



## Gathered into Many Bodies

A Communion Homily

Offered by The Reverend Tom Schade  
General Assembly, Portland, OR 2007

**F**or a while I lived in a house with a funny basement. Usually, the basement of a house mirrors the house above. But this one did not. There was a heavy stone wall, the kind that you would think was a foundation wall between two rooms in the basement. The ceilings were different heights in different rooms, and the rooms themselves seemed misshapen.

I learned was that my house was the second house built on that foundation. Fifty years ago, a tornado had destroyed every house but one on the street where we lived. It was a traumatic day in Worcester – 94 people were killed.

My house, or actually, the house that had stood there earlier, had been completely leveled, and a new house was built on the foundation. A new house that was just a little different in shape and configuration, so that the house and the basement didn't seem to match up.

I have never lived through a tornado or a hurricane that threatened my house, but I have been in houses beset by serious storms, when the wind howls around the corners, and everything loose is flapping, and everything not nailed down is already gone.

Within the whistles and the roars, you listen for the sounds of a deep groans and shudders that will warn you that something important, something structurally crucial is giving way. You listen for the sound that means that it is safer taking your chances out there than staying in here, or the sound that says its best to head for the basement.

The story in the book of Acts says that it was that kind of storm, the kind that warns of a world coming to an end, the kind that says that everything solid and dependable is about to splinter and shatter and collapse into a rubble and sticks. The house shook as though a windstorm was passing by.

And then, tongues of fire came down and settled on their shoulders of the disciples gathered there to remember their friend Jesus. .

When the tongues of fire came down and sat upon their shoulders, ecstasy reigned, and all the languages of humanity could be spoken and heard and comprehended. They went outside into the streets of the city and made fools of themselves. People thought they were wasted and stoned and drunk.

The Holy Spirit of the Risen Jesus had fallen upon these poor and grieving disciples, and they were changed and transformed. We say they were formed into the church, the body of the risen Christ, the church that would be his presence in the world until their yearnings were fulfilled and their friend would come again.

It's really quite an unusual story of God's inspiration and call. Usually the stories of enlightenment, or the stories of a divine call, or tales of divine inspiration tell of things that happen to persons, to individuals. God speaks from the

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## From the President **Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson**

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent  
it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her  
brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Mat. 23:37, Luke 13:34)*

I admit that many have been the days when I felt about the UUA as Jesus felt about Jerusalem. Many were the days when the culture of Unitarian Universalism appeared to be hostile to the Christian tradition which birthed it, and the Galilean prophet whose words and values had long informed it. There were days when it felt dangerous to be a Christian and a Unitarian Universalist, and I, along with many others, longed to gather Unitarian Universalist Christians together under a protective and nurturing wing. Out of that desire was the first UUCF Revival born and lo, you were most willing, you gathered together and spoke and sang and prayed openly as UU Christians. We wondered if there would be a price to pay, and there was – it was the price of witnessing and testifying. It was the price of being a humble fool for Christ. It was the price of claiming our faith in a way that made us accountable to each other, and publicly accountable to the gospel. It was the price of success.

This year at General Assembly it did not feel like an anomaly or anachronistic to be a Christian. People were interested, curious, respectful...at least the ones I encountered. We had a wonderful turn out for our events – a full house for the beautiful Communion Service, wonderfully engaging fellowship at our annual meeting and hymn sing with our largest attendance ever, and a crowd of 1350 people Sunday who came to hear Kathleen Norris speak unabashedly about the Christian life, its language and its embodied practice.

I am hopeful my friends. Some of the seeds sown have fallen on fertile ground. The fledgling plants are green and beautiful. Unitarian Universalists are not only more willing to acknowledge their Christian roots, they are more willing to consider the value of its practice. Jerusalem is no longer killing its prophets. Oh, it may still find us annoying. That is as it should be. Prophets are not in it for the popularity of it – only for the service of God, of truth and righteousness.

We are fulfilling our calling. As we seek to find a way to relate more effectively with each other and our UU companions we are growing, not only in numbers, but in wisdom and humility. May God continue to guide us that we might keep the faith and become ourselves living testimonies to God's infinite and all embracing love.

*Blessings,*

### Prayer Retreat with Reverend Carl Scovel

It's not too early to begin planning to attend a fall retreat with Reverend Carl Scovel at Glastonbury Abbey in Hingham, MA on the weekend of **Friday evening, October the 26th, through lunch on Sunday the 28th.** The theme of the retreat will be *"What Jesus Can Teach Us About Prayer,"* The cost of the retreat will be approximately \$120. If you have questions, please contact: The Rev. Carl Scovel, 36 Hampstead Road, Jamaica Plain MA 02130 [carlscovel@comcast.net](mailto:carlscovel@comcast.net).

# From the Executive Director

**Rev. Ron Robinson**

I have pulled two texts before me as I sit down to write a brief note on UU Christians and the relationship with the "Church," and the "Kingdom," all in this time of the continuing season of Pentecost or Ordinary Time. This time of marking the birthing and growth of the Church and the fire of the Spirit lit within and among us. A time of year when we begin to look toward engaging again with the church after our summers, hoping to find a home for our passions to be directed, and realizing our heartbreak with the church as we find it and it finds fallible us. Be it our local church, the UUA, or even Christianity writ large.

The first text: This Sunday is July 15, when in 1838 Ralph Waldo Emerson preached his Divinity School Address--"in this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life." An address where he challenged the state of what he then termed "historical Christianity" in favor of a more person-centered religious expression. I have my issues with how the Address has become pseudo-scripture for religious liberals who seem often to forget the context of his times (I wonder, as we do with Jesus and Paul, what Emerson might say if he were to see how his words are used today), but I resonate with its spirit of a call of reformation, and for helping us to see that the life of faith we hunger for can begin to be fed in the here and now. We have enough within us and right around us to begin deepening our faith and not wait for the perfect church in order to do so. There is no promise it will be easy; authentic community and lasting faith and transforming grace, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us, does not come cheaply. But wherever you are, you can plant seeds that will grow souls. You can find at least one or two other people, in your church UU or otherwise or outside of church life, to walk with you in acts of service, studying, praying. And/or you can make "glocal" connections through the UUCF portals--just contact us for more.

The second text: This Sunday's lectionary ([www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com)) readings for July 15th include Luke 10:25-37, the "great commandment" and the "Good Samaritan" parable on who our neighbor is. If someone were to ask you why you are a Christian, and particularly why you follow Jesus as a UU, I can think of no better response than to re-tell this passage. It is all here. Ours is a simple straight-forward generous faith that stresses love of God and of our neighbor (classic Unitarianism) followed by the salvation parable that God's love for us is universal, unconditional, extravagant, and can come through even our worst enemy or fear (classic Universalism). And we get all this thanks to Jesus, and thanks to that community of followers then and now that continue to enrich our lives and teach us with theirs; they a part of us, and we of them, a primary relationship that goes beyond the current make-up of our local churches or our Association, all because Jesus is central to us (classic Christianity of the early church kind).

As these texts came to me through meditations on a single ordinary day, I trust that you will find meaning wherever you are in these last days of the refulgent summer months when blessings can be found all around us if we take the time to notice even the luxury of breath itself. I hope you are open to God's spirit refreshing you, filling up your wellsprings, that you may be witnesses in a myriad of ways to the transforming power of the Holy spirit in your life. *Blessings, Ron*

Burning Bush to Moses. An angel brings Isaiah to the humungous Temple that is the Universe and the Angels that stand guard there. God comes to Mohammed in a cave and says, "take this down." God speaks to a person, in most of these stories. God inspires a person, usually.

Not this time, God apparently, does not always work at a rate of one soul at a time. The Holy Spirit of God fell upon this band of disciples, and form them into congregation, a church, a community of faith.

My bet is that many of you, maybe even most of you have been touched by that self same spirit at one point in your life, whether named as the Holy Spirit, or unnamed, whether bidden or unbidden, called or uncalled.

I say that because here at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, we are church-people. We are not casual passers by, or first time visitors to houses of worship. We may have been once in our lives, but not now. Many here, I can see, are religious professionals, and it seems to many of us that, we have been called, in some way mysterious, even though it seems incomprehensible that God does that sort of career-counseling.

And many of us are, I see, even more devoted; lay leaders and activists in congregations. You all do this work for free. My colleague, Barbara Merritt, always reminds me that God knows that some of us are so weak and distracted, so wavering in our faith, that we will not answer the call unless we get paid, while others answer out of purer kinds of devotion. Nonetheless.

We are here because we have been touched by the Spirit in the context of a congregation. It may have been a congregation that gathers in the name of Jesus Christ, or it may have been in a congregation that gathers in the Spirit of Jesus, as does mine, or it may have been in a congregation in which the risen Jesus does not wear a nametag, because the people fear the idolatry of his name. Such distinctions are less important than we think.

Somewhere and sometime, we have stood in a house shaken by winds like a rattle in a child's hand, and we have seen a way to what it ultimately true and saving in the faces of our companions, and we have experienced being heard and understood across the gap of our individual experience. , We have been touched by some spirit amidst the cracking, and the groaning and the howling of the winds, and that encounter changed us, and we seek the return of that Spirit in our lives, and we follow it through out our lives.

Even to Portland, Oregon for an expensive, confusing, and occasionally irritating denominational convention.

Now, suppose you went out into the halls of this convention center, and asked people chosen at random, you asked them as they passed by, on their way to workshops and lectures and plenaries and lunch, "What is the relationship between what we are doing here today and the wind that nearly blew down that little house in Jerusalem so long ago?"

Some people might know that what you are talking about, but many

would not.

And you would get a wide variety of answers, most of which would be in the “I don’t know and I don’t think I care” category.

But most of them have likewise been touched by the Spirit, have likewise, stood in a shaking house, have likewise heard another human being speak words that pierced them straight through the heart, as though tongues of fire rested on their shoulders.

God works in mysterious ways,  
and we know not the day nor the hour that Jesus will return to me or thee or them,  
and the Spirit? , it bloweth and listeth as it will.

There is a Church that says it was formed at the first Pentecost, and for a time, that Church ruled much of the known world. And was part and parcel of the great empires of the world. It shaped the thoughts of souls the world over.

Some say that it sold itself, eventually to the powers and principalities of this world, and now, it is dying -- dying a slow, painful and awful death. It no longer rules the world, its teachings and doctrines now longer define reality. It no longer exercises authority over and against the promptings of one’s own conscience. Now, it is like a mortally wounded elephant, it lunges and lashes this way and that way, and shows, in some ways astonishing, death defying strength and energy. From the halls of power to the museums, it has fallen; and from the queen of the sciences, Christian theology has fallen to a set of slogans and stories that obscure reality, not illuminate it.

Of course, Christianity is well suited for the death of its institutional and cultural power. If the story of Jesus of Nazareth is true, it was not true once, but true again and again. Meaning that babies are always being born to the sound of angels, and that both the poor and the powerful stop in awe of the potential power of a newborn child. If the story of Jesus of Nazareth is true, it was not true once, but true again and again. Meaning that people are being made whole every day by the power of faith. Meaning that teachers every day remind their listeners that all they ever wanted and dreamed of is as close as their hand. If the story of Jesus of Nazareth is true, it was not true once, but true again and again. Meaning that innocence is being broken on the wheel of violence, that there are midnight trials, and bloody beatings, while the powerful, now gaudy with golden crosses and bejeweled icons of fish, and engraved “what would Jesus do bracelets”, wash their hands, and sleep through the executions that take place out at the edge of town at dawn. Every day. Every day, My God, My God, why have you forsaken us?

If the story of Jesus of Nazareth is true, it was not true once, but true again and again. And meaning, that out of all that death and despair, resurrection still keeps happening, that the spirit of love keeps overcoming death.

And meaning that in this shaking house of a windswept world that creaks and groans on the mismatched foundations of history, that

people still see each other amidst our fears, our grief and our pain, and are able to make promises of covenant to each other.

There is a man in the church I serve. He is a healer; he works as a nurse in a local hospital, among the neurology patients. He is a gardener and a maple syrup producer on his family farm. On Monday, he cooks a meal around 50 people – I never really understand this little operation, the suggested donation is ridiculously low, no one watches the collection basket so many meals are given away. There are always lots of leftovers that go home with people for the week ahead, the food never runs out, and when we count up the money in the basket, every week, the dinner makes a profit. Lots of people work on the project, but there are no meetings, no contentions, no divisions. This man holds no office in the church, but everyone agrees that if we found the One Ring of Power of the Lord of the Rings in one of the closets of the church, he is the one that we would trust to carry it.

He is a modern example of a leader of the church, which is the risen body of Christ, present in the world, incarnating the Spirit of Jesus 20 centuries later.

The only problem with that story is that my friend is not a believer. Why I am not sure. He is definitely upset with God; I can imagine that being a medic in Vietnam and decades of nursing could erode away some ways of being believer. Is he angry at God? Whatever, he is not a believer. He would not go to a church where he had to say or pretend that he was a believer. And as long as he been coming to First Unitarian, I get the idea that he believes that if Barbara Merritt or I ever really grasped how completely and totally he is not a believer, he would be asked to leave. He comes to church, he says, just because he likes the people.

In the story of the first Pentecost, those called by the Holy Spirit into the church **were** the believers. The winds were blowing but the house and the foundation matched.

But now the house and the foundation are like my old house – they do not match. There are those who are the believers, and there are those who have been called by the Holy Spirit into those circles of love, and care, and mutual respect, and holy fire that are the incarnations of God's tough love in the world. One body is shaped like this and one body is shaped like that. The body of those who believe that Jesus is Lord and the body of those who have been touched by the Holy Spirit, are not the same.

And so, the world is changing – as Christendom dies replaced by secular society and private spirituality, where the boundaries between believers and non-believers are fluid and porous and indefinite. Here we are, in this moment, at this time, with these people, touched by the Spirit, in the time and place where boundaries dissolve. We are not the first people to find ourselves here.

The winds of the spirit are blowing still.

My prayer this morning is that the house where you worship is built on the foundation of the Holy Spirit, a body where *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.*, as Paul describes in (Galatians 5:22), where going on, he says, "the people are joyful and filled with the Holy Spirit.

## John Dominic Crossan coming to "Revival" 2007



*John Dominic Crossan is coming to Cleveland Revival November 1-4 to deliver the keynote address on Paul: Appealing or Appalling Apostle? Excerpts from two books by Crossan: In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom, A New Vision of Paul's Words and World and God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now (Harper San Francisco, 2007):*

### Excerpt from *In Search of Paul*

“Paul has been called by many names, most of them nasty. He was an apostate who betrayed Judaism, or he was an apostle who betrayed Jesus. He is not an open and affirming theologian, so why bother to read him today? Some say, as compliment or indictment (wrong either way) that he was the actual founder of Christianity.... Paul's essential challenge is how to embody communally that radical vision of a new creation in a way far beyond even our present best hopes for freedom, democracy, and human rights. The Roman Empire was based on the common principle of peace through victory or, more fully, on a faith in the sequence of piety, war, victory, and peace. Paul was a Jewish visionary following in Jesus' footsteps, and they both claimed that the Kingdom of God was already present and operative in this world. He opposed the mantras of Roman normalcy with a vision of peace through justice or more fully, with a faith in the sequence of covenant, nonviolence, justice, and peace. A subtext of "In Search of Paul" is therefore: To what extent can America be Christian? We are now the greatest postindustrial civilization as Rome was then the greatest preindustrial one. That is precisely what makes Paul's challenge equally forceful for now as for then, for here as for there...”

### Excerpt from *God and Empire*

“In a magnificently parabolic scene in John's gospel, Pilate confronts Jesus (or does Jesus confront Pilate?) about the kingdom he proclaims. “My kingdom,” says Jesus in the King James Version of the incident, “is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now is my kingdom not from hence” (18:36). I take five foundational points from that brief interchange.

**First**, Jesus opposes the Kingdom of God to the kingdoms of “this world.” What “this world” means is discussed throughout this book, especially in chapter 1 whose title “Empire and the Barbarism of Civilization” is my own translation of the “this world” of Jesus.

**Second**, Jesus is condemned to death by Roman Pilate, in Roman Judea, in the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire. But he never mentions Rome as such, and he never addresses Pilate by name.

**Third**, had Jesus stopped after saying that “my kingdom is not of this world,” as we so often do in quoting him, that “of” would be utterly ambiguous. “Not of this world” could mean; never on earth, but always in heaven; or not now in present time, but off in the imminent or distant future; or not a matter of the exterior world, but of the interior life alone. Jesus spoils all of these possible misinterpretations by continuing with this: “if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered” up to execution. Your soldiers hold me, Pilate, but my companions will not attack you even to save me from death. Your Roman Empire, Pilate, is based on the injustice of violence, but my divine kingdom is based on the justice of nonviolence.

**Fourth**, the crucial difference—and the only one mentioned—between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Rome is Jesus' nonviolence and Pilate's violence. The violence of Roman imperialism, however, was but one incarnation at that first-century time and in that Mediterranean place of “this world”—that is, of the violent normalcy of civilization itself (see my first point).

**Fifth**, the most important interpreter of Jesus in the entire New Testament is Pilate. He clearly recognizes the difference between Barabbas and Jesus. Barabbas is a violent revolutionary who “was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection” (Mark 15:7). Pilate arrested Barabbas along with those of his followers he could capture. But Jesus is a nonviolent revolutionary, so Pilate has made no attempt to round up his companions. Both Barabbas and Jesus oppose Roman injustice in the Jewish homeland, but Pilate knows exactly and correctly how to calibrate their divergent oppositions.

....Some of the questions raised in this book are: How is it possible to be a faithful Christian in the American Empire? How is it possible to be a nonviolent Christian within a violent Christianity based on a violent Christian Bible? How is it possible to be a faithful Christian in an American Empire facilitated by a violent Christian Bible?

**Intrigued?** Come to this year's Revival in Cleveland, OH November 1-4. Register on-line at [www.uuchristian.org/revival](http://www.uuchristian.org/revival), or call Ron Robinson Executive Director or Kathleen Rolenz, Host Minister (440-333-2255 ext. 115) if you'd like to know more or talk to someone in person. The UU Christian Group at West Shore is looking forward to hosting you and showing you a wonderful time.

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