

Finding True Identity

A Sermon Offered by Tim Kutzmark
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

THE MORNING READING

This morning's reading plunks us down in a desert in ancient Palestine. It imagines how the Jewish rabbi known as Jesus of Nazareth found his true voice and sense of self.

Some of us may know the story. Just before the start of his public ministry, Jesus goes out into the desert, where he has been fasting and meditating for 40 days. He's trying to find something.

In many religious traditions, the desert, the wilderness, is a place where spiritual truth is discovered. Many women and men have walked into the sparseness of the desert seeking insight and revelation. Jesus follows in the tradition of spiritual seekers such the great prophet Elijah, and the famed founder of nations, Abraham. For Jesus, it has been 40 days without food. He is weak and weary, but his senses are alive and his awareness is fine-tuned.

“The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple” by James P. Carse, adapted

Jesus of Nazareth took flight up into the hill country, into the desert. One evening he stood at the summit of a rise watching the purple light obscure the hills around him.

Not for the first time, he heard his own voice in the windless void. He had been speaking out loud. As always, the words flew from him, forgotten as soon as they were said. With no one to hear, his tongue ran on unchecked. Thoughts were little more than scrambled sound.

“Elijah!”

The sound of the name alarmed him. Did this come from his own throat or was it the prophet announcing himself?

“Abraham!”

The name echoed through the space before him. But was he the listener or the speaker?

“El Shaddai!” The Holy One. The Source.

Jesus sealed his lips. To block the rush of words rising from within, he tried to listen to the silence of the wilderness.

Instead he could only hear the known names of God, then the unknown names, one coming on top of another.

When they stopped, a hoarseness seized his throat. He tried to utter his own name to the emptiness. But he did not have the breath for it. So the secret names returned, cried out by a voice to whom no speaker belonged.

With the first light of dawn, a quiet descended. Nothing was spoken and nothing was heard, all the names of God forgotten.

Softly, he breathed *his own name*. The time to leave the wilderness had come.

THE SERMON

Finding True Identity

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*Softly, he breathed his own name.
The time to leave the wilderness had come.*

He's really not much different from us, the man who walked deep into that desert. The one we call Jesus of Nazareth. He, too, was filled with questions. Who are we? Why are we here? Does our life really matter? He, too, knew uncertainty, anxiety, fear. He, too, looked out and saw a world that was changing far too fast, a world where the old rules seemed to give way to something yet to be defined.

He's really not much different from us, the one we call Jesus of Nazareth. He, too, wondered what he was meant to do with this life he was given. He, too, wondered if his work, his job, meant anything in the long run. He, too, yearned for real spiritual connection and a sense of community. He, too, wondered who he truly was. He, too, was getting older, and looked back at the life he'd already lived, and looked ahead to what might be and wondered what would happen in the small amount of days still to come.

And so he did something that most of us don't do. Jesus left it all behind. He left family, he left home, he left life as he knew it. He walked deep into the wilderness. He entered the wasteland, to live within his questions, to earn his answers. There he waited, in heat, in sun, in stillness, in thirst, in hunger, in yearning. Days went by. Weeks went by. He was unshaven, unwashed, unfed, but unwilling to give up his need for an experience of the True. On the fortieth day in that desert, he awoke, too tired to demand, too tired to ask, too tired to search. All thoughts had been purged from his mind, save for one word. Softly, he breathed his own name, *his own true identity*. The time to leave the desert had come.

T.S. Eliot writes:

We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.

To know one's identity—one's true identity—is to know one's place for the first time.

In the Eastern faith traditions, our identity is called *Nam*. *Nam*. N-A-M. *Nam*, in its most functional translation, means 'name'; it is the label we attach to identify something or someone. But *Nam* has a much deeper meaning than simply a surface name. *Nam* penetrates to the core of being. *Nam* is the essence of something.

Most of us tend to identify with the obvious surface of our lives. Most of us tend to identify with the way we *feel*. Most of us tend to identify with the way we feel at any given moment. Consider the thoughts in our head over the course of our day. We have thousands upon thousands of thoughts. I'm happy. I'm discontented. I know what's right. I'm not sure. I need to do that. I can't do that. I really want to eat that cookie. I really want to lose some weight. I'm bored. I have so much to do. I love you. I hate you. I miss you. Give me some space. I feel great. I feel lonely. My body aches. I'm looking pretty good. My wrinkles aren't going away. I can't get sick because I need to take care of things. When will he die? How will I die? Round and round and round.

Most of us identify with this commotion of emotion that swirls inside our head. We think that is who we are. And it is unceasing, isn't it—thought after thought after thought, always shifting, changing, sweeping us into a new feeling. It is like a ride at the state fair. One of those rides that spins you around and around and around. It doesn't stop; you're pressed to the sides, the bottom drops away, and you just hang there, helpless in the endless whirling. The ancient teachers had a name for that whirling ride of the mind. They called it *chitta vritti*, "the turnings of thought."

But beyond the *chitta vritti*—beyond the constant change of our minds—there is what the Eastern faith traditions call *Sat*. *Sat*. S-A-T. *Sat* is a Sanskrit word meaning the absolute, eternal, unchanging Being. *Sat* is the reality at the root of ourselves. *Sat* is the stillness in the center of our storm. *Sat* is the stasis at the basis of life. Simply put, *Sat* is truth. Put *Sat* and *Nam* together and you get *Sat Nam*, which means 'true identity'.

Spiritual teacher Philip Moffitt says: "Many people fail to distinguish between their true nature and their personality traits, particularly their less desirable traits. The fact is you are not the worst characteristics of your personality. . . You may feel overwhelmed by the circumstances of your present life or bound by past traumatic events. Again, this is a failure in perception. They are just mind-states . . . They can be seen as impermanent and not belonging to you and, therefore, they do not ultimately define your true nature." (*Yoga Journal*, September/October 2000, p. 66)

Think back to Jesus, in the desert, worn and weary after forty days of searching. He crawls out of the wasteland back towards his home, his town. He knows he is unkempt and unshaven. He knows he is sunburned and parched. He knows he reeks from lack of bathing. He knows he is gaunt and half-dead, aged beyond his years. But he knows something else. He now knows who he is.

Yogi Bhajan Singh Khalsa, a yoga master from the Sikh tradition, says: "You are a human being." What does this mean? Let's break it apart. Hu/man/being. "*Hue* means light; *man* means mind; *being* means now." Light. Mind. Now. Put it all together. *Human being* means: "Now you are the mental light . . . you are a living existence of light. . . When you become light and you radiate, there is no darkness. A candle has one future: to spread the light." A human being has one future: to spread the light. "The job of the human being is to radiate through the finite self the infinite light" of love. (*The Teachings of Yogi Bhajan*, pp. 41-48) As the ancient

scriptures say: “In the end, three things will remain: faith, hope, and love. And the most powerful of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:13)

The light of love is what burns within Jesus, the human being. The light of love is what burns within us.

For us, as Unitarian Universalists, we have, throughout our 2000-year history, always seen Jesus as human. We haven’t made him God; we haven’t made him a Christ; we have kept him fully rooted in the human world. We see him as a brother, as a teacher, as a great guide, a prophet. But with this humanist belief comes a responsibility. If Jesus was someone just like us—just like one of the guys, one of the gals—then what Jesus did, we can do. What Jesus did, we should do.

As he crawled out of the desert, something shifted within him. A moment before, he was a worn, broken wanderer. But as he returned to his hometown, he was transformed. He remembered his *Sat Nam*, his true identity. And so, on a morning not unlike this one, Jesus walked into his town’s synagogue, his house of worship. Standing on shaky but determined legs, he asked to recite the morning reading for the service. When the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah were handed to him, he unrolled the scroll, and then spoke. As a human being not so different from us, he could have spoken from his fears, his tears, his limitations. He could have spoken from his *chitta vritti*, the endless whirlings of his mind. But as a human being not so different from us, he chose to speak from the inner light that is beyond all that commotion of emotion. In a voice that gained power as he proceeded, he spoke aloud his *Sat Nam*, his true identity:

“The Spirit of Life is upon *me*,” he says.

“Because Life has asked me,

Life has anointed me,

Life has called me,

to bring Good News to those who are lacking,

Good News to those who are poor.

Life has called me to proclaim liberty to those held captive,

Recovery of sight to those who are unable to see clearly,

And freedom to those who are imprisoned in body or in mind or in spirit—

I have come to proclaim a time of Love’s favor.

I have come to proclaim a return to Love.”

(Luke 4:14-10, adapted)

In a world that overlooked and marginalized the differently abled, the disabled, the poor, the sick, the vulnerable, the outcast, the homeless, the woman, the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, the laborer, the peasant, and the foreigner, Jesus was saying that the time had come for things to be different. The time had come to do things differently. “I have come to proclaim a time of Love’s favor,” he says. With these words, Jesus claims his true identity as one who stands with the forgotten on the side of love.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to reach beyond the turning of our minds, the *chitta vritti*, the whirl and twirl of chaos and confusion. We are called to be the conscience of compassion in this world.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells his followers: “Be compassionate as God is compassionate.” Biblical scholar Marcus Borg writes: “Compassion means ‘to feel with’ . . . compassion means feeling the feelings of somebody else in a visceral way . . . compassion is . . . feeling the suffering of somebody else and being moved by that suffering to do something.” (Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, p. 47)

Marcus Borg says that in Hebrew, “the word usually translated as ‘compassion’ (love) is the plural of the noun that in its singular form means ‘womb.’” (Ibid.) Jesus says: Be compassionate as God is compassionate. “To say that God is compassionate is to say that God is ‘like a womb,’ is ‘womblike,’ or to coin a word that captures the flavor of the original Hebrew, ‘wombish.’” (Ibid., p. 48) And so, “for us to be compassionate is to be like a womb. . . it is to feel and to act . . . in a life-giving and nourishing way.” (Ibid. 48-49) It is to nurture and sustain life with, within and from our very being.

This is our true identity. This call to be a womb to the world, to nurture the world, is our true identity. This all-encompassing love that demands connection, relationship and action *is* our true identity.

Our Unitarian Universalist ancestors believed in compassion. Our Unitarian Universalist ancestors believed in love. They believed that we are called to become—like Jesus—fully realized, loving human beings. They believed that human beings have within themselves not original sin, but original blessing. They believed that if the original blessing within us is nurtured, we have the potential to create much good in the world.

Our Unitarian Universalist ancestors believed that all human beings are worthy of love. They believed that we must *act* as if all human beings are worthy of love. They believed that we should live not in fear or judgment, but through love.

This is our inheritance. This is our true identity, as human beings, and as Unitarian Universalists.

This is who we have always been. This is our history. This is what has been passed forward through the ages to this moment, to this New Member Sunday, to those who have chosen today to join this faith and to stand on the side of love.

Listen to these words, spoken in 1770 by a great Universalist preacher, John Murray. Listen to these words— not as an echo from a long-forgotten past—but as words spoken for us, today:

“Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling belief something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of women and men. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into . . . despair, but preach . . . kindness and everlasting love.”

Kindness and everlasting love! This is our true identity.

May it be so. Sat Nam. Blessed Be. Amen.

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