



Sermon

When I tell people new to our denomination that I grew up Unitarian Universalist, I am often told how lucky I am. "I wish I hadn't had to live with all that guilt," they'd say or "It must have been nice not to be forced to believe something you didn't." I have even heard "You had it so easy!" I am lucky that I grew up being told that I had inherent worth and dignity and able to engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. However, growing up Unitarian Universalist was *not* easy. From the age of 10 until I graduated high school, I lived in Arkansas. While the first question a native St. Louisan asks another is "What high school did you go to?" the first question you get asked in Arkansas is "What church do you go to?" No chance to build some trust and ease into a religious discussion with a stranger, no. I was thrown into the boiling oil right at the start. A normal initial meeting went something like this: Them—So nice to meet you. What church do you go to? Me—I'm Unitarian Universalist. Them—What's that? Then I had to try to explain Unitarian Universalism in a few sentences, focusing on my humanist beliefs. They might ask a clarifying question or two, but invariably this was soon followed by "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" "Uh, no." "Don't you know that if you are not born again you will go to hell and burn in eternal fire and damnation?" That would have been the nice version. Some people were truly hateful and cruel. I may not have grown up with guilt, but Christianity became a really scary place for me really fast. At one point, I had a "friend" calling me nightly to try to save me by reading Bible passages to me and warning me of the dangers of my heretical beliefs. After a couple of weeks he finally gave up when I lost my temper and said, "If being saved means I have to spend the rest of eternity in heaven with people like you, I would rather go to hell!" I was told I belonged to a cult, that Unitarian Universalism wasn't a real religion. And somewhere inside me, part of me began to believe that my faith was somehow inferior. For years, I wanted nothing to do with Christianity. There was no loving God there, certainly no salvation, just pain and rejection. And being a Unitarian Universalist, that was fine. I could ignore Christianity if I wanted to. I was on my own spiritual path and could look anywhere for inspiration and it was good.

But it was not good. I was tense often. If one of my friends was actively involved in his or her church, I was uncomfortable that my faith would come up and I would be rejected again. It would happen in unexpected ways. Once, when I was pregnant, one of my co-workers, with whom I had always had a good relationship, said "Have you given any thought to the spiritual upbringing of your child?" "Actually, yes we have," I said, my heart sinking. "My husband and I are planning on raising her Unitarian Universalist." "My ex was Unitarian," she said with disgust. "I belong to the Evangelical Free church." Our relationship never recovered.

Eventually, I decided that rejecting all of Christianity just because I had been hurt by fundamentalist beliefs was illogical. My spirituality is very holistic and rejecting all of Christianity felt like I was leaving something out. So I started looking for Christian roots I could believe in. I had the opportunity to study

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the New Testament in Greek in college. I read books about the Bible like Marcus Borg's Reading the Bible Again for the First Time and Karen Armstrong's A History of God. I have copies of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library. I learned a great deal about early Christian history, about when and how the Bible came to be the book it is today, how alternative beliefs flourished and were rejected, how politics and theological differences led to the many denominations we have today. I began to appreciate how "human" Christianity was. I no longer felt trapped by the fundamentalist box I felt forced into as a teenager. I could look at the Bible as an allegory and look for its universal truths.

For a while I thought that that was enough. But I have come to realize it is not. In the first place, I used my new understanding of Christian history to tear down other religions. "They think they are so special," I would say to myself. "I know where their beliefs come from. They have nothing sacred or special to offer me." I put them down so that I didn't feel so inferior about my own beliefs. I was still reacting to the hurt I had experienced. In the second place, while I said I could look to Christianity for its spiritual truths, I would look to any other religious tradition for wisdom and spiritual insights before I would look at Christianity. Humanist, Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic, Pagan, you name it, I was there, but not Christianity. And lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I was embarrassed to say in UU circles that I was interested in Christianity. This is not unusual. Many UU's I know are embarrassed to say that they are Christian—that they pray, or that they read the Bible for spiritual guidance, or that they would like to even mention Jesus.

I believe that this reluctance to embrace our Protestant Christian roots is undermining our appeal and effectiveness as a denomination. One of the reasons why Unitarian Universalism continues to have difficulty attracting like-minded individuals is because even though we welcome people looking for an alternative to mainstream Christianity, we rarely mention anything about Christianity or Jesus in our churches. We change the lyrics to Christian hymns in our hymnal. We will look at other religious traditions and beliefs and evaluate them against our reason and experience, but we tend to reject Christian theology altogether. That doesn't feel very welcoming to me. Rev. Stephen Kendrick expressed this better than I. He said:

Many Unitarian Universalists choose to turn away from our Christian roots because of experiences we are very uneasy with or troubled by. While this reaction is understandable, it strikes me that it is not ultimately healthy for a religious movement or for any of us as individual searchers. Why? Ignoring Jesus' teaching and influence distorts our own past and heritage, which is deeply steeped in Christian origins. Furthermore, as Unitarian Universalists, we seek to build a religion based not on nay saying or rejection but rather on a positive, life-affirming message. And finally, Jesus is still worth hearing out. I can think of no more misunderstood and misjudged figure. I find him more compelling and inspiring as a human being who suffered and loved and claimed that no one is perfect but God than as the magical entity some of his most devoted followers worship. It is equally ironic that this prophet of liberation and spiritual freedom, who said that the poor shall inherit the earth, is misunderstood by people attracted to the free faith and justice-seeking tradition of Unitarian Universalism.

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I see this rejection often when we describe ourselves in terms of how we are not like mainstream Christianity instead of what we do believe. We do not have a creed, we do not believe in a God with a flowing white beard, we do not believe Jesus is divine, we do not believe in hell or the devil, we do not believe we are sinners, we do not believe the Bible is infallible. While these statements may all be true, the tone can be dismissive and sometimes even condescending. As if we are superior to people of other denominations, not welcoming. It feels to me to be no better than when the fundamentalist Christians in Arkansas told me I belonged to a cult.

In addition, we do not do enough to help people heal from the wounds that mainstream Christianity has inflicted on them. Many come to us because they have rejected their religious upbringings. Many have been rejected by their denominations. When these people come through our doors, we want to offer a welcome and safe home for them to explore beliefs that have meaning for them. But we do not address the emotional and spiritual pain that they have experienced. We avoid it. "You've been hurt, let us take you away from all that!" I feel like we are the Calgon of the religious world. You remember those ads? The overwhelmed housewife cries "Calgon, take me away!" and she is transported to a wonderfully relaxing bubble bath. This pain is real and should not be ignored. We need to talk about it and the doctrines that caused them and show newcomers our interpretation of those doctrines. Unitarian Universalists often say we want spiritual fulfillment. We cannot do this unless we include *all* of who we are, including our Protestant heritage. I am not suggesting that we should give up our many sources of wisdom or that we should "convert" to Christianity. What I am suggesting is that we as a denomination need to be more holistic in our approach. We need to be willing to look at Christian writings and theologians for wisdom the same way we would read the writings of the Confucius or listen to the Dalai Lama. We can help each other find words that speak to our need for deep connection and do not hurt. When we find pain, we need to stop and address it, using both our minds and hearts. I have needed this healing and I believe others do too.

So I am circling back yet again to my Christian roots to find a Christianity I can honestly say I believe in this time. And I am doing it from a distinctly Unitarian Universalist perspective, using my reason and experience to give meaning to what I find. I am looking at historical sources, not to tear down a faith, but to understand its context. From our Unitarian heritage, we generally focus on the life of a man, not the death and resurrection of a God. So I am looking at the life and message of that radical Jew who took on the establishment—both Jewish and Roman—to try to make his world a better place. I am looking for the man who would break bread with the outcasts of his society—women, Samaritans, the poor. A man who said we are all children of the divine. A man who faced even his executioners with love. A man who put Love First.

And when I do that, Christianity regains its place as a valid way for me to understand the human condition, which is much more to my liking. It means that Jesus' death is not for my salvation, but to show me what love can really be in the face of hate and injustice. This is the kind of love that inspired Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King. We UU's have a tradition that believes that all creation is inherently good, that I have a duty to act with compassion toward those around me—the poor, those who are discriminated against, and those in need. That my truth is not the only truth, and I must support others in their search for their truth. This is not new information. I have known these things for

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years, but I got them from other sources, and from my reason and experience. Now I have wisdom from Christian writings to inspire me as well.

I am trying to use my new insights to understand who I am and to be better able to listen to who you are. So let me tell you who I am. Humanism has always taught me that reason and experience are paramount in judging spiritual truths. My passion for social action began with humanism and has its foundation in our seven Principles stressing individual worth, interdependence, justice and equality, and peace. From Buddhism I try to practice balance, mindfulness, and loving compassion. I take time for myself. I am reminded of the impermanence and preciousness of life. My studies of Judaism teach me that I must work to bring heaven to the here and now and to help me remember to keep my faith at my center—not to let it get pushed aside by day to day concerns. Judaism's refusal to call God by name also helps remind me to avoid idolatry. Paganism keeps me rooted in this world, in the turn of the seasons, in the natural cycles of my body and my world. I can embrace growing older with joy. I have written the Green Column in our newsletter because of the passion I have for our natural world. Islam reminds me that any science which addresses the "big" questions—who we are, where we come from, and where we are going—only serves to show how holy our existence is. Islam also stresses the importance of equality and free will and the importance of helping those less fortunate than ourselves. And finally I have come to realize how Christianity stresses the inherent goodness of creation, the infinite power of love, the importance of tolerance, and need to work for justice because the fate of all of humanity is bound together.

It is this kind of holistic approach that I would like to see us present to those who come through our door searching for new truths. It is like the Pointillist painting you see on the cover of your Order of Service. If you look from a distance, the painting looks to be complete, but as you get closer, you see the individual points of color, melding together that make up the picture. If any point were a different color than it is, the painting would still be a coherent whole but would be a different painting. Our Unitarian Universalist spirituality is like this painting. Our traditions merge together, some colors more prominent than others, but all must be there, working together. You cannot leave out the reds or the greens, all colors must be present for the painting to be whole. Each of us is also like these points of color, we are unique and different, but we must all be here together or the painting is plain and boring. It is our differences that make the painting beautiful.

Our Christian roots can only make us stronger as a denomination. As we support each other to spiritual growth, may we all journey together toward a true wholeness that can show love in the face of pain, welcome where there has been rejection, and unity built on our diversity.

Amen and Blessed Be.