

A Different View of Jesus' Teachings
A Sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss
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Religiously, this is an interesting time of year for Unitarian Universalists. We have just finished celebrating Rohatsu, the eight days of meditation by the Buddha that led to his enlightenment. We are in the middle of Hanukkah, the Jewish holiday focusing on religious freedom and the importance of maintaining hope against seemingly impossible odds. We are approaching the Winter Solstice with its appreciation of the dark and its celebration of greater light to come. And we are in the season of Advent when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus who would come to be known as the light of the world.

It seemed to me that this would be a very good time to take another look at the teachings of Jesus, particularly as they can be understood from the writings of Neil Douglas-Klotz, whose insights into the spiritual message of the Aramaic Jesus focus our attention on themes common in many of the world's religions.

Neil Douglas-Klotz's approach to Jesus' teachings is based at least in part on his own spiritual path. Though part of his family is Jewish, he was raised Christian, and for the last 20-some years, he has studied both traditions as well as various mystical traditions of Islam including Sufism. He describes himself as a practicing Sufi. Understanding that Jesus spoke Aramaic and that most of his listeners would have heard his teachings in that language, Douglas-Klotz points us to a very different understanding of many of Jesus' sayings than can be derived from an analysis of the Greek text so many of us have studied when trying to get back to Jesus' original meaning.

Our capacity to understand the world is defined at least in part by the concepts inherent in the language or languages we speak and understand. As Neil notes, "...the mind of a Semitic language speaker inherently divides and makes sense of reality differently than that of a Greek or Latin speaker. As people of the West, we have been raised with many Greek and European language concepts. We have been taught that they constitute the essence of civilization and science, and so we take them for granted. However, there are other equally valid ways to view the world.

For instance, ... both Aramaic and Hebrew have only one preposition that must describe both the relationship 'within' (as in 'within my interior, emotional life') and 'among' (as in 'among my exterior social community'). When 'within' and 'among' are the same word, then the way in which I treat the different voices within me – my interior 'selves' – is always connected to the way I treat my friends, neighbors, and enemies – my exterior 'selves'. In addition, the Greek division of human life into 'mind,' 'body,' 'emotions,' 'psyche,' and 'spirit,' underlies the modern western view. The Semitic languages do not divide reality in this way. They provide multiple words for the subconscious self, all tied to the communal self. They imply a continuum between what we call spirit and body, not a division."

Now don't worry, this morning's sermon is not primarily about the technicalities and nuances

of the study of languages. If you want that level of detail, I refer you to Douglas-Klotz's works – particularly, *The Hidden Gospel-Decoding the Spiritual Message of the Aramaic Jesus*. Still, this emphasis on language is important. Neil is not just making up what he thinks Jesus should have said. In his translations of some of Jesus' sayings, he is pointing to layers of meaning that might well have been discerned by those who heard Jesus teach in Aramaic. This understanding of his message is only hidden to those who see the world as divided in ways that probably didn't occur to Jesus.

Probably the best place to start is with some of Jesus' sayings about God. For instance, Mark, 11:22, which the KJV translates as "Have faith in God," can be understood from the Aramaic as "Remain within yourselves – live in a place of rooted confidence in Sacred Unity." Or Mathew 5:8 which the KJV translates "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God." This may be understood from the Aramaic as "Ripe (or ready to be fruitful) are the consistent in heart; they shall see Sacred Unity everywhere."

Central to this way of understanding Jesus' sayings is the understanding that "In Aramaic, the Name ALAHA refers to the divine, and wherever you read the word 'God' in a Quote from Jesus, you can insert this word. It means variously, Sacred Unity, Oneness, the All, the Ultimate Power/Potential, or the One with no opposite. From my perspective, this is an understanding of the sacred that more closely corresponds to the Buddhist concept of the One than how we typically think about the word God in the English language. As Neil points out, "if only one Being exists, then every other being must have a share in it. Individuality is only relative in this view of God."

That Jesus thought of God (Alaha) in terms of sacred unity can be seen from this saying from the Gospel of Thomas. "Look for the Living One while you are alive, so that you will not die and then seek to see him and be unable to see." (Saying 59) In other words, if you are expecting to find something other than the Sacred Unity available to you now when you die, you may be disappointed, for when you encounter the Sacred Unity of which you are already a part, you may not be able to recognize your larger self.

Similarly, when we look at the Hebrew and Aramaic word that is usually translated spirit, it is a word that also means wind, air and breath. Consider how different John 4:24 KJV translated "God is a spirit" is when rendered from an Aramaic understanding. "God is breath. All that breathes resides in the Only Being. From my breath to the air that blows around the planet; Sacred Unity inspires all."

Or let's take a more complicated saying such as Mathew 12:31 where Jesus says (KJV) "Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men." In hierarchical church structures this passage has been used to justify burning people at the stake.

However, using the Aramaic understanding of this passage, it could mean "All types of tangled behavior, the missing and falling, the rips and tears – all the ways you cut yourself off, break your connection, or disrupt the pattern – can and will be mended. Sooner or later, you will be freed from error, your mistakes embraced with emptiness, your arrhythmic action returned to the original

beat. But your state cannot be mended or repaired, when you cut yourself off from the Source of all rhythm – the inhaling, the exhaling of all air, wind, atmosphere, seen and unseen – the Holy Breath.”

Neil explains what he believes this means: “When we ‘sin against the Holy Spirit’ we can only be healed by an involuntary action of surrender that places us back in the sacred communion of Unity. We cannot, of course, actually forget to breathe. We can however, fail to breathe with a sense of connection to other people and our surroundings. Our current western culture does not, in fact, encourage us to be aware of our breathing communion with our surroundings. If it did, we would probably have quite a different world than we have today. Yet we can learn to heal our relationships through a deeper experience of breathing.”

Or let’s skip to another important teaching moment, when Jesus is asked which is the greatest and most important commandment. He answered by quoting Jewish scripture which the KJV translates as “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” There are a number of interesting understandings that emerge when one looks at this passage in Aramaic. For instance, in Aramaic what is translated as “soul” and “thyself” are the same word.

Here is how Neil thinks the passage might have been understood by Jesus’ hearers. “Let compassion unfurl from you inner womb for Sacred Unity in the form that impresses you most deeply inside or out. Send this love with and through your whole passionate self, your whole awakening, subconscious self, your whole instinctive mind, and with all your life energy.

“Give birth to love for the one ‘next door’, as you do for your own soul-self and the part of it that feels like a neighbor. Give birth to compassion for the nearest, yet unfamiliar, aspect of your self, as you do for the one outside who feels like a stranger. Give birth to the deepest warmth for the neighbor, inside and out, as you do for your own subconscious community, inside and out.” This sounds a little like instruction in meditation doesn’t it.

Or lets take one more famous passage, John 3:16 which the KJV translates “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Neil writes: “Another hearing, based on the Aramaic text, can be:

For Unity so loved Diversity,
all the worlds of form,
that it brought you a child of Unity,
fulfilled in all aspects of self,
so that whoever would have
the same confidence in their own fulfillment,
like the earth underneath supporting all,
would not fade with their form,
but continue, from world to world,

with and in the ever-living Life.”
[repeat]

This way of understanding Jesus’ teachings presents a very different experience of who Jesus was. Yes, he might still be described as “the light of this world” in the sense of being the teacher of a path to enlightenment. And yet like all teachers of enlightenment, his focus was on his hearers realizing their own enlightenment. Perhaps that is what he meant in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, “You are the light of the world.”

Throughout his books, Neil Douglas-Klotz invites people to focus on their own understanding of what truth there might be in any teacher’s sayings for the individual reader. He invites us to do this, by engaging in what he calls body prayer, a form of meditation focused on breathing. It is with one of these exercises –one designed to help us with loving all aspects of our soul self - that I want to close today’s sermon.

Take a moment to make sure that you are seated comfortably and “Return again to breathing gently with a sense of love and life energy (with) [for] your inner community of selves. To help center the body prayer, you can breathe with the Aramaic word rahm, deep unconditional love, (or hayye, life energy). Imagine your inner psyche as a beautiful clearing in nature where all aspects of the self can gather. Imagine that all the paths to this clearing provide free and unobstructed access to the deepest parts of yourself. When each aspect is ready to be transformed, it will arrive in its own time, awaited by an atmosphere of love and respect. Practice waiting with love, but without urgency or even expectation.

[After a few minutes] [And now], conclude by breathing with a feeling of gratitude for whatever has occurred, even if it is only a moment’s peace and quite.”

Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be