



Reading

Our reading this morning comes from William Ellery Channing, one of the founders of American Unitarianism which emerged in the early 1800s in resistance to Calvinism, the predominant theology of the day. Calvinism emphasized the sinfulness of humanity, God as merciless judge, and the doctrine of predestination, which taught that the human race had already been divided into the few who got to heaven, and the many who did not. Even as a young boy, Channing knew something was wrong with this kind of religion. It was too hopeless and too harsh. As a young student, he found himself drawn to reformist theologians and teachers who looked for other ways of understanding Christianity. At first they hoped to create a place for liberal religion in their churches, but the conservatives were in no mood for reform. The liberals ended creating a new denomination, Unitarianism. Channing became its pre-eminent leader. The following excerpts are taken from his 1820 article, "The Moral Arguments Against Calvinism" which became his theological masterpiece. The religious language may sound old fashioned, given what Unitarian Universalism has become, and yet it cannot be overestimated how radical these ideas were for his time. If you listen carefully, you will find the seeds of our foundational theology resting in this passage, even though Unitarianism and now Unitarian Universalism have changed a great deal in two hundred years.

"THE general spirit of Christianity teaches no doctrines [of human depravity, eternal punishment and predestination]. [This] we have opposed. The Christian spirit is love, charity, benevolence. Christianity is designed to manifest God as perfect benevolence, and to bring men to love and to imitate him. [Calvinism] gives views of the Supreme Being, from which our moral convictions and benevolent sentiments shrink from horror, and which, if made our pattern, would make us into monsters! It is plain, that, were a human parent to form himself on the universal Father, as described by Calvinism, that is, were he to bring his children into life totally depraved, and then to pursue them with endless punishment, we should charge him with a cruelty not surpassed in the annals of the world; or, were a sovereign to incapacitate his subjects in any way whatever for obeying his laws, and then to torture them in dungeons of perpetual woe, we should say, that history records no darker crime.

"[On the other hand] is it probable, that [in] a religion, which aims to attract and assimilate us to God, considered as love, we may confidently expect to find ... the brightest views of the divine nature [and the greatest possibilities of human nature].

"We are presumptuous, we are told by [the Calvinists], in judging ... our Creator. But he himself has made this our duty, in giving us a moral faculty [of conscience]; and to decline it, is to violate the primary law of our nature. Conscience, the sense of right, the power of perceiving moral distinctions, the power of discerning between justice and injustice, is the highest faculty given us by God, the whole foundation of our responsibility, and our sole capacity for religion. God, in giving us conscience, has implanted a principle within us, which forbids us to prostrate ourselves before mere power, or to offer praise when we do not discover worth. [Thus, should we not] abhor a severe and unjust [Creator]? Our Creator ... discovers himself to us in ... benevolence, equity, and righteousness. He rests his authority ... with the great and fundamental principles of morality written on our souls."



Sermon

Sometimes I try to imagine what life must have been like in America in the first decades following the Revolution, the decades in which William Ellery Channing grew up. A new country was being created: new forms of government, new leaders, new ways of managing the economy, a new sense of identity and purpose. I imagine it to be an exciting restless time, with so much promise and possibility, and opportunities to make good things happen. And yet we also know, that in times of incredible change, there is also a lot of fear and uncertainty. The newness can feel dangerous, precarious, unreliable.

Human beings do not change easily. We do not leave behind our old patterns, just like that. They usually follow us and we will adjust to large and small changes in ways that drag those patterns with us. This happens in our individual lives, it happens in the family, in society, in government, and in religion.

In the first decades of this country's history, a democracy unlike anything else was being created. Suddenly all men were born equal (and of course it was just white men – that pattern did not die). But even this level of equality was an incredibly new thing. And there was a lot of fear of what that would be like. If everyone was equal, could you keep order? Would people get out of control? They had known a society defined by class, where your family of birth defined who you were and what your potential was. Strong social classes were considered necessary to keep order, for it was assumed the upper classes were morally superior and needed to keep the less-educated, more impulsive lower classes under control. I know that goes contrary to the story Americans tell themselves, that this is a classless country, but it was not true and it's not true today. However it is the ideal and one of the things that came to define what it meant to be American. So you had this new democracy based on the ideal of equality trying to emerge in a society based on class division and cultures of hierarchy, one being an untested way of living with other human beings, the other a familiar old pattern. We can only imagine the tension resting below the surface.

One of the things I believe is that the tensions in any society are mirrored in the religions of that society. What we're struggling with will be reflected in the ways we understand God or the divine and how we practice our faith. Our deep concerns will determine the questions we ask of our beliefs and the answers they give us. And that's because religion is about making sense of life. All the gods and goddesses we create, the understandings we have of an afterlife and so on, are all reflections of how we're experiencing and understanding life on this earth. And in the early years of this country, we see the tension between old hierarchy and new equality in the theological battles that erupted about who God was, and how human beings were supposed to relate to God.

So for example, after the American Revolution, Calvinist Protestantism was the dominant religion of the day. Calvinism proclaimed a fire and brimstone message about a fearsome God who was pre-eminently a merciless judge. Humans were sick sinful creatures dependent entirely on the mercy of this powerful God for salvation. How many of you have been exposed in some way to this kind of theology? You have been exposed to an old pattern that has refused to die. There was no equality before this God, just the need for unthinking obedience. Kind of like that old hierarchical society that America was supposed to be leaving behind, where those above have authority and those below do not and you do not question it. This kind of God is not a God that fits with democracy.

Calvinist Doctrine also promoted Predestination. This doctrine said that God had already decided who went to heaven and who went to hell. So the only thing you could do was try and determine whether you were one of the elect. Were you wealthy? Did you do a lot of good in the world? Did you respond to the altar call at a revival? Life became a test, and you looked for signs of whether you were saved or not everywhere. But ultimately, none of these signs were guarantees, and there was absolutely nothing you could do to change what God had decided.



When I look at this doctrine in a big picture way, like a student trying to understand why things are the way they are, I can see how predestination might make sense in that time, because many people experienced their lives as being at the mercy of arbitrary forces. There were no social security nets, no unemployment benefits, no job security, no health care insurance, you were always vulnerable to forces beyond your control, and sometimes you couldn't make sense of why some got lucky and some didn't. Predestination was a religious way of making sense of the routine unfairness of life.

There's all kinds of ways people make sense of the things they can't control. Each of us compensates in some ways for the places in our lives that don't feel safe. I think, for instance, that there is a direct connection between the fact that the United States has the weakest social safety net and the most fundamentalist churches of any industrialized nation. You have to find safety somewhere, and if your society isn't creating that safety, you're going to make up for it in other ways. So, we have an avalanche of churches that offer all the answers.

But again, this predeterminist kind of thinking doesn't make sense in a democracy, if by democracy we mean that each individual has a say in their lives. In a democracy it is not acceptable that we should simply be at the mercy of forces out of our control. Why are so many still up in arms about Hurricane Katrina. Because who suffered and how much they suffered was unfair and we railed against that unfairness. Unfairness is considered a moral problem in a democracy, not something to just accept as divinely ordained or simply normal. So here, again, you have a theology that doesn't make sense in the nation that was being created. It is the echo of an old old pattern.

William Ellery Channing grew up in this disconnection. He grew up in a church that preached the doctrine of human depravity and predestination. He was exposed to a God that was hard and merciless. One day his father took him to see a famous minister, and he heard that we were lost souls in a dark universe in desperate need of sovereign grace. (David Robinson, 6). As the minister thundered on, Channing felt terror, and a desperate hope that it wasn't true. Life suddenly seemed so hopeless. How could you ever let down your guard and experience joy? He was overcome with a sense of foreboding and dread. Life couldn't be about this!

When I think about the young Channing going home with this fear in his heart, I think about the many people I've met who've had the same experience. You may have been exposed as children or as adults, maybe it was reinforced by your parents or your community, but there's this look in people's eyes when they've had that kind of fear and hopelessness, that crushing feeling, that life is indeed a dangerous thing and God is a source of foreboding and dread. And yet somehow you're supposed to love that God with your heart, body, and soul? It doesn't make sense. Children and adults need safety and security to become well-rounded people capable of making their own decisions. Many of us know how this teaching has damaged our souls. I know that some of you have worked for years to undo it so that you can be free and able to enjoy life and true love.

Channing found himself in this place. Somehow, he knew there was something wrong. And that wrongness dawned on him as they drove home from the service. His father started to whistle as if he didn't have a care in the world! And when they got home, he had a lovely evening reading the paper, and Channing wondered how he could possibly do these things if it was actually true that we were lost souls in desperate need of grace? Channing had identified the gap, that tension – between what was said, and what was actually being lived. He came to the conclusion that his father couldn't believe in what he said he believed. For if he did, how could he have a pleasant evening? And he saw his neighbors doing the same thing. Going to church and getting bullied and condemned from the pulpit, and then going home for a lovely Sunday dinner! How did that work?

Maybe you've had a similar experience. Some of my extended family are Southern Baptist. Conservative, hard theology, very black and white, very homophobic. And yet at family gatherings, my partner and I are lovingly embraced, welcomed, and we enjoy each other's company, a lot! I can't understand how they can sit in their churches listening to what is said, and then sit with me and be these loving, kind, gentle people. How does that



work? How do people commit to churches, promising to live out their values, but then sit with those who have been condemned by their ministers?

Channing had a vision of a theology that allowed for harmony and connectedness. What you believed should be consistent with how you actually lived your life. It became his mission to resolve the tension. He was called to promote an understanding of God and humanity that would allow people to live undivided lives. Many were already living as if God loved them no matter what. So why not simply call it like it was. Call a spade a spade rather than dressing a spade up as a wolf and then living like it was a lamb.

And so we have the strong words of our reading this morning. We have been given glorious minds by God, with moral faculties for kindness, generosity, hope, love, affection, selflessness, and an understanding of right and wrong. We don't need to have right and wrong pounded into us. God already put that understanding in us. Channing took to heart when it said in the Bible that we were created in the image of God. For that reason, he had a deep trust in the potential of humanity. We didn't have to be made afraid to do the right thing. The desire to do right was given to us and when given a fair chance, we were likely to choose well.

When I look at it from a big picture sense, I see in Channing's work a theology that matched the democracy that was emerging, for democracy is based on the trust that people have a conscience and will choose what is most right. In Channing's theology all humans are equal before God and God's supreme desire was not to separate the saved from the unsaved, but to reconcile everyone to him. And, you don't have to wait to die to do that. That reconciliation can happen here and now, when you are in touch with the godliness of your own nature. For Channing, the true Christian way was not to divide, but to bring together so that all aspects of our lives form a seamless whole. Channing looked for the promised land in each human heart. He looked for revelation in each human life. He looked for salvation in the choices each human made.

That is the theological foundation of Unitarianism. We are made in the image of God and we serve God by being the best human beings we can be and by serving others so they too can find salvation in their own godliness. Even though Unitarian Universalism has become so diverse, with many different understandings of God for some, or no God at all for others, this foundational principle, that we are created in tremendous beauty, and given the gift of conscience – remains the core of who we are and what we proclaim from our pulpits. This is the foundation of Unitarian Universalist theology.

This message still matters. As we see every day, the old patterns are alive and well. Fear is still a powerful motivating force for the decisions we make as individuals, as a society, as a nation. True democracy still remains to be seen. There are far too many divisions between us. And true to form, the tensions between the old and the new are still mirrored in theologies that compete for the hearts of this nation. We know the God of judgment is still alive and well in the hearts of many and that many more are being damaged by this teaching. Channing's old battleground still exists and now, we are the players on it. And I ask myself all the time, what is our next move on this battleground? What are we called to do? Well, I guess you'll have to come back next week for the answer to that question.

But know this and hear this. You are blessed. You are anchored in the heart of the spirit of life. You are loved beyond measure, which means that none of us is ever alone, abandoned through judgment or any other mean spirited thing. We are called to hope and joy, for the revelation of our hearts tells us this, if we are but ready to listen. Amen and blessed be.



“Unitarian Universalist Theology II: Ecclesiology
(The Theology of Church)”
Rev. Krista Taves
January 11, 2009

Introduction to Reading:

Our reading this morning comes from the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, a Unitarian Universalist minister who specializes in ecclesiology, meaning the theology of church. Wesley believes that our Unitarian Universalist ecclesiology is rich and spiritually nourishing, as well as misunderstood and under-appreciated. According to Rev. Wesley, we ground ourselves in a powerful living ecclesiology when we ground ourselves in covenant, which she defines as walking together in the spirit of mutual love. In this reading, she playfully explores what Jesus might have said about covenant to the early Christians, and then translates that for our modern world:

Reading

Adapted from Alice Blair Wesley, “The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of our Covenant” 2002.

“Jesus basically said, “Look, you are obsessed with Caesar and his power. Sure the government controls much of your life. But no human ruler can control all life. You want to know what is holy? What we can count on? What we ought to be most faithful to? How we ought to shape our own lives, insofar as we can? Look at the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. Look at how seeds sprout and grow.

Above all, look at the ordinary, everyday, human love, of parents for their children and children for their parents. Look inside your own heart at your ability to change, to go from treating others as crassly and meanly as Caesar treats you, to the more normal, healthy ways of a loving spirit.

Lord knows, it is not always easy to figure out what are the ways of love! But even in this empire, we can form covenanted congregations we decide to enter, and help each other live in a context far larger than the puny Roman Empire which – however strong it looks – will fade as all empires do. Caesar will not like our congregations and meeting to worship and to help one another discern what love requires of us! He will persecute us for presuming to claim our loyalty is to something bigger and more important than he is. But, unless we let him intimidate us, he cannot stop us from organizing to worship and to learn to live freely in accord with the laws of love.”

What would Jesus’ message sound like if addressed to our time? I think, something like this: “Look, I know some of you think all the power that matters is in the human hands of Wall Street traders, the grossly deceiving advertising industry and the grossly shallow entertainment industry. Well, if you are obsessed with that piece of the world, if all you do is go to work, watch television and seek out entertainment, you might think that piece of the world is the whole world. Well, it’s not. There is a great deal more to life than working for huge corporations, finding some new distraction or buying more things. Be gathered into communities of love. Find, together, what is more meaningful, more loving, more worthy of your attention, and be empowered in devotion to these things. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened to you. The truth will make you free.”

Sermon

I can remember the evening I got my first email. It was October 1998, I had an aging computer, and had hooked up an obsolete modem given to me by a friend. Somehow, don’t ask me how, I had succeeded in

opening an account, downloading the software I had been given, and dialing in. You would need to appreciate the level of my technological illiteracy to understand how incredible that was. And the miracle continued! I was able to open something my friend had called an “inbox.” He had promised there would be an email waiting for me if I got that far. My poor obsolete modem was so slow that the email opened one letter at a time. “Heh Krista. Welcome to the nineties!”

And for some reason, as those words unfolded on the screen, I began to shake. Why was I shaking as I sat there in front of a relatively insignificant email? I shook the same way when I got a faster modem a few months later and joined my first yahoogroup. I could hardly sleep that night! A new frontier had opened up that I never knew existed and the possibilities seemed endless. And to top it off, I didn’t have to leave my house to get there! For those of you who are extroverts, you have no idea how the internet revolutionized life for us introverts! No one interrupts you! You get to think and process with no pressure to respond quickly. You can edit and edit and edit until it’s just right. But best of all, you can actually look like the life of the party on a message board!

But it was more than that. More than an introvert finding her way on the internet. Deep down, I knew that my life had changed and would never be the same because of getting online. I had joined something much larger than me, filled with others who were doing the same thing. This was a radical new way of reaching out to other people. I bet people felt the same way about the telegram, the telephone, and the postal service, when they first became available. They, too, revolutionized how we reached out to one another. They changed how we created community. They exposed one more time how hungry we are for each other and that as a species we will go to great lengths to find ways to do what we’ve done since we evolved into who we are – be together.

Would it surprise you to know that the beginning of what we now call “church”, was no different? Like the postal service, the telegram, the telephone, and the internet, it was born of the human need to be in community, to connect to something greater than ourselves. It also opened up possibilities never before imagined and revolutionized how human beings came together.

Two thousand years ago, when the women and men who had followed Jesus in life regrouped after his execution, they were feeling isolated and confused, wondering who they were now that the one they hoped would lead them into the kingdom of heaven on earth was gone. When he had lived, they knew who they were and there was an exciting radicalness, in how they understood themselves, other people, and the God they worshipped. And when they got off track or lost their focus, there was their leader, helping them to find their way back. Being with Jesus wasn’t easy. He was always telling maddeningly complex parables, breaking taboos, and challenging them to reconsider everything they had ever known. Add to that the pressure they came under from religious and secular authorities, it was a tough road to walk. But in spite of that, perhaps because of that, being with him had filled them with a living creativity many had never felt before. They had never felt so alive, so vibrant, like what they did really made a difference. So when he died so soon and so tragically, it seemed like a horribly cruel joke. How could this happen? Without him, who were they? What did his message amount to? Did what they had experienced mean anything anymore?

Some simply could not find their grounding without him and moved on. But many stayed. They had left everything behind for this man, and all they had now was each other and their memory of him. They weren’t quite sure what to do about that but in the void left by his death, these women and men found comfort in each other, and slowly began to reclaim the beauty and truth in what they had experienced together with the man they came to call their Messiah.

It wasn’t always easy. They differed in how they remembered him. They differed in how they understood his message. Sometimes in their grief and confusion they said harsh words to each other, judged each other, questioned each other, made false assumptions about each other. At one time it looked like the two people who emerged as their leaders would never find common ground. Each was certain that his way was the only way and that the others were dangerously mistaken.

But in the end, no one left. For all the harsh words and ultimatums, they agreed that even in their differences, they still held in their hearts the same resurrecting love. What they had received and created together was too special to squander. They were there to raise each other up, to help each other live faithfully, to stand by each other when things got hard. Mostly, they were there to help each other focus on what was important, not have their lives bled away by the forces that denied life. So, they stayed, because they believed that the man who had brought them together lived on in the hearts of every single one of them and that by honoring each other they honored their Messiah and his grace-filled message. Out of this gathering of like-minded souls, Christianity and its primary vehicle, the church, were born and the world would never be the same. This religion and the churches that formed through it revolutionized the way human beings came together.

Now what I've given you is a very simple history of a complex time, and I'm almost certain that more orthodox Christians might not quite appreciate the way I've laid it out, and that's because every Christian denomination interprets the history of the early Christians in a slightly different way to reinforce the way they understand church. But basically, this is our ecclesiological heritage, and by ecclesiology I mean the theology of church, the theology of what holds us together. It is the 2000 year heritage of any religion that has its roots in the early Christian movement. Even though there are thousands of different kinds of churches with so many shades of ecclesiology, this is still our heritage. For the Catholics, with their hierarchical top-down structure starting with the pope at the top and the people at the bottom, for the Methodists with their dioceses, bishops and councils, and for the Mennonites, Baptists and Quakers with their priesthood of all believers, this is all their heritage. And, even though Unitarian Universalism has become much more than the liberal Christian denominations we started as, this is also our 2000 year heritage. This is the theological basis of our covenantal ecclesiology: that church is people coming together in mutual love and working out how they will stand together in the mysteries of life, the universe, and eternity in service of the higher good.

Would you suspect that the first day I stepped into a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I shook the same way I shook the evening I got my first email. Being the introvert I am, I slipped in two minutes after the start of the service so no one could talk to me, and sat in the back row, right by the door so I could leave as soon as the service ended. And then I started looking for any reason not to like it. Any reason to say, "These people couldn't possibly understand me. They aren't going to accept me. They aren't going to be able to handle the truths I believe in. They aren't going to like my questions or anyone else's. And I'm even not going to like the words in the hymnal!" Oh, the list went on. I was completely prepared to be disappointed so that I would have a reason not to make myself vulnerable to the possibility of trusting a church. And it didn't happen. In the very first words of welcome, it didn't happen. In the hymns, it didn't happen. In the reading and prayers it didn't happen. In the sermon it didn't happen, and by the time we reached the closing words, I was weeping because I had never felt so comfortable in a church and the comfort both soothed me and scared the living daylights out of me because it exposed this deep unmet need of being in community, of being with and trusting people who were oriented to something much larger than ourselves that was not a God I could never obey, but a spirit of life and love that invited me in to the dance of life. That spirit is our Messiah, the one that we manifest in our being when we seek to fulfill the bonds of mutual love with one another and to live in harmony with our world.

I came to church because I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. I was tired of being disillusioned with life. My life was being chipped away by things that were draining my core life energy. Unhealthy relationships. Bad choices. Selfishness. Depression. To use the language in our reading by Alice Blair Wesley, I was focused on Caesar, seeing only Caesar, and Caesar felt powerful and invasive. All the things I had made into false gods that I thought could sustain me had been crucified, one by one, until it felt like there was nothing left to hang on to. I have no idea what possessed me to think that my pain could be brought into a church. Perhaps it is because that 2000 year ecclesiology was embedded into my DNA, telling me that in these strange institutions which millions of people of have poured their hearts into over the last 2000 years, we can find our salvation, we can recover hope for our lives and for the world.

And I have to say, this was no extraordinary church. These were just kind ordinary people. Asking questions like me. Doubting like me. Tired. Wanting to find hope. Wanting to trust the world. Wanting to have their minds and spirits stimulated. Wanting to reclaim beauty and truth. Looking for friendship. Wanting a connection with the divine, however they understood it. Wanting that for their children. Kind

ordinary people who had experienced their share of disagreements and chose to continue walking together in the bonds of mutual love. Dare I say that every one of us had probably watched the false gods we'd created dashed by Caesar, and we came to church looking for something real, something trustworthy to hold on to.

These kind ordinary people let me slip out the back door as the minister read the closing words. These kind ordinary people shook my hand when I came back the next week, two minutes early this time. And when I came back the third Sunday, their kind ordinary minister said to me, "I know you. You keep coming back and every time I'm glad you're here. See you next week." And in my busy over-filled and spiritually devoid life I started to carve out a place for this ordinary church.

I had no idea that a 2000 year ecclesiology was grounding us in an embrace of mutual love. Unitarian Universalism feels so modern sometimes that we forget we have a rich history extending back thousands of years. The ecclesiology of Unitarian Universalism looks at our Christian heritage and sees in it the overarching truth that we are equals, that we should aim to treat each other in a way that acknowledges the sacredness in each human heart. We should listen to each other as if every word contains possibilities of the revelation. And when we fail, we can see grace in those who come back to the table and try again. And for those who do not, we can only trust that grace will come to them in other ways. We are being held by an ecclesiology that says we are the ones who build the kingdom of heaven on earth. Not a distant Messiah, for even those of us who believe in the Messiah will, like those early Christians, say that the Messiah is made real through us and that we become the message in our words and in our actions. We become Messiahs to each other and witness to each other that we can always be resurrected. There is always hope for us and always hope for our hurting world.

So on this morning, we sit in this ordinary church, with ordinary people, with our ordinary children listening to this ordinary minister. We've come from our ordinary lives to be together this morning, to strengthen ourselves and each other with kindness for the journeys of our lives. For some of you, this is what you've done for years. For others, you are just beginning to explore if this might be a spiritual home for you. What brought you here? You could have done any number of things this ordinary morning. And yet here you are, giving us the gift of your precious time. And so I close with the words of Alice Blair Wesley:

"Be gathered into communities of love. Find, together, what is more meaningful, more loving, more worthy of your attention, and be empowered in devotion to these things. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened to you. The truth will make you free."

May it be so.



Reading

Excerpts from "Saving Paradise" by Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashimi Brock:

We can come to know the world as paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth...Knowing that paradise is here and now is a gift that comes to those who practice the ethics of paradise. This way of living is not Utopian. It does not spring simply from the imagination of a better world but from a profound embrace of this world. It does not begin with knowledge or hope. It begins with love.

To know paradise in this life is to enter a multidimensional spiritual-material reality...Paradise is simultaneously this earth, a beautiful, luminous creation, and the realm of the dead, which is connected to the living but is separated by a thin veil through which the dead can pass to accompany, bless, or guide the living. Paradise is human life restored to its divinely infused dignity and capacity, and it is a place of struggle with evil and injustice, requiring the development of wisdom, love, nonviolence, and responsible uses of power. Paradise can be experienced as spiritual illumination of the heart, mind, and senses felt in moments of religious ecstasy, and it can be known in ordinary life lived with reverence and responsibility. Paradise is not a place free from suffering or conflict, but it is a place in which Spirit is present and love is possible.

Entering paradise in this life is not an individual achievement but is the gift of communities that train perception and teach ethical grace. Paradise provides deep reservoirs for resistance and joy. It calls us to embrace life's aching tragedies and persistent beauties, to labor for justice and peace, to honor one another's dignity, and to root our lives in the soil of this good and difficult earth.

Sermon

Depending on your political leanings, Blanca Alvarez is either an illegal alien or an undocumented worker. And if you're unsure about the difference, bear with me. It will become clear.

Like so many Mexicans, Blanca saw no chance for a decent life where she lived. She wanted more than the cycle of poverty that her family was stuck in. She wanted to work and have something to show for it. She wanted an education. Most of all, she wanted that for the family she planned on having. She was determined to leave Mexico. But, like most poor people, she wasn't educated, didn't have a trade, and didn't have the money. The only way she saw to escape was to enter the U.S. illegally. So, this young woman scrounged together all the money she had and found a coyote, someone who makes their lives smuggling people across the border. When they got close to the border, the coyote told her and the others to take off their shoes so that the dogs had less of a chance of hearing them. He had one whistle for ducking and one for running. When he used the duck whistle, Blanca huddled close to the ground. When he used the run whistle, she ran across the stones in her bare feet. By the time she made it across the border, her skin had been bitten raw by insects and her feet were bleeding profusely, but she was there, or should I say, here, and ready to start her new life.

Regardless of your view of illegal immigration, it is hard not to see the human reality behind what has fuelled it for so long: the universal need for a meaningful life, a life with hope and possibility, where your children might have the luxury to ask the question, "What do I want for my life?" because they can actually look farther than the next meal. Those universal needs are what brought every one of our ancestors, with the exception of those who are Native American, to this continent.



Some would say that this sense of meaningfulness and hope is what this country is all about. It is part of the American dream, the hope of a perfected union. But truth be told, even the concept of the American dream is based on a story that is much bigger and much older than this particular nation. The foundation of western culture is based on the mythical concept of the promised land – a land flowing with milk and honey, where the pastures are green, peace is at hand, and justice and mercy reign. In the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures Adam and Eve get thrown out of that Garden of Eden into a life of hardship. The rest of history is about getting back to Eden. From the Jews fleeing Egypt to find their promised land, to the teaching of Jesus that the promised land was at hand by living out his message, to the creation of the American dream of a perfect union, all that has been about getting back into that Garden, of finding our way back into paradise, into a perfect union with god or humanity or all that is. Back into that state of perfection where there is no pain and suffering, no loss, no hardship. Instead, we live primarily in joy, love, and possibility because all has been reconciled.

Every religion, including this one, plays with the concept of utopia, of what a perfect world would look like and how that might happen. That is eschatology - a theology of a better time that involves bringing together all that has been torn apart, all that has caused suffering in the world. Every religion has sought to make sense of the fact that the world is a difficult place to live. There is evil. There is loss. Bad things happen, often in ways that don't make sense. We seem to need reassurance that somewhere, somehow, some time, the pain and unfairness that is so often part of living comes to an end.

Let's take Buddhism for example. The Buddha dedicated his life to finding the way to end suffering. His answer was to relinquish all desire. To be attached to this world and anything in it, is to suffer. In Buddhism, the human soul reincarnates over and over again, each time perfecting a little bit more the discipline of non-attachment. When a human being has finally reached that state of complete and perfect detachment, they will no longer have to come back here. Their spirit will be completely absorbed into that great eternal oneness called Nirvana. That is Buddhism's paradise. To use Christian terminology, that is Buddhism's Eden.

Many of you may have grown up with a very different eschatology. Life is a test and you only get to do it once. You have to believe the right things and do the right things. At the end of all time, those who are saved will be taken into a reconstructed Garden of Eden, the Kingdom of Heaven, and those who are not will descend into hell. This eschatology or some version of it is most common in conservative forms of Christianity in both Catholicism and Protestantism. If you grew up in one of these denominations you were probably exposed to it in some form.

Liberal Christianity has quite a different eschatology. The God of liberal Christianity is less about judgment and more about benevolent and forgiving love. This God is rooting for you and doing its best to walk with you on your journey. Getting back to the Garden is less about punishment and exclusion for those who don't get there, and more about reconciliation with all of life. When liberal Christianity talks about an end time, and truth be told, it's not a major focus, the general assumption is that you and everyone else is taken home into the arms of God because God could not, in all her loving nature, let anyone slip away. There is no true Garden of Eden unless everyone is in it.

There are two big questions in eschatology. Where are we going? And, who is going with us? How a person answers those questions is going to say a lot about how they view themselves, other people, and their world.

Let me give you an example. There are strong connections between an exclusive eschatology and a hard position on illegal immigration. From what I've seen, those more likely to demonize Blanca Alvarez are those who have an eschatology that says it is perfectly alright for people to be left out of the Garden of Eden. It is perfectly alright to dehumanize them, see them as unworthy, and see them as less than us.



Those with a liberal inclusive eschatology are likely to have a different approach. We are all children of God, with inherent worth and dignity, even undocumented workers like Blanca Alvarez. Yes, she may have broken the law, but she is still a human being with hopes and desires deserving of basic respect. Who can be defined only by the boundaries they have crossed? If we judge someone's worth only by the law they have broken, we have made ourselves into gods of judgment, the kind of god that would keep some out of the promised land and call that justice.

There is a saying that we become like the gods we worship. How significant that many of those with a restrictive eschatology advocate simply rounding up the perceived danger and shipping it off. How equally significant that those with an inclusive no one left behind eschatology are more likely to advocate immigration reform.

How often do we think that theology is only something done by distant professors in their ivy-league towers? That it's mostly about words and abstract concepts? Theology is flesh and blood with real life consequences. Our eschatologies influence everything we do – how we raise our children, how we understand the differing roles of men and women, how we view marriage and family, how we are employers and employees, who we go to war with and who gets invited to the negotiation table, and who we support in our bailout packages. Our eschatologies will tell us who counts and who doesn't, who is considered in and who is considered out.

Unitarian Universalism has a very unique way of engaging the whole concept of eschatology. The root of our eschatology is in that liberal Christian version I've already told you about, the no-one-left-behind eschatology. That is our heritage. But we're no longer just a Christian church, we are a church of diverse theologies and so our eschatology has evolved and become something that is uniquely ours, that distinguishes us from other religions.

Truth be told, most of us could care less about the end times! We have no idea when that's going to be and what it's going to mean. There is nothing useful about focusing on something we can't know and can't control. But we still have the universal human need for some reassurance, some hope, that all the evils we see and experience in the world and in ourselves have some way of being reconciled. So we have our own answers for how that might happen.

We look at paradise less as a reward that waits for us in some future time, and more as a vision of how things should be on this earth. The promise of paradise is here. The Garden of Eden is not an escape from a troubled world, it is a radical engagement with the world because for all we know, this may be it. We may be going into an afterlife, and many Unitarian Universalists believe in an afterlife, me included, but you really can't know for sure. Our eschatology mirrors those famous lyrics by Crosby, Stills and Nash, "If you can't love the one you want, love the one you're with." Well, this world is what we're with and this is the location of our paradise. Our eschatology is profoundly intertwined with social justice. Where is the brokenness in our world now? Who is hurting now? How are we separating ourselves from the cycle of life? How can we be participants and agents in reconciliation? We're not worried about who's going to be left behind in some mythical end time. That just distracts us from the really important question: Who's getting left behind now?

Unitarian Universalism's eschatology proclaims that we are all in this together, one human family and there is no Garden of Eden if some are excluded. Poverty, war, discrimination, environmental destruction – these are the enemies of the Garden of Eden. Our sacred work is to make the oneness we believe in as real as possible. We have to make sure we're not just saying it, but that we're doing it, that we actually treat the people in our lives as if we are one human family. That we actually make lifestyle choices that affirm and promote that oneness and teach this to our children. This is why Unitarian Universalism is really big on building self-awareness so that we can make more responsible choices, thus doing our part in reclaiming paradise. One of the reasons Unitarian Universalism offers programs like Our Whole Lives, which teaches kids comprehensive sex education, Welcoming Congregation, which is a consciousness raising program focusing on sexual minorities, and Journey to Wholeness



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which builds awareness of how racism works, is because we know that it is so easy to fall into old patterns, where we act as if paradise is only for us, or that we have responsibility only for getting ourselves and people like us into it. To use the words of Rebecca Parker and Rita Brock, our call is to ordinary life lived with reverence and responsibility.

Our eschatology asks of us to live as if paradise were now and that tells us that we are the tools of the spirit who constantly bring it into being. It is the warming of our hearts, of our forgiveness and grace, and the opening of our hands that is the sacred key to opening the gates of Eden.

Today, this church is beginning a very important process. We are kindling our flame, asking the questions, who are we, where are we going, and who are we here for. These are eschatological questions asking for eschatological answers. We are engaging our theology, asking ourselves what we're going to do with our little piece of the Garden of Eden. I welcome all of you, no matter how long you've been with us, to be a part of this process. Eden isn't created only by a select few. It is created by all and for all.

May it be so.



Reading

“Evil and the Examined Life,” from *Unspeakable: Facing Up To the Challenge of Evil*, by Os Guinness

“Where was God when the towers fell?” The ABC reporter’s question to me, only two days after the horrific slaughter of the innocent thousands in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, went straight for the jugular, and it was meant to.

With television making the atrocity a local event for untold millions around the world, questions like that must have been asked in countless ways that day – sometimes with heartbreak, sometimes with anger, and sometimes with mute incomprehension. But the concern was surely the same. The deadly terrorist strike laid bare the two deepest issues of human life: the raw evil of the inhumanity of humanity and the agonizing question of the place of God in human suffering.

These two issues lie at the heart of our human existence. Each requires the other for an adequate response, and both are surrounded by a dangerous ignorance and confusion today. The first can be expressed, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” And the second: “What does it say of us as human beings that the worst atrocities on planet earth are done by our own species – in other words, by people like us?”

These issues and questions are far older and have far wider application than the events of September 11. While thousands died at Ground Zero, thousands of others across New York and hundreds of thousands of others across the world also died that day – of cancer, stroke, hunger, accidents, murder, AIDS, suicide, and for many other tragic reasons, not to mention old age.

While the televised attack on two of the world’s most famous buildings was shockingly extraordinary ... far more people in the world suffer today under the heel of grinding evils that are numbingly ordinary and will never make the newspaper headlines. And, countless human beings live in abject daily fear of evil and the brutal people who abuse power and oppress them. For much of the world, evil is – and always has been – a daily fact of life.

Facing up to human evil is disturbing. Some forms of evil strike us dumb with fear. Others leave us speechless. Finding the words to come to terms with the unspeakable is crucial to facing up to it and to overcoming the fear that is so widespread in today’s world. But exploring the challenge of evil need not be depressing; indeed, it may even be bracing, even inspiring. We [can] encounter what has finally made the difference for countless people weighed down by evil: the contrasting mystery of goodness, which outweighs even the mystery of evil.

Evil could happen anywhere. Equally certainly, it does not happen everywhere. What we must make certain is that it does not happen wherever we each call “here.”

Sermon

You’ve probably all seen some version of this advertisement on tv. A woman with modestly styled hair, dressed in spotless light coloured casuals stands in her large sunny kitchen, one hand holding a mop, the other a cleaning product. Suddenly the camera pans into her kitchen floor, which is alive with dark menacing beings, identified as grim, dirt, germs and bacteria. But, her cleaning product is more than prepared for the task. In a dramatic flourish, all that impurity is washed away. The ad ends with a camera shot of the woman’s fresh, perspiration free face, the product clearly displayed next to her wide perfect smile.

How many of you look like that when you’re washing your kitchen floor! My mother would never consider wearing freshly washed pants to clean her house. Even my grandmother, who scrubbed the corners of her kitchen floor with a tooth brush, sweat when cleaning. But the ads obviously appeal to something in us because I don’t think they’ve changed much in 60 plus years, except that more of the housewives are women of color. Whether the product is meant to clean floors, kitchen counters, stovetops, sinks, toilets, bathtubs, carpets, or laundry, you can pretty much depend on the formula. The impurity is defined as an invader encroaching into the sanctity of your home. The product is going to save your home, cleansing it of this dangerous foreign impurity. The result is that moral order is restored and you and your family are safe from danger once more.

It is said by many that our society has become obsessed with purity. There are so many ways for us to disinfect our bodies, our clothing, our homes. And yet, we are discovering the shadow side of that obsession. Children with dangerously weak immune systems, diseases that manifest years later, allergies and food intolerances, not to mention the environmental impact of all these cleaning products and their containers. We’re learning that a little bit of dirt may not be all that bad. In fact, it may be



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absolutely necessary for our health. Some supplements now even contain the enzymes found in soil because some believe we need them for intestinal balance.

We're talking about soteriology today. Soteriology is the theology of salvation, or in plain English, the evil we think we need to be saved from and how we go about saving ourselves from it. Every religion has its own soteriology. Every society and culture has a soteriology, it's own way of defining evil and protecting yourself from evil. Our society's obsession with cleanliness and purity is a form of soteriology. We have identified an enemy and created a system to eliminate it, all with the goal of returning to some kind of harmony.

But clearly soteriologies are tricky things, because it's easy to get off track or to get carried away. Your attempt to protect yourself from evil as you understand it can become evil itself and then you are part of the problem rather than part of the solution. And worse yet, as in the case of our obsession with cleanliness, you may even become more vulnerable to what you were trying to protect yourself from.

Another soteriology that many Americans believe has gone off track is the soteriology of national security. After 9/11, the enemy seemed pretty clear, and a clear path to destroy it was engaged. The problem is that in their zealotry to stamp out the threat of terrorism, our leaders stepped outside of the constitution, outside of the Geneva Conventions regarding torture, and further destabilized the Middle East. Not only has this country become the perpetrator of human rights violations, but some say we have in fact, jeopardized our national security itself. So there are those who argue that we have joined evil in some way, and made ourselves more vulnerable to evil.

Not all soteriologies get off track. In fact, there are some pretty good ones out there. It's just that the ones that are unhealthy tend to get a lot more attention. For some reason, which would be a whole sermon in itself, we tend to give brokenness more attention than health. There's no doubt that there is evil in the world. There is danger. There are things we need to protect ourselves and our children from. We all need a soteriological roof over our heads. But we have to do it responsibly. We have to always keep in mind that we live in an interdependent web of life and every decision we make has consequences for someone else. This is as true for decisions we make in our personal lives as it is for decisions we make nationally and globally.

Both Unitarianism and Universalism came into existence in this country by challenging soteriologies that were out of control and seemed to be hurting rather than helping human beings to live moral interconnected lives. Unitarianism responded to a soteriology that said we were all depraved and sinful and that the only way to save ourselves from evil was to throw ourselves at the mercy of God. Universalism responded to a soteriology that said God was a stern judge ready to punish all wrongdoing and that the only way to save ourselves was, again, to throw ourselves at his mercy.

Both Unitarianism and Universalism saw this as fear-based and shame-based religion that actually stood in the way of living religiously. Good does not come out of fear. Good does not come out of shame. In fact, people filled with fear and shame are more likely to be vulnerable to evil and to do evil themselves because fear and shame create moral weakness and the inability to know right from wrong. Fear and shame stand in the way of reasoned and careful thinking. They blind us to the possibilities in our lives. They hold us back from trust and love and hope. Any of you who carry fear and shame and struggle with fear and shame will know the truth of this from what you have experienced in your darkest moments.

Fighting evil using fear and shame just creates more evil. Which is why breaking those Geneva Conventions on torture has left us more vulnerable. Terrorism is based on the tools of fear and shame, and when we took those tools as our own, we continued the cycle and became part of the problem.

Our Unitarian and Universalist foremothers and forefathers sought to take the poison of fear and shame out of religion, Unitarianism by saying we didn't have to fear ourselves, and Universalism by saying we didn't need to fear God. Even as Unitarianism and Universalism have evolved in the last two hundred years, even when they merged in 1961, and even as we moved from a purely Christian basis to a theologically diverse religious fabric, this has remained the basis of our soteriology. We are saved from evil and from doing evil by cultivating our god-given goodness and by choosing love and trust over shame and fear. Whether we call that larger love and trust God, or the spirit of life, the essence of humanity, or the mystery of an ever-expanding universe, this is our soteriology.

Unitarian Universalist soteriology is not about being helpless to our own nature or about being helpless before a higher power. Our soteriology is about human possibility and human hope. It is about human responsibility. Our Savior is not some larger than life person transformed into a god. We are the hearts and hands of the holy and thus we are each other's saviors. It is up to us and no one else to save this world and its people from the powers of evil.



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This is a pretty powerful soteriology and one that distinguishes us from most of the religions that surround us. For hundreds of thousands of people in the last two hundred years, this soteriology has freed them from shame and fear. It has freed them into a this-worldly salvation where they were free to do good simply for the sake of doing good, not because of some promised reward in an afterlife or because of the threat of eternal punishment.

But remember, soteriologies can get dangerously off-track. Even ours.

One of the things that really bugs me about those cleaning commercials, is that evil is out there. It is nasty, dirty, inhuman, foreign. The woman cleaning her kitchen has no dirt under her fingernails, no grime on her freshly pressed pants, not a drop of sweat on her brow. She is completely pure, and completely unreal.

I'm sure that many of you heard on the news in the past weeks that writer John Updike died recently. Did you know that his first wife was the daughter of a Unitarian Universalist minister. He spent many Sundays in a Unitarian Universalist pew, but he never became a Unitarian because he thought we didn't take evil seriously enough. Our theology focused so much on goodness, on our goodness, God's goodness, the world's goodness, that we really weren't looking seriously at our own potential for evil or reckoning with the truth of how serious and real and embedded evil is in our lives. We had turned away from atonement and sin and forgiveness in favor of self-congratulation. We may have turned away from a superhuman god who could save us, but we turned ourselves into those superhumans. In our well-intentioned pursuit of freeing people from the woundings of a misguided Christianity, we ended up becoming an unfocused, feel-good, fluffy kind of buffet-style religion, kind of like that blissful woman in the advertisement, defining evil as something completely alien to who we are. Our soteriology, where we save the world with our own goodness, separated us from a true reckoning of our part in systems of evil.

Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker says this is true not only of Unitarian Universalism, it is endemic to western culture. We want to be the ones who are pure, without blemish, without blame for any of the bad things that happen in the world. This is why those cleaning ads still work 60 years later. This is why there was such moral outrage when some suggested that we examine American foreign policy to understand the context of 9/11. Evil had to be an us and a them, with us clearly on the right side.

My theory is that our fear of Unitarian Universalism's Christian heritage causes us to see things in a similar black and white way. We are so afraid of those shame and fear based religions that wounded so many of us that we threw out the truthful things about evil, atonement, and sin. Remember, fear and shame are the tools of evil. Has our fear of this heritage made us brazen and prideful, causing us to throw away things that we need to continue our search for wholeness?

Evil is not something that is out there. Evil is right here. It is in you. It is in me. It is in this sanctuary. It has the potential to emerge in our most precious relationships. We need to be saved every single day because evil is like a poison that leaches into the ground water from which we all drink. Especially in this global economy, no one is pure. No one is without blame. So, our salvation cannot be about an idealistic retreat into goodness. Our salvation is about a loving daily engagement with the struggle that goes on inside each of us to choose trust and love over fear and shame. Our salvation is about constantly forgiving each other, ourselves and perhaps even God for when we go off track. It's about rejoicing with and for each other for the many ways we try to heal. It's about having faith in humanity's unquenchable thirst to get back up and keep living. Our salvation is about honoring each other for our sincere attempts to bring beauty and justice to this life. Our salvation is about celebrating the dirt under our fingernails, and the grime that works itself into the knees of our once perfectly clean pants.

We need a theology of salvation that can hold all the complexities of that interdependent web of all existence, of which every single one of us is a part. It refuses to define us solely by our failings. It holds us back from taking our goodness for granted.

This is what I wish for myself, for each one of you, for this church, and for this precious world we live in and serve.

Amen and blessed be.



Reading

Excerpt from "A New Religious America," a sermon preached by Thomas Nickelson, May 18, 2003

Living on the border... has become ... a powerful metaphor of hope for the future. Borders have become defining in our lives. At the same time, people and groups who live at the borders have a special role to play. They can be the gatekeepers, the sergeants at arms, the border guards, but they also can be the bridge makers, the reconcilers, the weavers, the ones who are easing us into a new world beyond the old pressures of nationalism, religious parochialism, racial division, and class structures.

We are no longer a Christian nation. We are no longer a Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish nation. We are religiously diverse. Most of the religions of the world are growing here. This is work that changes everyone's view of our nation and of the world. We have no choice to choose this new future or refuse it. It's here ... It is in every city and in many towns. It is exciting, painful, challenging, filled with risks and possibilities. Some love it, some hate it; and I use the word hate advisedly. The hate of religious diversity in the country is a very tender point in our public life. We might make it one day to a healthy pluralism and we might not, but there is only one course ahead and that is to do the best we can with the new religious diversity.

It has not been easy for immigrants coming into America and establishing their religious practices. Religious freedom here guarantees people of all religious traditions the right of assembly, belief, and practice, but public attitudes are often a different story of suspicion, hostility, and exclusion. If we are willing to live at the religious borders in this country, even in this city, we will learn quickly what immigrants have had to endure to claim their rights. Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists have gathered their communities in this country. They have built temples and mosques and gurdwaras, but they still live in fear of popular reaction, and for good reason.

For us Unitarian Universalists, there is a very clear message here.... Diversity is not pluralism. Religious diversity is a given ... but, we are still far from true pluralism, ... Diversity is the sheer variety of religious groups and practices in our culture. It is one thing to tolerate them; it is quite another to embrace them. Tolerating diversity is ... very passive and it doesn't really change anything. It's like going swimming but sitting on the beach. Embracing diversity is active and intentional. It means jumping in. Embracing pluralism is positive, an expectation that diversity will strengthen the future. ... Diversity is a given. Pluralism ... has to be created. (Pause)

Sermon

There's a story that I read some time ago that I just can't shake. I don't know if the story is literally true, and yet there is most definitely truth in it. It is a story of a particular people. But, it also has a universal meaning, and so in that spirit I share it with you.

"About a century or two ago, the Pope decided that all the Jews had to leave Rome. Naturally there was a big uproar from the Jewish community. So the Pope made a deal. He would have a religious debate with a member of the Jewish community. If the Jew won, the Jews could stay. If the Pope won, the Jews would leave.



The Jews looked for a champion to defend their faith, but no one volunteered. It was too risky. Finally, an old man named Moishe who spent his life sweeping up after people, offered to do it, saying that his poverty and age meant he had less to lose. He asked only for one condition, that neither side be allowed to talk. The Pope agreed.

On the day of the debate, Moishe and the Pope sat opposite each other for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. Moishe raised one finger. The Pope waved his fingers in a circle around his head. Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat. The Pope pulled out a wafer and a glass of wine. Moishe pulled out an apple. The Pope stood up and said, "I give up. This man is too good. The Jews can stay."

The cardinals were all around the Pope asking him what happened. The Pope said, "First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger, to remind me that there was still one God common to both our religions. Then I waved my fingers around me to show him, that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground, showing that God was also right here with us. I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that God absolves us from our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything. What could I do?"

Meanwhile, the Jewish community had crowded around Moishe, amazed that this uneducated man had done what all their scholars had insisted was impossible! "What happened?" they asked.

"Well," said Moishe, "first he said to me that the Jews had three days to get out of here. I told him that not one of us was leaving. Then he told me that this whole city would be cleared of Jews. I let him know that we were staying right here. And then, I'm not sure what happened! He took out his lunch and I took out mine."

So often we think we're on the same page, that we're speaking the same language, and yet we are in completely different universes, with different understandings, different priorities, different hopes, fears and desires. How often do our attempts to communicate with each other, even within the same culture, end up in places none of us ever expected. Then it's not hard to imagine how challenging it is to communicate across cultures, not to mention when there is a significant difference in power between the people doing the communicating. It's pretty hard to communicate effectively when you don't feel on equal ground.

Far too often, the differences between us have lead to violence. Countless lives have been lost or uprooted because difference is seen as dangerous. Countless souls have been broken because fear of difference is used to dehumanize and control the one who is seen as different.

The story of Moishe and the Pope is a great example of missiology, a theological term that means the way a religion looks at the world around it. How do you view those who are different from you? In this case, the Pope had an exclusive missiology, which saw difference as bad and dangerous. This is the kind of missiology that will say there is only one truth and we have it. You've probably encountered that missiology because it's all around us. This missiology made it alright to send the Jews away. But Moishe's answers, in the Pope's mind at least, challenged his exclusive missiology, and opened him up to a more inclusive missiology, where he saw the connections between them. It became more difficult for him to dehumanize the Jewish community and to write it off.



Unitarianism and Universalism have a similar story. In both, our foremothers and forefathers have experienced persecution from those with more exclusive missiologies, and that experience shaped the kind of missiology we created and in fact, still practice today. And in both cases, our missiology has changed those around us because it has offered a different way of looking at the world.

In the early 1500s, a Spanish scholar named Michael Servetus studied the Scriptures in their original languages and found no proof of the doctrine of the Trinity. He came to the conclusion that the church's position that you had to go through Jesus to get to God was flawed. The church was confusing Jesus with his message. He was not the message. He was the messenger, sent from a loving God to offer humanity a renewed path to right living. When Servetus published *On the Errors of the Trinity*, many were deeply influenced by his ideas. The Catholic Church was not so impressed. Neither was the emerging Protestant Church. Both put a bounty on his head and when John Calvin, a leading Protestant reformer, managed to have him arrested, Servetus was burned at the stake, a copy of his book tied to his ankle. But his Unitarian ideas did not burn away. They spread through Europe, gaining traction especially in Poland and Romania. In the 1700s the ideas had spread to Britain, and then from Britain they came to North America. And at every stage in their history, the expansive ideas of Unitarianism were met by exclusive missiologies that saw them as dangerously threatening.

When Unitarian ideas of God and Jesus and humanity emerged in the liberal wing of the Congregationalist Church of New England in the late 1700s, sparks flew. Conservative Congregationalists with their exclusive missiologies worked overtime to suppress these new ideas and the liberals soon faced the painful reality that they had been turfed out of the churches they loved. They were going to have to form a new Christian denomination – Unitarianism.

The experience of that exclusion left a painful but powerful mark on them and has resulted in a missiology that is uniquely Unitarian and seems to respond particularly well to others who have faced exclusion in their churches of origin. Since the beginning, we have committed to an inclusive missiology, that values connecting with others over separating from them, that assumes there is a truth out there that we see but partially. We always look for the connections, for the points of agreement and understanding. You can see this missiological thread throughout our whole history.

For example, our missiology held us together in the first in-house theological battle that erupted in 1838. Ralph Waldo Emerson, after whom this church is named, challenged the centrality of the Bible. He said that not only didn't you need Jesus to get to God, you didn't need the Bible either. Both Jesus and the Bible were but one way to understand God, but you could easily approach God through other ways, like nature. You could have a direct connection to transcendence. There were some in the Unitarian church who found these ideas totally threatening and wanted to ask them to leave. And yet, somehow they couldn't bring themselves to do it. They remembered what it had been like to be rejected. They understood from their own experience that challenge and reform was a sign that you loved your church, not that you wanted to bring it down. And so, with great difficulty but firm commitment, they found a way to make the table bigger so that there was room for this new diversity. That's how our missiology works. You always look for what there is for you to learn.

The same thing can be seen in the next theological controversy, when humanism entered Unitarianism in the early 1900s. The humanists said that not only didn't you need Jesus, not only didn't you need the Bible, you didn't even need God to connect to the sacred and to live an ethical life. Living itself, right here on this earth, was a sacred thing. There were some theists who wished to expel the humanists, arguing that they were going to poison Unitarianism. And yet, somehow they couldn't bring themselves to do it. Even though all the Unitarians who had experienced the expulsion first hand were now dead, there was a strong institutional memory that inclusion and open mindedness is what Unitarianism has been about from its earliest days and they were not going to turn against that missiological tradition. So by the early 1900s we had Christian Unitarians who still held Jesus and the



Christian Bible as central aspects of their faith practice, Deist Unitarians who found less meaning in Jesus and the Bible but still had a strong connection to God, and Humanist Unitarians, who had no need for Jesus, the Bible or God, and looked into human consciousness for their eternal truths.

Now to be honest, it continued to be difficult for each of these groups not to think that they were the true Unitarians. Even to this day, we still have people who will see their own kind of Unitarian Universalism as more real and feel threatened by the diversity in our churches. Every time a new kind of diversity comes into our doors, there will be those who fear we are losing our church. But our missiology keeps pulling us back to the table. Basically, this is the truth of it. Our inclusive missiology is what welcomed every single one of you into this church, and it is now your inheritance and it is then up to you to bestow that inclusive missiology to those who come after you, even, and perhaps especially, when their particular theology makes you uncomfortable. And our missiology should make us healthily uncomfortable when we start to get exclusive. When we start thinking that we have a truer and more right way that makes us better than others. Or when we feel tempted to shut out anything that changes the church we fell in love with in the first place.

We live in a religiously conservative part of this country and we are frequently judged and often our children are judged, by people who go to churches with exclusive missiologies that say there is only one right and true way. We are experiencing, sometimes daily, what Unitarians have been experiencing for hundreds of years and sometimes it wears you down. When you have the experience of being judged, it's easy to take the hurt and to become hard ourselves and to be distrustful of difference. It's one of the ways we protect ourselves from getting hurt again. But our inclusive missiology shouldn't let us get away with that for long. If our response to judgment is to become hard ourselves, then we have joined the oppression and become oppressors. We have become the bearers of an exclusive missiology. If we really believe that there are many paths to truth, then we have to keep our eyes open to see the similarities even and perhaps especially with those who judge us.

Now some people make the mistake of thinking that our inclusive missiology means that anything goes, that you can believe anything you want. But that's simply not true. If your beliefs separate you from others, if your beliefs harden your heart, if your beliefs allow you to turn away from suffering and to resist taking on responsibilities that are yours, then you've misused our inclusive missiology. This is not a religion for the faint of heart. Cultivating the kind of awareness it takes to keep an open heart and mind is a discipline, a life long discipline. To the use the words of our reading, "It is exciting, painful, challenging, and filled with risks and possibilities." It means getting off the beach and into the water.

But it is so worth it because like all aspects of Unitarian Universalist theology, our missiology when lived faithfully is one part of the path to freedom, one part of the path to wholeness and beauty and sense of meaning and purpose. Our missiology, like all parts of our theology, is about claiming new life and being resurrected to ourselves and to the world. Countless lives have been lost or uprooted because difference is seen as dangerous. Countless souls have been broken because fear of difference is used to dehumanize and control the one who is seen as different. Our missiology is about turning the tide so that more and more of our fellow sisters and brothers can live in trust and peace and security.

Who knew that our theology was so powerful and so necessary for our beautiful and hurting world? And did you have any idea of how significant you are as you live it?

Amen and blessed be.



"UU Theology VI: Pneumatology
(The Theology of the Spirit)"
Rev. Krista Taves
April 19, 2009

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

Sermon

I'm sure many of you could tell incredible stories of the crazy things your kids have done to get what they want and still look like they're doing what you told them! I would also hazard a guess that even as adults, we do crazy things to get what we want and still look like we're doing what we think others think we should be doing! All of this involves a dance of the spirit, we're dancing in the paradox between all the different levels of the expectations we have for ourselves and the expectations others hold for us.

In our children's story this morning, Nasreddin and his mother were in that kind of dance. Like all close relationships, whether by blood or choice, they were in a sacred covenant. It was an implicit covenant, meaning its terms were largely unspoken, which is not unusual for many of our deepest relationships where we rely on trust and tradition and intuition to guide us in our faithfulness to one another. As a mother, she was committed to his well-being and nurture, and part of that covenant involved making sure that he had the basics - a roof over his head, food in his belly, and clothes on his back. Just the clothing part was no small covenant to fulfill. Before the days of washing machines and indoor plumbing, women spent huge amounts of time doing laundry. It's no surprise that she was gone more than an hour.

Nasreddin's covenant with his mother was to trust her, to trust that she was looking out for his well-being. So her request that he watch over the house, was asked with the expectation of that trust, that there was a good reason for what she was asking. So even in this most mundane of activities - a mother doing laundry and asking her son to watch the house - there is a sense of mutual obligation to each other and a whole set of assumptions and values at play. We should never underestimate the depth of the sacred in the ordinary.

But of course, there was a catch. There always is in a story that's worth listening to. She didn't come back in an hour as she said she would. Nasreddin waited and waited. He tried to do what she asked of him, but like most children he had a limited ability to manage things like boredom and restlessness. So he tried to find a way to leave the house without breaking his promise. And you have to admit that he came up with a very creative solution even though it didn't work! Nasreddin took literally his mother's order to keep his eye on the door and brought the door with him, ironically leaving the house wide open to all kinds of dangers. But, he tried, and even though he broke the covenant in one way, in another way, he strengthened it through his creative attempt to hold all these different needs in balance.

Our covenants are like that. They are not always easy to honor or they wouldn't be as special and powerful as they are. Living them will ask us to grow and mature. The thing we call life is the creative dance we do as we hold ourselves in the tension and beauty of our covenants. For many Unitarian Universalists, the thing we call spirit is that beautiful, mysterious, often unnamable thing that moves through that dance. For many of us, this is the spirit of life. For some of us, it is the revelation of the holy, or God. For others, it is a mysterious thing for which there is no name and comes about only through human action and choice.

Today is the sixth and final sermon in our series on Unitarian Universalist theology. We started this series back in January, and it's been a long and meaningful road. This series is inspired by the work of Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Ann Parker. Parker says that every religion has the same six components - foundational theology, meaning your understanding of the divine/human relationship; ecclesiology, meaning the theology of church; soteriology, meaning the theology of salvation which is basically how do you understand evil and how do you protect yourself from it; eschatology, meaning the big picture of where we're going and how we're getting there; missiology, the theology of how you look at other religions and beliefs that are different from yours; and finally, pneumatology, your theology of the spirit.

Our foundational theology is based on the concept of the divine and the human in a covenantal relationship based on love and trust. Our ecclesiology is that we are equal and we walk together in the bonds of fellowship. Our soteriology is that evil is not something outside of ourselves but rests within all and happens when we betray our potential for goodness. Our eschatology is that no one is left behind; everyone has a place at the table. Our



missiology is that all religions contain truth and wisdom. When you look at these five pieces of our theology, some pretty powerful values emerge. We believe in inclusivity more than exclusivity. Our faith is more about who comes in than who we keep out. Love is more powerful than hate. Equality is the hallmark of a divine relationship. Interdependence is the universal way.

Each of these theological components is interrelated. It's the love and trust in our foundation that informs the way we do church. Evil is turning away from that love and trust. Eschatology is about offering that liberating love and trust to all and welcoming everyone to the table. Missiology is also about loving and trusting the truth in things we might not understand.

Our pneumatology, our theology of the spirit, informs all of this. So although this may be the last in our sermon series, it is by no means the least. In fact, all the other parts of our theology are about welcoming, nurturing, accessing and manifesting the spirit.

The spirit is the beginning of everything. Where does our consciousness come from? Where do our values come from? Where do we get that spark of knowledge of what is right and wrong? What compels us to create lives of meaning and purpose and service? Where does the love and trust which is our foundation spring from?

Every religion has a theology of the spirit, which is really a theology of how the divine or the sacred moves into the mundane, human, and ordinary because religion is fundamentally about bringing these two realms more closely together. This is why, for instance, the example of Jesus is so powerful in Christianity. He was the complete fusion of both. This is why Mohammad is considered the central prophet of Islam. The divine reached out to him, it crossed the line so that he could be a messenger of God. The Buddha was less about bringing the divine down to earth, and more about helping the earthly reach the divine – that was transcendence. In many Native American spiritualities and in Paganism, the spirits of animals and peoples and gods cross back and forth all the time. Religion gives us a path to navigate these two realms of existence because there is a universal hunger in all humanity to do just that. We want our own lives to be infused with a sense of higher purpose and meaning, a sense of sacredness, godliness, whatever.

Unitarian Universalist pneumatology has a bit of all kinds of pneumatologies in it because we are so open to truth in many forms, but still, the way we do it is uniquely ours. Jesus is powerful for us not because he alone is the fusion of the earthly and the divine. He came to show us the path so that we ourselves can fuse those in our own lives. We see Mohammad and Buddha in the same way. But really, it's more than that. Unitarian Universalism has, in many ways, completely broken down the line between the earthly and the divine so that there are not really two realms at all, but one.

Listen to what Rebecca Ann Parker says about our theology of spirit:

"Our Pneumatology is as close as breath, as fiery as the sun, as transformative as the waters of the river. Our particular perspective on spirit is our emphasis on the immediate presence of the spirit of life in all of life. We don't have a sense of spirit that is outside of us. We do have a very strong sense in our heritage that there is a spirit of life that is in all things, moves in all things, is in us and in others and weaves us all together. You can see this in how the 19th c. Unitarians spoke of God as ever present, as with us, as closer than breath. The way that Emerson spoke of the oversoul, there is this force of soulfulness that is in all things and it breathes through us. It's a sense of God as all permeating, all pervasive, moving in all things, each one of us a manifestation of that spirit that is greater than any one of us."

That is our pneumatology. Direct, unmediated, available to all and in all. And this rings true, regardless of your particular theology, whether you are humanist or deist, or theist, or Christian, Jewish, Pagan, Buddhist, or simply Unitarian Universalist.

The way I see it is that as liberal religious people we are about being conduits for the indwelling of the spirit of life. We are to live the truth that there is so separation between the earthly and the divine. But it's also more than that.



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We are to be conduits for the breaking in of the spirit of life in those places where it has been forgotten or suppressed. As we know so well, a lot of the world still lives as if there is this harsh separation, and lot of the pain and suffering of this world, whether that is a personal pain that each of us experiences individually, or a collective pain that we experience together, comes from that harsh separation, which is a form of violence. It allows us to dehumanize each other, to be unmoved by suffering, to be careless in our words, to be rash in our choices, and sometimes to justify this violence as being moral.

One of the reasons we are so committed to open-mindedness, tolerance, and acceptance, is that these acts of spiritual generosity weaken the power of that violent separation. When you are committed to open-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance, you're really asking yourself to slow down and think and walk in a different way. We've all learned how to walk the path of violence. It takes a lot to unlearn it. We are so easily tempted into the rashness of that place of dividedness. Oh we'll try to tell ourselves that we're living out the covenant, there are so many ways we can fool ourselves, but we'll just end up tearing the door off of its hinges and being even more exposed. No, that's not what we're called to do. We are trying to be undivided people in our own hearts and by our example and by our lives we become part of the healing. We are the spirit made flesh.

Our pneumatology asks us to see the promise of wholeness everywhere. When we allow that promise to govern our lives, that is how we are healed, and it is how we bring healing into this beautiful and sacred world.