

# The Silence of Jesus

Unity Church  
December 7, 2008

You want to do what? You want us to offer communion. Here? Are you nuts? People come here to escape the hypocrisy and magic mumbo-jumbo of the mainstream churches. There's no way Charles. It's not going to happen. We gave up communion a long time ago. We are not going to take it up now.

If you think that was that you just don't know Charles. Charles was an African-American. He grew up on the outskirts of Fort Wayne. He was very bright. He was drafted at the start of World War Two. He did well on the standard intelligence tests administered to all draftees and was sent off to the Army Specialized Training Program at Fort Benning, Georgia where he was one of only four blacks in a company of 250 trainees. He was led to believe he would be trained as an engineer but times got bad in Europe and he ended up as an infantryman in the old segregated 92<sup>nd</sup> Division; the unit known to history as "the buffalo soldiers." He fought his way from Anzio, up the spine of Italy in one of the bloodiest and most costly campaigns of the war. He was the only man in his platoon that made it home from Italy. He disembarked at Mobile, Alabama. He had won a silver star, a bronze star and a purple heart. He was wounded. He was twenty and he was on his way home.

The troop train stopped somewhere in the South that night. Charles got off to stretch his legs and went into the station to get a drink of water. But he had forgotten where he was. He drank from the fountain marked "whites only"

and woke up lying in a pool of his own blood. By the time that troop train pulled in to Fort Wayne, Charles had sunk into despair. He sought solace at the church of his childhood. But though he loved the music and treasured the gospel of Jesus all he heard preached from that pulpit was sin and damnation. By then he had seen hell enough to last a lifetime. Now what he needed was hope.

These words of his are taken from a oral history recorded shortly before his death: I'm studying. I have this GI Bill and I'm studying. Well, by that time I said, "Well, sociology sounds like something which is relevant to—" So I was no longer talking about journalism, I was embarking on sociology because it looked to me to be the academic discipline that was most relevant if I was going to "save the race." I don't know how else to put that. I arrived at this meeting. They were talking. A white man stood up and he started talking about, "What we need to do in Fort Wayne to do something about discrimination, and prejudice and Jim Crow," and so forth. He was saying, "What we need to do is get an Urban League here. We need to organize an NAACP." Well, I could have fallen through the floor. "Who is this white man talking stuff like that?" Here I am looking around trying to figure out how to make some sense out of what I want to do. And here is this guy talking about the kind of things that I want to do.

So naturally, after the meeting I went up to him and introduced myself. His name was Aaron Gilmartin and he was a Unitarian minister who had arrived in Fort Wayne while I was away in the army. I had never heard of Unitarians. I knew nothing about them.”

That chance encounter would shape the rest of what would become a long and fruitful life. Gilmartin, known as

“Gil” to those whose lives he touched, never even talked to Charles about Unitarianism. But he found himself wondering what kind of a religion inspired a white man to devote his life to racial justice. In time he became the deeply devoted Unitarian Universalist lay leader who approached me early one fall and suggested we offer communion.

He was nothing if not tenacious. He finally wore me down. All right I said. We’ll do it. But we’re going to pass it through the pews. Nobody has to stand up. People can just pass it on if they don’t want to do it and there will be no music. We have to make it as devoid of previous associations as we possibly can. Charles acquiesced to this rather Spartan plan.

We did it the Sunday before Thanksgiving. I gave a cut and dried explanation of the difference between the tradition of transubstantiation practiced by those who believe that the bread and the wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ and the memorialist understanding which simply invites us to remember the ministry of Jesus by coming together at the table. I stressed the fact that we stand in the memorialist tradition. Then I went to sit down in the silence as the bread and wine began to pass from hand to hand.

Not more than 30 seconds later Charles broke the rules. He started to sing. “Let us break bread together on our knees...” People started bursting into tears. Their pent-up need to let that old strong story back into their lives broke their hearts wide open. Those of us steeped in our liberal disdain for the sacraments looked on amazed until the emotional tenor of the room took hold of us as well. This was no resurgence of belief, no turning back to an old way of thinking, closed off from reality. This was an epiphany, a moment of sudden intuition when we understood, some of

us for the first time, that the ministry of Jesus could still touch and transform our lives.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century most religious liberals had rejected the absolute authority of the Bible. That rejection was the result of a growing awareness of the variety of ways the religious impulse was practiced and enshrined around the world. That awareness was growing at the same time as textual criticism, sometimes called “the scientific study of the Bible” was shedding new light on the scripture. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the idea that the Bible was an integrated, contemporaneous expression of the word of God was breaking down as scholars found strong evidence of diverse authorship that hinted at political motivations. Scholars ever since have been working to strip away the commentary in an effort to discover the authentic voice Jesus.

James Breech, the author of The Silence of Jesus sets the stage by telling the following story: “Once,” he writes, “while I was at Princeton, I went to hear W.H. Auden read some of his latest poetry. The lecture hall was jammed with hundreds of people, all of whom were very animated with expectation. Auden read in a voice so still that almost at once people began trying to repeat to each other what they thought he had said, and in almost no time it was impossible for those at any distance from the podium to hear any but intermediary voices. In a completely quiet room the speaker could have been heard, but the general hubbub rendered his voice inaudible.”

Imagine the analogy writ large; for two thousand years people have repeated what they thought Jesus said until his message has been all but lost to intermediary voices. But scholars like James Breech, Amos Wilder, Rudolf Bultmann, John Dominic Crossan and a host of others have made it

possible to hear his message as if he was here with us now. Here are some things attributed to Jesus that he clearly didn't say. He didn't talk about himself. He didn't claim divine or messianic status. He didn't offer us a code of conduct. He didn't ask us to believe in supernatural forces.

Jesus was a storyteller. He told stories about real people confronting real situations. His authority is not based on who he was or where he came from. His teachings are not about him, his teachings are about us. Our liberal tradition began with that realization. The Christians among us, and there are many, say, "we don't worship Jesus, we follow him." Jesus did not live and die in the hope that we all would become Christians. He lived and died to teach us how to live and yes, to teach us how to die. Jesus was a Jew who broke beyond the limitations of his tribe. But that does not mean he wanted to gather a new tribe around him to displace the old one. He wanted to do away with tribes entirely.

Breech writes, "...for Jesus eating and drinking was the occasion for fellowship among those against whom the tribalized children were prejudiced, and those whom they would segregate. Fellowship is not the same as feeling oneself in union with everyone. Fellowship implies exchange among those who maintain their separate identities as separate persons." This is important. Jesus did not teach what Breech calls "utilitarian narcissism." He did not teach that we should overlook the differences among us in the interest of "mellow feelings of harmonious union." Instead, he taught that hope and faith and love are found when we choose to engage one another as free, authentic human beings with our differences intact. "Crying what I do is me for that I came." And the symbol of that engagement, the symbol of that meeting is the communion table. "Do this in memory of me," he said.

Jesus calls us to live at the borders, at the dividing lines, to step outside the comfort of our pride to eat and drink with strangers not of our tribe. He asks that we come together in full freedom leaving every categorical constraint behind. All, the one who's coming soon again will ask of us is all we have to give. "Let go" then "of your notion of God, your understanding of Jesus, your notion of Buddha...you know that when climbing a ladder, you have to abandon the lower step in order to come to a higher one." As we approach the turning of the year, as the darkness deepens and the empty place inside us seems to expand with every breath, give yourself a gift. Let Jesus be a teacher and a guide for you. No one is asking you to give your life away. No one is asking you to believe in anything you don't believe. All I'm asking is that you let the old strong story in that it might nourish and sustain you for the days and years to come.

In the stillness, in the cold clear lonely midnight, listen, listen to those who live at the borders, listen to those who come back from the wars. Listen to the testimony of those who regularly risk the company of strangers. Then let their brave words be made flesh in our lives as we gather once more at the table.

May it be so and amen.