



Message

* This sermon was inspired and informed by the work of Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for the ministry, who developed the concept of our Theological House.

Because Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal religion, many people, especially our critics - think it has no center, that we don't know who we are, that there's nothing holding us together. I partially agree. We often don't know who we are, but not because there's no center or because there's nothing holding us together. Rather because we've forgotten how to explain our center. Unitarian Universalism has a long history of defining itself against predominant religious ideas – like the Trinity, or heaven and hell. In the last fifty or so years, we went through a long period where we defined ourselves against other religions by trying to back away from saying we were a religion, or that we had a theology. And we personalized religion. So we would talk about our personal beliefs, but very rarely about an overarching Unitarian Universalist theology. What happened is that we lost a sense of a center, of living live in a religious system that is bigger than our individual beliefs. We live in what UU theologian Rebecca Parker calls a theological house. And even for all of our individual diversity, we have some things that have stayed pretty much the same over the course of centuries. The problem is, we don't often realize we're in that theological house. We don't know how it got built and what it means to live in it. Our theology has become implicit, meaning, kind of vague and unspoken, rather than explicit, or open and talked about.

I'll bet we all know people who know exactly what theological house they live in. They can talk about their theological house explicitly. Unitarian Universalists have a hard time doing this. According to Rebecca Parker, this leaves us in a place of weakness. How can we participate in our faith if we don't even really know it? How can we share our faith with others if we don't know our own theology, or think we don't even have one? How can we take care of our theological house if we're not even really sure how it got built?

We live in a theological house like every other religion. This house has a foundation, walls, a roof, a door and windows, and a larger environment in which it lives. Today we're going to explore our theological house, and I invite you to follow along with me using the diagram in your order of service. By the end of our time, I hope you will have a clearer understanding of Unitarian Universalist theology so that you can better understand and explain the religion that you are taking part in this morning.

Let's begin with our foundation. And for this we have to go back two hundred years. Protestant Christianity at that time saw humanity as depraved and sinful, and God as all-powerful, and ready to punish and reward. Most Protestants at that time also believed in predestination. You were predestined for heaven or hell. It was pretty dismal, black and white thinking, and some Christians were really uncomfortable with this. What a waste, to spend your life worrying whether you were saved or damned?

These Christians worked up new ideas about God and humans. First, they gave up this idea of God as punishing and harsh. God was all that was good, loving, kind and strong. Second, they gave up the idea of humans as depraved. We weren't. We were made in the image of God, meaning we had tremendous potential for good.



The religious task, as these Christians understood it, was to awaken all that is good in humanity so that our god-given potential could come out and shine. The religious task was also to promote a partner-like relationship between humans and God. We are co-creators with and through God, made in the image of God, who works through us. When we nurture our goodness, God comes to be in the world. This is the theological foundation of Unitarian Universalism – that we have great potential for good, and that god moves through us as we nurture that goodness and do good in the world. Even when Unitarianism moved into humanism, and left the concept of God behind, this idea of human goodness and partnering with all of life, has been carried forward. As theism has come back into Unitarian Universalism, the older Unitarian concept of God and humans as being in a divine partnership, with no division between what's earthly and what's divine, has been resurrected.

This foundational theology is all over the place in Unitarian Universalism, and it's especially strong in our hymnal, which is the closest thing we have to a Bible. I've chosen a hymn for every piece of our theological house, so that we can experience it first hand, so let's sing the first and last verse of hymn 298 Wake Now My Senses v1,5, paying close attention to how it shows us this part of our theology.

We move now from our foundation to the walls of our theological house. **Ecclesiology** – or the theology of church - which is what holds us together. This part of our house happened in resistance to a form of church that is hierarchical, the most familiar one being the Roman Catholic Church. When Unitarianism first emerged in Europe 400 years ago, there was only one way to do church – with God and pope and King at the top, and the people at the bottom. There were some Christians, called Radical Reformers, who thought this was wrong. The early Christian church had none of this hierarchy. There was a radical equality between members who decided together what happened in the church. In fact, there was a real belief that God works best when people worked together as equals. The fancy word for this is congregational polity. Our ecclesiology is congregational polity. Church is formed by human beings who come together of their own free will and make a covenant to walk together. This way of church has defined what church means for all kinds of groups, including Baptists, Mennonites, the Puritans who first settled this continent, and Unitarians. Even as we have become more theologically diverse, we have held onto this powerful belief that we come together as equals and that the church is created by human beings in sacred covenant with each other. But it's more than this, in our ecclesiology, we are the walls, we are the presence of God, or the embodiment of the spirit of life to one another. We witness to one another.

But what do we witness for? Well, it's pretty simple. Our foundational theology – the bringing of goodness into the world, being vessels for the movement of God in the world, and the nurturing of every soul into their full potential. You can see this ecclesiology in all the different ways we are Unitarian Universalist – whether humanist, Christian, pagan, atheist, agnostic, Jew, and all the other ways we do religion. And of course, it shows up in many of our hymns. One that I really like is 360, Here we have gathered, and we're going to sing verses 1 and 3. Pay close attention to what this hymn tells us about what brings us together, and what can happen when we join with one another.



Soteriology is the theology of what we need to be saved from. Every religion sees some kind of danger for humanity and develops ways to protect us from that danger. For instance, some Christians believe that salvation is about saving your soul from an otherworldly hell. We are evil, and we have to be saved from our own evilness. You do that by accepting Jesus as your savior, and you get to heaven.

Our soteriology looks a lot different. Our Universalist ancestors rejected the idea of heaven and hell, saying that God is so loving he would never condemn his creation to an eternal punishment. Heaven and hell aren't otherworldly places you go to after you die. Heaven and hell are right here on earth and they are created by human beings whenever we "relate violently, oppressively, or cruelly to one another." (Parker)

We need to be saved from the hells that we create on earth. Those are personal hells that happen in our individual lives, and collective hells, where there are unjust systems that create hell in bigger ways. War, poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and the need for enemies. Whenever we dehumanize each other and ourselves, that is hell.

Now you might ask, if humanity is so good, how does bad stuff happen? Evil happens when we fail to allow the spirit of God, or the life-affirming power of all that is, move through us. We live in an unfair world, and that means that all of us fall short of our full potential, and in that falling short, evil is born. So how do we protect ourselves from the hells we create? By committing ourselves to the building of heaven on earth. We need to be very aware of our shortcomings and take responsibility for them so we don't fall into the hell of arrogance and pride. We need to do our personal and collective homework, looking at all the ways we hold back goodness in this world, and then become agents for the building of heaven. This is how we become the roof of our theological house.

Please join me in singing the first verse of hymn 1, May nothing evil cross this door, a hymn that shows our soteriology at work.

Eschatology is a fancy way of saying the theology of where we come from and where we're going. To give you an example, in many Christian understandings, we started off perfect, in the Garden of Eden, there was the fall, where Eve eats the apple. Since then, we've been trying to get back into the Garden of Eden. And at the end of time, Jesus is coming back, and this whole world is going to be raptured so the Kingdom of Heaven comes here. And those deemed worthy make it, and the others go to hell for eternity. That's how it ends up.

Unitarian Universalists have a different eschatology and it's all summed up in one hymn, Forward Through the Ages hymn 114, and we're gonna sing one verse of this hymn and that pretty much sums it up.

Unitarian Universalism is a very hopeful religion. Given our faith in the goodness of humanity, our understanding of God as a partnership, and our commitment to build heaven on earth, we understand our eschatology as one where things are supposed to get better and better. We're not supposed to simply



accept that injustice exists and there's nothing we can do about it so we just have to accept it. Everyone should have the chance for a fulfilling life. Now, to be fair, for the last hundred years, there have been many times we've doubted our own eschatology, usually when it seems like human evil is getting the upper hand. World War I, The Depression of the 1930s, World War II, The Holocaust, The Cold War, genocide in Rwanda and Darfur, environmental destruction, so many examples of how evil people can there. That questioning found a place in our new hymnal supplement, in the song Woyaya. (sing it) This song doesn't completely get rid of that onwards and upwards eschatology, but it's not quite as bold or grand, there a little bit of mystery, a lot less certainty. Yes, we're gonna get there, but we're not sure how, or where, so we just hope and trust that we will. That's kind of where our soteriology is at right now.

And that brings us to missiology – how we relate to our neighbors. Given that we see the potential for good in all human beings, given our trust in the potential for good when we come together, given our understanding of evil and what we need to be saved from, and given our belief that life should get better and better.... It's not hard to know what our missiology is. We see the potential for good in our neighbors, just as we see it in ourselves. Just as we have a partnership relationship with God, or the holy, we want that same compatible trusting relationship with people who are different from us. We believe in hospitality to others. We want to learn from other religions and other ways of being. We are not necessarily afraid of having our house changed by what we learn from our neighbors. If God works through human beings, then God is working through every person, not just those who are like us. Now, this doesn't mean we let everything in... we tend to let in elements of other religions and belief systems that reinforce what we already have in those other elements of our theology. This is definitely a window with a screen, after all, you have to protect your house. You don't want the roof to leak, the walls to be drafty, a door that never closes, or worst of all, a cracked foundation.

The biggest misunderstanding about Unitarian Universalism is that anything goes. If you look at our history, and the way our religion has evolved, that just doesn't hold water. We have been careful about what influences we let in. I imagine anyone of you who've been around for a while have experienced what happens when enough people feel that we have wandered too far. Sometimes we're able to deal with it openly and in a healthy way. That's when our ecclesiology is working like it should. In the worst cases, it becomes ugly, and we're no longer accessing our god given capacities, but rather coming from a place of fear and distrust, a place some would call evil. This means that our ecclesiology, our way of being church, has broken down and is in need of healing.

Our missiology basically asks us to be open to the world, and to reach out to the world in a loving, trusting, way, knowing that any time we connect with another living being, as become a vessel for the movement of the holy. A hymn that best expresses this is hymn 189, Light of Ages and of Nations.

All of this comes together in our pneumatology, our theology of that which is beyond ourselves. For us, the holy is everywhere and in everything. It is in the earth with its elements – earth, air, fire, water. It is in every living being. It's all permeating, and pervasive, always moving and it's bigger than any of us, and we can access it when we connect to our highest selves – the best people we can be. Our pneumatology came into being as we stripped away from God all those things that seemed to keep people from being able to connect to the holy. God as King, God as male. God as a punisher. God as a



particular race and age. God as some disembodied being able to intervene in this world. God even as having human characteristics all. And for some people, even the word God itself. Unitarian Universalism has consistently deconstructed how we talk about the holy, and transformed it into a force or presence that is with all things and in all things and moving through all things. That understanding of the holy is in one of our most beloved hymns, 123, Spirit of Life. Let's rise together and sing this beloved song of ours.

Spirit of Life 123

I want to say a few words about the weaknesses of our theology. We are much more comfortable looking at our potential for good than our potential for evil. We like to think of evil as out there rather than in here. Our ecclesiology is not foolproof. Sometimes the majority isn't right. Sometimes a minority can hold a whole congregation hostage. Our missiology sounds great. But it's much easier to be open minded with religions that are also open minded. It's harder to be open to the truths of religions that seem to be judging us. Sometimes our eschatology of onwards and upwards keeps us from being able to reach out to those who are suffering. It's hard for us to sit with pain and failure. We'd much rather keep doing that onwards and upwards thing. But most importantly, and this isn't necessarily a weakness, but something to make note of... our theology emerged from white middle class culture. That culture is in the DNA of our theology. This isn't a bad thing, but I don't think we have really been able to grasp how powerful as well as limiting that DNA can be.

With all its strengths and weaknesses, this is our theological house. We are the foundation, the walls, the door, the window, the roof, and we are one with all that surrounds it. We need to be able to talk about our theological house to other people. We need to talk about our theological house amongst ourselves. We really need to be able to explain our theological house to our children and to the youth so they can make it their own. Unitarian Universalism has a living theology of hope and trust in the transforming power of love. We save lives and hearts and reassure souls. When we do our faith well, we are a beacon of light in the darkness, a promise that the sacred and the holy moves in all things in all times, in all places and in all ways.

Amen and blessed be.