied. Sometimes the way of love means a regimen of strict discipline. And the same would go for our relating to adults.

But Jesus wanted his followers to think about the person. He would have them think about their own inner motives. And if our motives are relatively clear, it may be that we ourselves can be miracle workers - in the sense that we can see enemies transformed into friends. This will not always happen. That is why, when it does happen, even once, it is a kind of miracle, as in the case of Clarence Jordan and the Koinonia Community.

One person profoundly influenced by this man Jesus was Mahatma Gandhi. When he was a young man he read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He was so moved that he was in tears - because of the beauty and practicality he saw in these teachings about non-violence. Years later there was a man who pushed through the crowd around Mahatma Gandhi and began to beat him severely. Gandhi's followers grabbed him, and Gandhi said, "Let him be. If he hated me so, he must have a good reason, or else he must be ill-informed. After we settle the matter, he will be one of our most loyal adherents." And so it was. After talking with Gandhi, and having some insight into the nature of Gandhi's movement, the man allied himself to Gandhi's cause with great devotion from then on.

Life today is full of risks. Jesus had a theory about which risks to take. And he chose the risk of love, not because it is "nice" or because he was overly tender, but because it was wise - he knew that love is the strongest and most enduring force in the world. And since that time, many a tyrant has been fooled by it. He said, "They that take up the sword will perish with the sword." (Mat 26:52) If only George Bush could understand that.

And words of wisdom whisper down through the centuries, "Ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, you shall love your neighbour and hate

your enemy - but I say unto you - love your enemies - and pray for those who persecute you... You therefore must be perfectly good, even as your Father in heaven is good."

Now whether or not there exists a father in heaven - is another question. I tend to believe there is not a Father in heaven, nor a mother. But the teachings of this man Jesus - his wisdom, his courage, his compassion - all have great relevance today for a troubled humankind.

REFLECTION by Rev. Fred Cappuccino (2005)

Glowing - glowing deep within each one of you - is a divine spark.

Though some of you may be skeptical, or feel you are unworthy - yet the divine spark glows - there inside you.

Sometimes it is overlaid with self-interest; sometimes it is encrusted with fear - yet the divine spark illumines your soul.

We may tend to deny it - knowing that we have done those things which we ought not to have done. Yet the divine spark never leaves you.

Jesus said the same in his own idiom, "The Kingdom of God is within you."

This divine spark may surprise you as the future unfolds. It may lead you to risk much in some wild act of compassion.

You are of infinite worth; you possess a dazzling beauty that is irresistible. Trust this divine spark glowing - glowing in your deepest being.