

**"SUBWAY JESUS"**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Kaaren Anderson**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Appleton, Wisconsin**  
**[www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)**

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**Readings**

**Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickle and Dimed*- excerpt after attending Deliverance Church, near Portland, Maine**

It would be nice if someone would read this sad-eyed crowd the Sermon on the Mount, accompanied by a rousing commentary on income inequality and the need for a hike in the minimum wage. But Jesus makes his appearance here only as a corpse; the living man, the wine-guzzling vagrant and precocious socialist, is never once mentioned, nor anything he ever had to say. Christ crucified rules, and it may be that the true business of modern Christianity is to crucify him again and again so that he can never get a word out of his mouth. . . I get up to leave, timing my exit for when the preachers' metronomic head movements have him looking the other way, and walk out to search for my car, half expecting to find Jesus out there in the dark, gagged and tethered to a tent pole.

**Holy Crap, what a Nice Guy by Gus Kroll from Geez magazine**

I have this friend. He was one of my best friends for the longest time, but now things are kinda awkward between us. I see him at church from time to time and I'm just never sure what to say to him or to his other really good friends. His name is Jesus. Jesus the nice guy. He's really white, has blow-dried hair and wanders around in a bath robe encouraging people to be concerned about everybody's souls and vote conservatively. It may sound strange, but this is how I grew up thinking about Jesus: he wants me to be a nice guy. Ah, except not towards those our country happens to be at war with, not to the gay community and not to people who have abortions. Now when I run into this Jesus I just want to scream, "Damn that guy pisses me off!" Over these last few years I've come to believe sin is not just personal but it is social; not just simple but multi-layered and complex; and that the kingdom of God isn't just pie-in-the-sky when we die, but it's shoes on the feet of orphans in Romania, redistribution of wealth in Bolivia, homes for homeless in Detroit and democracy in South Africa. This is an amazing lens through which to view the incredible life of Jesus and the early church. Even if there is no heaven or hell. I believe the way of Jesus is a better way to live.

"The Subway Jesus" by Rev. Kaaren Anderson, 2005

I'm late, a date  
Thoughts wander as the car thunders by  
I'm engulfed in the crowd, moved forward and side

My feet search for footing,  
Mothers push aluminum strollers  
Baby smiles, drooling, drooling

I'm in, grab my pack, on my back  
Stand facing the deadpan crowd,  
Sway to the time  
To the time of the clanking roll, the clanking roll of the L train  
Crosstown

I get off quick, no time to lose,  
Got to get to where I'm going, no time to lose,  
Walk swiftly to the A train  
Uptown  
Reach the platform, look round,  
No aggressive mother's here with their strollers of drool

The train's in sight, rat runs for cover,  
I watch and wonder  
As the train comes in sight,  
Passing with a thunderous roar  
Hair blows from hot hot air  
Of the A train,  
Uptown

Get on, next stop, a spot  
I move with ease into the seat,  
Looking and feeling like I'm on the soul train,  
My whiteness blinds the folks next to me with their rich mocha skin,  
I glow in the dark, I'll show you, an easy trick you'll see  
The A train's for me, as it rattles and rolls,  
Uptown

I get bumped, drop my book, look down and swear  
"Jesus"  
sit up,  
two eyes of watery reflective brown, turn and stare into mine  
What? He replies.

What do you mean, What? I think, I swore, sorry,  
Jesus.  
What?  
Oh lord, oh man, oh for the love of,  
There he was, sweet jesus, there he was, sweet jesus,  
Jesus,  
On the Soulful A train, Uptown

His face calm and dark,  
Sweet Jesus was no white man,  
Jesus, my man, was black,  
A man of patience and love  
With soulful, piercing eyes, staring into mine

His hair was short and spiral topped  
His demeanor calm, so calm in the clamor of the train,  
I began to lull, my breathing slowed,  
the clatter of the train resembles a stroller rocking in time, lulling me away  
on the A train Uptown

"Sweet Jesus" I whisper,  
What? He replies,  
I stumble for appropriate words  
Jesus, the prophet of the ages is on the train  
Looking and listening to the ways of our age  
He seems amiss and somewhat distraught, he watches and sways, bouncing and nodding in time  
to the train,

What happened, he said.  
What?  
What happened?  
To what, to what, I wonder, I wonder  
What happened, he said,  
To my message?

To my message of love and of giving,  
To my message of forgiving and learning  
Did I say all this?  
What has become of my message  
What has become of my message  
I did not say the kingdom was far  
I said the kingdom was here within,  
Not in some heaven in the sweet by and by

What happened? He said,  
His eyes searched the car for answers,  
None came

You know they said I would come back  
I did, you see.  
I saw:  
Sweet Jesus was the man  
On the A train  
Uptown

What happened?  
Don't know, I reply  
Been confused myself, sweet Jesus  
I reply  
Why?  
Why.  
Lots said, I reply  
So I've learned he replied

Work for justice he whispers,  
Work and you shall find the kingdom within  
Work and be righteous and in peace  
Work and you shall find  
Me

Be fair, be love, be kind  
Work and you shall find the kingdom within  
A train Uptown,  
My stop, pause,  
Got to go, got to go, I'm late, a date  
Doors open  
He smiles  
Work for justice he whispers,  
Tell your message, I reply  
  
Doors close  
Grab my pack, on my back  
Sweet Jesus is a black man on the A train  
Uptown

I wrote this poem 20 years ago, after taking the subway home to my apartment in the lower east side of Manhattan, and with the resonate ruminations of my New Testament professor still dancing in my head. I went to a lefty Christian seminary, and this was what I was after with Jesus. I had grown up Unitarian Universalist, and Jesus wasn't mentioned much. He'd occasionally wander forth to check if his shadow appeared around Christmas and Easter, but that was about it.

In seminary, I learned his primary guiding force was to find the kingdom of God found in the heart. Stephen Mitchell in his book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, comments, "His teachings have such a deep moral resonance. In this he is prototypically Jewish. What is required of us is to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God."

To really get at whom Jesus represents, I should have written the poem with Jesus not just black but disabled, transgendered, illegitimate, old and female. For this is what the crux of his message was about. He believed "the least of these is the greatest of these." He saw himself as a full part of humanity, as connected to all people, as incapable of escaping the tugs of the interdependent

web. Everyone was his brother and sister, mother, father. Everyone was part of him. When asked by a student what the most important Commandment was, he said, basically I've got to call it a tie: To love your lord your God with all your heart, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

So it was in seminary I came to know the real Jesus, not the Jesus wiped clean of any edge, fault, or squirmish manners; not the whitebread Jesus proclaiming to save my soul from the fiery dungeons of hell. So let me just say, my interest in Jesus, the man, grew. Then, I married a real Jesus lover. Scott, my husband, grew up in the Anabaptist movement (think Amish with zippers), that have central to their understanding of Jesus humility, service and peace as their holy trinity. My husband went through an intensive course in high school to reflect, study, process, and register as a conscientious objector. It should be said, that now, Scott is also a Unitarian Universalist minister, and up until this year we've been co-senior ministers in Rochester. I am now the lone senior minister and he is a high mucky muck at the UUA. Yet, I digress.

So after being married to this Atheist Jesus lover, I wanted to know more, why was Jesus his main man, his guiding force at times. When I asked him, he told me to go check out these radical Mennonites.

So I did. What I love about these folks is they don't know if they dig Jesus that much as he is not cuddly and soothing. They affirm that to live like Jesus - to act like Jesus - isn't an easy message to follow.

As Laurel Mathewson says: "The more I read the bible the less I am sure that Jesus loved me or that he would be a nice person to have living in my heart even if he wanted to be there. Jesus of Nazareth is not a sensitive new age guy. Frankly he seems a little erratic. Wild-eyed. Harshly truthful. Often impatient. What interpretation of the bible were the teddy bear Jesus believers reading? At times, I want(ed) their version. . . (but). We do ourselves a disservice when we try to tame Jesus. If Jesus remains somewhat wild eyed and mysterious in my reading and imagination it's not surprising. Would we expect to fully know and befriend God? The crazy things he says, like love your enemies, are the reason I think, the spirit of the lord was upon him at all. In rubbing away his rough edges, his otherness, I risk rubbing away the spirit of god."

I have come to think of the Jesus I revere as the pre-Easter Jesus. There is no son of god, no christ, no heaven and hell determined on sin, no miracles, or walking on water. I have come to revere the Jesus that our Unitarian and Universalist forebearers believed in. Jesus of Nazareth. Which leads me to this rub.

We are a tradition that grew out of Christianity. If you took the spectrum of Christianity and you had fundamentalists on one end, and Liberal Congregationalists on the other, we've fallen off the edge. We aren't Christian. We use Jesus as one of many spiritual advisors to help guide us in our living and loving. Our Jesus, is an exemplar human, while conversely in the end, a regular Joe. Which gets me to Christmas.

I've been in the ministry now for 20 years. And at every congregation my husband and I have served, the pews are packed for Christmas Eve. There are always people showing up yearning for the magic to appear so they can be yanked out of the craziness of the season, and let the materialism, the consumerism, the frenzy of buy, buy, buy, take a back seat, if just for an hour, during the celebration of Jesus' birth. Now for the first ten years of our ministry, Scott and I

wrestled with how best to celebrate Jesus. We didn't see people elated at the holiday season, rather burned out, frazzled, and often feeling guilty for overspending. Many of them were hopeful that this gift finally, might make their 8 year old satiated for more than 10 minutes. Many just yearned for a holiday family dinner that wasn't ruined with too much excess: presents, alcohol, noise, consumerism, disappointment, expectation, greed.

And for those first 10 years, we did our best to lift up Jesus at Christmas, which worked on one level, but then, well, not on another. The holiday is about Jesus as Christ. So with no Christ, where does that leave most of us? We felt for a long time we needed something deeper, more binding, more celebratory, that connected people instead to one another's needs, rather than separating them. We wanted to take back Christmas to honor the Jesus we knew and loved. Further, we have always loved those lines of the theologian John Crossen- "As the people of the earth increasingly divide into two mega classes called rich and poor, the first step toward the kingdom is deciding whose side Is God on? Then we must ask ourselves: 'How radical must we be?' A church that doesn't answer this question is dealing not in religion but in hypocrisy. It's offering a transcendental Prozac, a little vacation each Sunday. Rather than giving coins to beggars we should change the church so that it makes the world a better place."

So we set about changing the church to make the world a better place. Here's how. We started a project called the Greater Good. We asked our parishioners to look at their Christmas spending, tally it all up: gifts, meals, Christmas cards, vacations, wrappings. Come up with a number. Now, cut that number in half, save half for yourself, and give the other half to the church for a project for the Greater Good. Then we had Jesus lead us. His story is about a child born in the barn a child born into poverty, a child surrounded by poverty— a story that says if you want to engage divinity, find it in the midst of that. So, any project or organization we would give our money to, had to deal with issues around poverty. We also focused on the child part as well as the poverty part. A child will lead us, is what the wisemen foretold. So, we decided to let the children of our church guide the way. Since children in theory had the most to lose at Christmas, they get to vote on the one or two organizations that would receive the money. We've used memorable slogans like: Christmas is not your birthday, it's Jesus' birthday. Or live more simply so others can simply live.

That first year, we didn't really know what to expect. At the time we were a congregation of about 700 people, about your size here in Appleton. We hoped for \$50,000 and I prayed (in my atheist way) that we'd get at least \$20,000. We raised \$80,000 and gave half to start a project in Honduras around clean water, and the other to a nonprofit in Rochester around victims of violence. For 7 years we have done the greater good offering and we've given away now, more than \$450,000. Over the years, we've helped victims of human trafficking, farm workers, homeless youth, started CSA's in the inner city, and this past year, started a micro-financing bank for urban Rochester. The village in Honduras, a village of 2,000, now has cisterns, water filters, cook stoves, latrines, and school scholarships for kids after 6th grade. I couldn't really be prouder of a project that made the holiday real for people, it gave it depth and meaning, it brought us all together to serve needs greater than our own. We were not offering a transcendental Prozac but instead a changed world, and a changed people. So all that is great, but what I have loved about this more than anything is what it has done to my own family.

When my daughter Solveig was 10, it was the 2nd year of the greater good. When we started, my kids already had a limit on Christmas at \$50, so to move that to \$25, had me a little worried I

might get pushback. Serious pushback. I mean after all, her friends were getting new snowboards, and iPods, and \$100 plus gift cards. But then, one day, about 2 weeks before Christmas, she says to me, “Mom all I want for Christmas is that really good bread I love from the Bakery, and that expensive goat cheese, you usually only let adults eat. I want a note on the bread and cheese that it is mine in the refrigerator. That’s all I want.” I remember saying, umm, ok. But, it struck me then, she had both feet in. She got it. This wasn’t her birthday, in fact it wasn’t about her. The season and our understanding of our religious obligation to serving needs greater than our own, was imbedded in my child. She was embodying Christmas. I don’t think I’ve ever experienced a better gift at the holiday than that miracle that invaded this average American somewhat entitled kid, in our kitchen on a Thursday night.

Roger has told me that you folks might consider doing this project next year. All I can say to you is this. It will take sacrifice on your part; it will take a strong will to say no to those you love when you want to say yes. Some people may consider you stingy, or punitive, or Ebenezer Scrooge’s half brother. I would never say doing this is easy, in fact it will take considerable reframing with your immediate family, with relatives, neighbors, co-workers and friends alike. It will take all of you as a congregation reaching into your hearts and scrounging around, and finding there is a lot more room in there for the stranger, the broken, the homeless, the lonely, the hungry and the desperate, to take a permanent stance in your cavity of pumping love than you ever could have imagined.

So all of that is true, but so is this.

It will change you...

It will bring a new grounding to your life. And instead of feeling swept away by the consumerism, materialism, selfishness, and me-ism our culture so readily expects us to participate in, you will feel connected to those you love, and to those you don’t know, because you have changed. You will see the human family and our obligation to one another in a whole new light. You will be the change you want to see in the world.

It will bring a sense of wonder and gratitude to your children. They will know, care, and participate in serving needs greater than their own, and it will make them larger in spirit, more generous in love, kinder in their actions. They will have a new understanding of the word share. Finally, it will do this.

It will bring you to your knees in gratitude for what you have. It will make you appreciate your family, your life, your house, your car, your church, your dog, the view from your kitchen window. It will change you, because you will become the person you most want to be. Generous, grateful, satiated, awake, and connected. It will bring you back to life.

My most fervent prayer is you take on the Greater Good as a gift to yourself. Yes, it saves, transforms and changes the least of these, that’s a given, but perhaps more importantly, it changes you, for good. And I can’t think of a better gift to give yourself, than that.

May it be so, Amen.

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