

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
SMALL GROUP MINISTRY
Liberal Christianity
Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA

Opening Words & Chalice Lighting:

Deep calls unto deep, joy calls unto joy, light calls unto light.
Let the kindling of this flame rekindle in us the inner light of love, of peace, of hope.
And "as one flame lights another, nor grows the less,"
We pledge ourselves to be bearers of the light, wherever we are.
~ Gordon B. McKeeman

Guidelines for Sharing (For those new to SGM. This is also a good refresher for members.)

We'll each speak for a few minutes, with no cross talk or interruptions. Cross talk means advice giving, blaming, or trying to fix another person. It is wise to speak in the first person, "I think, I feel..." to avoid cross talking.

When we are listening: Try to listen to each other as if you were listening to, or watching, your own thoughts. It is not necessary to give the person reassurances that they are being heard, such as nodding or eye contact. By simply listening together we create a holding space for each speaker. Comfort and care can be offered after the group session.

When it is your turn to speak it is not necessary to respond to the persons who have gone before you, though you may find yourself building on what has been shared already. Find out what your own inner wisdom wants to say.

Check In: What's on your mind today?

Focus Readings:

"But if, as some early Christians began to do, you take a heathen view, and make him a God, the Son of God in a peculiar and exclusive sense--much of the significance of his character is gone. His virtue has no merit; his love no feeling; his cross no burden; his agony no pain. His death is an illusion; his resurrection but a show. For if he were not a man, but a god, what are all these things; what his words, his life, his excellence of achievement?--It is all nothing, weighed against the illimitable greatness of Him who created the worlds and fills up all time and space! Then his resignation is no lesson; his life no model; his death no triumph to you or me."

~ Theodore Parker, *The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity*

"I see the pre-Easter Jesus as a Jewish mystic who knew God, and who as a result became a healer, wisdom teacher, and prophet of the kingdom of God. The latter led to his being killed by the authorities who ruled his world. But I do not think he proclaimed or taught an extraordinary status for himself. The message of the pre-Easter Jesus was about God and the kingdom of God, and not about himself."

~ Marcus Borg <http://www.marcusjborg.com/2010/05/23/yes-and-no/#more-480>

An Alternative to the Conventional Understanding of Jesus

The conventional understanding of Jesus focuses on the miraculous events surrounding his birth and the miraculous events surrounding his death. In the Nicene and other creeds his life and three year ministry are reduced to a comma.

Paul in his letters and ministry taught that the purpose of Jesus was to come and die for our sins - to expiate God's anger for our sins by his great sacrifice. This idea, that Jesus, by his suffering on the cross, atoned for our sins, is called substitutionary atonement. Paul believed that

Many Christians throughout history have rejected that idea. Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), widely credited as a precursor to the Unitarians, explicitly rejected substitutionary atonement. The great theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 –1834), considered by many to be the father of modern Christianity, also rejected it.

The conventional view of Jesus is that he was God in human form. But Francis David (1510-1579), the first Unitarian minister, refused to address his prayers to Jesus. The Unitarians came by their name because they rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. They rejected it because they said it is not just unscriptural, it's idolatrous! You shouldn't worship Jesus. Jesus is not God. Rev. Theodore Parker (1810-1860) also denied the divinity of Jesus.

John Dominic Crossan, a noted scholar and author¹, invites us to imagine what it was like during and after Easter for those people that Jesus had trained as his disciples. Before Easter they were actively proclaiming the coming of the dominion of God. They traveled to towns and villages, with no money or food or even an extra shirt³. They trusted that they would be fed and clothed and housed by the people to whom they were bringing the good news. Before Easter that good news couldn't have been that Jesus had risen from the dead. These disciples must have experienced some of the magic -- some of the "juice" – some sense of the realm of God that Jesus talked about. They were inspired enough to follow him, to risk their lives to spread the Good News that he had proclaimed. With this in mind Crossan invites his readers to consider this question: Did what they had been doing all of a sudden become invalidated by the crucifixion? Did the good news they had been proclaiming become irrelevant? Did it stop being meaningful? Wouldn't the Good News they had been sharing before the crucifixion continue to be valid after the crucifixion?

This is a radically different image of Jesus than the conventional one. Marcus Borg, a professor of religion and Jesus Seminar Fellow, wrote 'Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time'. In it he portrayed a different image of Jesus than the conventional one. He considered Jesus, first of all, to be a person of the spirit, a shaman. A spirit person is one who has a sense of the wonder and awe of existence, a sense of connection with what we would call the "spiritual." Jesus was affected and touched, transformed to the deepest levels of his being by his experience of the holy. It affected him; it moved him; it informed him. Jesus also, Borg says, was a healer and a reformer of his own religious tradition, Judaism.

What was the Good News that Jesus brought if it was not eternal life to all who believed in him? It was that the kingdom, the realm of God, was here now and it was available to everyone who was willing to repent and love God and love his or her neighbor. Schleiermacher taught that Jesus saved not because of his suffering on the cross or his resurrection but because he was so affected by his sense of the divine, of God, that it transformed his being. That transformation was the source of his authority. His Good News, his Gospel, was that this sense of the holy, this

¹ Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography

³ Mark 6: ⁸These were his instructions "Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. ⁹ Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. ¹⁰ Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. ¹¹ And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them."

¹² They went out and preached that people should repent. ¹³ They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

transformation, was available to everyone: the rich and the poor, the literate and the illiterate, priests and publicans.

Focus Questions:

1. What do you imagine Jesus thought was his purpose?
2. Have you ever been affected by a sense of the divine, the holy?
3. Would the ministry of Jesus have been meaningful if he hadn't been crucified?
4. How has the story of Jesus affected you?
5. What do you think Jesus might have meant when he spoke of the Dominion of God?

Check-out/Likes & Wishes: *Did this session affect your understanding of Jesus?*

Closing Reading & Extinguishing Chalice:

How does one address a mystery?

Cautiously -- let us go cautiously, then, to the end of our certainty, to the boundary of all we know, to the rim of uncertainty, to the perimeter of the unknown which surrounds us.

Reverently -- let us go with a sense of awe, a feeling of approaching the powerful holy whose lightning slashes the sky, whose persistence splits concrete with green sprouts, whose miracles are present in every place and moment.

Hopefully -- out of our need for wholeness in our own lives, the reconciliation of mind and heart, the conjunction of reason and passion, the intersection of the timeless with time.

Quietly -- for no words will explain the inarticulate or summon the presence that is always present even in our absence.

But what shall I say?

Anything -- any anger, any hope, any fear, any joy, any request, any word that comes from the depth of being addressed to Being itself -- or, perhaps, nothing, no complaint, no request, no entreaty, no thanksgiving, no praise, no blame, no pretense of knowing or of not knowing.

Simply be in the intimate presence of mystery, unashamed -- unadorned -- unafraid.

And at the end say -- Amen.

~ Gordon B. McKeeman