

JESUSES AMONG US
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To the Unitarian Society of Menomonie, Wisconsin
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You've heard me talk in the past about my friend Annie, although I haven't identified her by name. Most recently, I mentioned her as a joy about a month ago for having come back into my life as a good friend after we had separated over misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

Since we've gotten back in touch, she's kept me up to date with a situation in which she's involved. Two years ago Annie spent the summer in Ethiopia doing research for the U of M on the status of women journalists there. She met and befriended Kalkidan Muluken Ababte, a journalism student then at Unity College in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capitol. Kalkidan, or Kal, graduated in fall 2004 with a diploma in journalism and began writing for the English-language Daily Monitor, as well as working as a stringer—that is, someone who does freelance assignments—for other Ethiopian independent newspapers.

I'd like to take a moment to quote here from the BBC's information page on Ethiopian media: "The number of privately-owned newspapers has grown; some are available online...The private press offers quite different reporting to the state-owned newspapers and is often critical of the government. The relationship between the press and the authorities has sometimes been difficult. Media rights group Reporters Without Borders cited a "spiral of repression" against the private media in the wake of the violent protests that followed the 2005 elections." Keep this in mind as I continue.

In summer 2005, Kal flew to Scotland to visit friends and explore furthering her education abroad. On her return home, she stopped in London to visit other friends and call her parents. She found her father had been arrested in the wake of disputed poll results and complaints of fraud. He was comparatively lucky: violent protests left at least 40 other people dead. By November, nearly another 50 people will have been killed and thousands will be imprisoned and tried on charges of treason and, incredibly, genocide. Kal was told the police had delivered a warrant for her arrest.

Kal emailed Annie, her most-worldly (read: American) friend about the situation, and Annie vigorously encouraged her to immediately visit the police and request asylum. She did, and Annie visited her in March where she

was in the United Kingdom's political asylum project; while she was there, however, Kal was informed her appeal was denied. I do not know the reasons she was given for the denial, or even if she was given any reasons. I suspect they involve some misinformation provided the UK by the government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, winner of the disputed election. The UK's asylum project provides people with housing while in the program, and as she'd been denied, she was no longer housed by them. She has been denied the return of her passport and her press card that identified her as an Ethiopian journalist, without which she fears "all evidence to support her persecution will be lost and without her passport she cannot work, she cannot eat, she cannot live."

Kal now sleeps on the couches of friends and sometimes in the tube stations of London. Kal is living off \$10 US a day. Annie has tried wiring her money, but without her passport she can't accept the transfer. Annie reserved hostel rooms for her while she was there, but she may not be allowed to remain in them because, again, she has no passport with which to identify herself.

Kal's imminent return to Ethiopia is fraught with peril. She will certainly face arrest and questioning and probably inhumane treatment and conditions. Human Rights Watch released a report in January documenting beatings, intimidation, and kidnappings and detention of many people considered friendly to the Coalition for Unity and Democracy, the opposition party that led requests for recounts and made charges of electoral fraud, and for whom the independent press has often been accused of being a mouthpiece, especially in rural areas. These have included beatings of opposition party politicians, members, farmers and villagers, and at least one 17-year old girl whose crime apparently was that she was on her way to the funeral of another student killed by police in the post-election violence. In February, four male students were allegedly executed by federal police. Their alleged crimes are not known. The Ethiopian government is not known for its gentle treatment of critics and dissidents. "Disappearances" are not unknown. Kal, as both a reporter for independent, often critical newspapers, and as a supporter of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy, is particularly vulnerable.

I'm quoting here from Annie's email: "When I visited Kalkidan...there was not a day she did not cry. She misses her family, she fears for their safety, and she fears for her friends who are still in Ethiopia and have been jailed and beaten. [She] is scared to return...and fears for her life...[She] is not only depressed and losing hope, but she is frustrated that she is not in a position to help her people, and now she cannot even help herself."

Annie concludes, plaintively, "I need help. I do not know where to go or what to do to help my friend...[My] family and I will take full financial

responsibility for Kalkidan and are inviting her to come to Minnesota to live with us. If it is possible, we would like to begin the process to bring Kalkidan to live with us, and plead for political asylum from the United States...As you can tell from this email, I am pretty desperate and would appreciate any help or light you could shed on this situation." And then she concludes with the Ghandi quote with which she has concluded every email I've ever received from her: "We must be the change we wish to see in the world."

I titled this sermon "Jesuses Among Us" because I like the play of words that suggests both "Jesuses," or Jesus multiples—although since Jesus is a Latinate I suppose we could say "Jesi"—and the suggestive phrase "Jesus is among us." Both are apt to my topic this morning. This is a particularly apt topic at this time of year, full of bunnies and eggs, bitter herb and salt water, death and resurrection.

There's a very old religious theory among Christian sects that god puts a Jesus, or perhaps sprinkles several versions of Jesus, among every generation. I emphasize Jesus the Rabbi, Jesus the Teacher, Jesus the Man over Christ the Divine Being because it strikes me that if the crucifixion story is true, Jesus the Man had considerably more to lose than did Christ the Divinity, and James Salter reminds us that heroes are the people with something at stake. This is, like almost everything else worth considering, a heresy among more mainline groups. So in deference to them and to the religion of Jesus—which was of course Judaism—and to the holiday out of which the Christian Easter grew, Passover, let's call this the theory of the Tzadikim.

I love the idea of the Tzadikim Nistarim. They are also called the Lamedvavniks, or the Holy Thrity-Six. This is an ancient mystical Hasidic belief that into every generation are born thirty-six righteous souls whose actions keep the world turning. There are always thirty-six, never more, never fewer. As one dies, another is born. The Tzadikim Nistarim, or "Holy Righteous Saints," are themselves unaware that the world depends on what they do, or even that they are doing anything at all. They simply go about their lives doing whatever it is they do. What makes them holy is that what they do is never considered by them or by others as anything holy or even often given any thought. They simply do the righteous thing because it is the right thing to do.

Let me put this into practical terms. Some of you might remember Vic Morrow, an actor now perhaps best known for the manner of his death. Morrow is the actor who was killed during the filming of The Twilight Zone Movie in the early 80s. A helicopter dropped literally out of the sky on top of him and a boy and girl filming a scene with him. All were killed immediately.

Here is what he did I consider so heroic and so righteous. I remember watching the news reports at that time and seeing this film clip a few times: the camera is positioned for filming, you begin to see that something is going wrong, Morrow and the children begin to run through the knee-high water where they're filming, just as the helicopter enters the frame from above and collapses on them. The pilot, blinded by explosions, had lost control.

Sad deaths, tragic deaths. But nothing heroic or righteous. Except for this: as I watched the clip on the news, it was clear that Morrow had begun to outdistance the kids as they ran, and then he turned around and picked them up and began to run with them. It's not by any means certain that, had he left them, Morrow would still be alive, but it is certain that the brother and sister would have been just as dead. But what is important is that he turned around and picked them up. A hopeless, desperate act. A holy act. I have no idea what might have gone through Morrow's mind—he may have thought, "I'll go out a hero," or he may have thought, "these kids will cushion the blow," or he may have thought nothing at all—but in the end it doesn't matter one bit if he thought everything and nothing. The fact remains in his last moments of life he tried to do a good thing. It is this that makes him a candidate for the Tzadikim.

I don't think one needs to do something so public as that either. When I was in sesshin in Toronto the abbot used to say that you will not die until you accomplish whatever it is you're meant to accomplish in this life, and you will know you accomplished it because you are afraid of death. The act could be as simple as saving a butterfly from a spider's web or as complex as quickly killing a damaged fly ("even bugs have karma," he used to say). You might go through your entire life doing or not doing these things, and you would have no clue when the decisive act had taken place or what its affect would be. You simply do what you do and that has made all the difference. The Buddhists call such a person a Bodhisattva, although it is assumed such a bhikku or holy person is aware he is acting in a holy way.

Fine then. Call them the Thirty-Six, call them the Tzadikim Nisarim, call them Bodhisattvas, call them Jesuses. Call them Mahatmas, call them angels, call them Holy Strangers, call them monks or mystics—the point is that there are people who live their lives in a holy way.

But I'm going to use Jesus because ours is primarily a Christian culture and the crucifixion and the Christian gospels are something we're all familiar with. It's imperative to recognize that, among us, there are Jesuses who are unrecognized, who do the simple things necessary to keep us alive. Imperative in this is the humbling of self. In John 13, Jesus, after washing his disciples' feet, tells them "Do you understand what I have done for you?...You call me

'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

I'd like to point out here the communal aspect of Jesus' act. He has washed the feet, not of a single disciple, but of them all, and then instructs them to do likewise. Have you taken part in a foot-washing ceremony? I have, and it's a particularly odd public experience. You do not choose who washes your feet or whose feet you wash: that's the luck of the draw, or at least it was in the church where I took part. There is a particularly intimacy to touching another person's feet, in maneuvering it and manipulating it, in scrubbing the calluses and getting between the toes. Mothers and a lot of fathers know this feeling. But there is no sensation to compare with washing the feet of a stranger, feet you don't know where they've been, feet that are a little sweaty, a little dry, or a little funky. Nurses know this feeling.

I'd like to take a moment to mention my mother-in-law, and this relates to feet. Most of you know my wife Jayne spent a week with her godmother in hospice as she died from lung cancer. Toots, Jayne's mother, also spent the week there. She and Florence were friends for nearly 50 years. She suffered swollen ankles in order to stay at Florence's home and at her bedside and to attend her as she breathed her last hours.

Not much. Not really much at all, certainly not to compare with crucifixion or even trying to save the lives of children. But the substance of Jesus' display of love is love for one another, love for the community. In his book *God So Loved the World*, theologian Jonathan Wilson explains that "In Christ, God shows us God's love for humankind. That demonstration of God's love generates in humans a love that involves turning from sin and from fear. In other words, as an example of God's love, Christ's life and death teach us how we should live and motivate us to live as we have been taught...[In this context,] Christ is seen entirely as an example...Jesus Christ is first an example of God's love active in the world to redeem humankind. On the basis of this prior love of God, we can then say that Christ as fully human is also an example of how we are to live."

Now it's true I have some issues with some of this idea. Part of the idea Wilson presents here is a condensation of the beliefs of Peter Abelard and Friedrich Schleiermacher, both of which he holds up first for consideration and then for disputation. I often find myself more in agreement with Abelard and Schleiermacher than with Wilson. For instance, Wilson is convinced of the divinity of Jesus and so is convinced that seeing him as anything merely human is to deny the power of his message, while I would argue precisely the

opposite: that it is the humanity, the mere humanness of Jesus, that makes his teachings so cogent.

I want to tell you a story that might be a little more than you want to know, but that's always the way when you tell the truth. You know, we've got an incredible infestation of Asian beetles and they're damn inconvenient (to put it mildly). They find their ways into everything. Everywhere. But they're still alive. Still sentient, living beings. I often tip them out of my pets' water bowls. Not long ago I was in the bathroom, doing what one does in the bathroom, and one of these Asian beetles dropped into the bowl. Without thinking, I reached into the still warm water and plucked him out. I can wash my hands. But that's no matter really, because what is important here and what I won't argue with is the idea that there is in Jesus' teachings a lesson for how we should live our lives. And it is in this teaching that I root my belief that the ancients were correct, that there are Jesuses born into every generation.

I realize it might seem presumptuous to include Vic Morrow into this company, or my friend Annie or my mother-in-law Toots or even to, dare I say it, include myself in such company. But I don't hesitate to do it. Because while it may be true none of the Tzadikim Nasirat know that they are of the Thirty-Six, it is necessary that we recognize the Jesus in ourselves. The Mahatmas we become. The Boddhisattvas we embody. Annie's living example of Jesus' teaching to "Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" deserves to be acknowledged and venerated. I celebrate her action.

Note that she hasn't literally lain down her life in terms of ending it. But that hasn't been asked, and neither does Jesus teach that we have to do that. It is in the small, daily, humiliating things we do that we lay down our lives in the grander, more heroic way. We wash feet, we try to save children, we ask for asylum for friends in need, we reach into a bowl of water to let out the Asian beetle, we suffer personal distress to hold the hand of a sick or dying friend. These are the actions Jesus taught and the ones we must celebrate. I invite you now to tell us about the Jesuses in your lives.