

This We Believe

Sermon by UUC Minister Rev. Lori Staubitz UUC October 28, 2007

Knock, Knock

Who's there?

U who?

U who who?....

It's me neighbor, just stopping by to share something I am really excited about; You know that new church I joined, well... Years ago, one of my preaching / homiletics courses at Virginia Union Theological School in Richmond, Virginia was taught by a well known elder, African American Baptist preacher Rev. Miles Jones. He used some very down to earth analogies, stories and images to bring home his teaching points.

I remember him telling us that it was our job as preachers to design our sermons in such a way as to get people from the street onto the porch. Once there, we were to help them through the door. It wasn't enough to just let them in, we needed to help move them in such a way that they would make themselves at home with the message, find comfort in the saving power of gospels. It was our job to help the lost find refuge, to give worshipers something worthy and nourishing to the spirit, so they in turn, could venture out to share the good news of their faith with others.

He cautioned that if we didn't provide enough substance, catchy phrases and well crafted stories would not suffice...If we failed to "bring them home", we would lose people out the back door just as soon as we had opened the front door to invite them in. I think he knew too, how our own spiritual development would suffer....if we, as ministers, neglected to explore the deeper theological foundations of our faith. This image helps me as a minister but I think it is a good image for each and every one of us; new aspirants as well as growing and maturing members of this liberal tradition alike. Most UU's are familiar with the Principals. We hand them out to newcomers and pull them out of our wallets to use as talking points when we have a chance to share some of our values with others.

In 1987 we adopted these 7 principals. They were an effort to hone and clarify values and practices we held in common; it gave us a means of articulating a common faith. We've done this many times throughout our history. As an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister, I have considered our principals more as methods for practice than a faith statement. I have heard it said many times that we are not a creedal people. However, in every age, we need to assess the essence of our faith, as Theodore Parker did in his time...Here in our time we need to be asking that same question: "What is transient and what is permanent?".... We have a saving message we would do well to articulate to a wanting and waiting world.

I have always found the 7 principals useful but not sustaining....they are helpful reminders pointing the way to deeper truths but do not offer much solace in times of personal despair or in the face of present day atrocities, famine, genocide, terrorism and ecological disaster. I have never given them as words of comfort for the grieving, they fall short in addressing real life difficulties and say nothing of love. However, our seven principals do provide an entrée to the liberal journey, a doorway to the interior life of a devoted, radical faith

tradition.

If Rev. Jones were here today, he might point out that these principals are a good way to get people up on the front porch, a helpful introduction...but he would admonish us to go

further ...to answer the door with our message; to invite all into a deeper understanding, to help one another take up residency in this living and abiding faith. In order to do this, he would say, we will first need to ground ourselves in some ancient (the Old Testament was his only choice) scripture or some important religious story that will illuminate our purpose. Unitarian Universalist theology is evidenced in ancient poetry and mysticism, Egyptian Kingships, Hindu and Buddhist teachings, Jewish Scripture, the Christian Gospels, Native teachings, Indigenous, earth centered religions, in scientific discoveries and through the arts. We are unique in the ways we value a wide spectrum of sources to lend authority to our saving message.

So let us turn our thoughts and ears to Isaiah 61- found in our hymnal under Universal Ministry # 571. We are recipients of a Heretical faith tradition....stories of those willing to question and challenge the powers and principalities of their day: The prophets of Israel called for justice in light of the atrocities of their time. Jesus, the model Universalist was affirming, compassionate and stood with the oppressed.

- 1) **1517**- Martin Luther (Germany) of the Protestant Reformation spoke about our direct relationship to the divine and the empowering responsibility of the individual.
- 2) **1531**-Michael Servatus (Spain) "He taunted the Protestant reformer Calvin by publishing the "Errors of the Trinity" in which he promoted the concept of a Unitarian God, or one God instead of the trinity. Servatus is considered a UU martyr since he was burned at the stake with his books.
- 3) **1554**- Castellio (France) - supported religious toleration for all which was known as universalism. He was condemned to death as a heretic.

The first evidence of a U. U. community was in Transylvania after 1550. For a very short, but significant time, Universalism was upheld by King John Sigismund. He was influenced most greatly by his mother the Queen and a trained priest and statesman Francis David, both Unitarians.

In 1587 the first Act of Religious Toleration and Freedom of Conscience was established and upheld. Unitarian Christianity continues today. Many congregations in the United States have established partnerships with churches in that region.

- . • Human Goodness and Free will over the doctrine of original sin,
- . • The unity of God over the doctrine of the Trinity,
- . • Use of reason while interpreting the scriptures

These hallmarks of liberalism over time would become the more conservative, Orthodoxy of New England Traditionalists. Three centuries later four historical figures

rocked this form of liberal Christianity:

Rev. William Ellery Channing for his famous "Baltimore Sermon" given at the ordination of Jared Sparks in 1819 entitled "Unitarian Christianity."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, transcendentalist writer who delivered a radical address to the graduating class June 15, 1838, at Harvard Divinity School.

Rev. Theodore Parker, abolitionist Unitarian minister, delivered a sermon entitled "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" at the ordination of Rev. Charles Shackford on May 19, 1841 in Boston.

In his introduction to "Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism" author Conrad Wright provides insight into how these three leaders laid the foundations for contemporary Liberal Theology.

He wrote: "All three of these addresses represent turning points in the history of American Unitarianism. Emerson cut deeply at the traditional philosophy of Unitarianism so that it was never possible for Unitarians to return to the position that Christianity is based on the single authority of Christ as the unique channel for God's revelation to humanity. Emerson and Parker alike insisted that the religious impulse is primary and universal and that Christianity is one of many expressions of that primary (divine) impulse, deriving authority from congruity of universal truth."

There are many liberal prophets from this period. Struggles with sexism, racism and classism are evident in the ways our history has been handed down to us and are clearly ongoing challenges for us today. It is important to add the Universalist, itinerant country preacher Hosea Ballou to our list of American Prophets this morning, for his message of Universal Salvation is foundational to our gospel of hope.

His treatise on Atonement written in 1805 introduces an image of God as loving father, one who will be reconciled to all his children, over the angry, judging and vengeful god known by many, even to this day. As our first hymn proclaims: religious truth is unfolding, not confined to any one particular event, time, place or tradition.

Who will proclaim our prophetic, saving message today?

Erich Fromm "Finding the Good" - -quote from John Montgomery's book "The Great Pretender: An Examination of God Through Science, Psychology and Philosophy"

Fromm describes "the good" as biophilia; the passionate love of life, of all that is, a desire to foster and nurture growth, whether in a person, plants / ecosystems, ideas of social groups. Those who share this passion look for ways to construct rather than retain, be more rather than have more. She or he is capable of wondering and finds confirmation in the process of creation than comfort in maintaining what is. This is a person who loves the adventure of living more than certainty, looks for continuity and wholeness over the more concrete summation of parts. This is a person who strives to influence through love, reason and example rather than by force, cutting things down or apart...who acknowledges relations over treating others as a means to an end.

What can we say about ourselves here and now, that will be more than a watered down,

mediocre consensus....something that will propel us to move closer to the center of our faith with a firm knowledge and commitment....

Let us tell our story, that we are people with a dynamic, evolving, emergent faith. It is not fixed. It is not static...

We are a people who believe in ongoing revelation, truth, beauty and wisdom unfolding through all times, and places; from all peoples. The spirit of life welling up, in and through each living being. In spite of all our failings, we continue to trust in our potential to do good, to be compassionate, to love and do justice.

In 1819 William Ellery Channing wrote:
"I am a member of a great family of souls"

Perhaps, the essence of our faith is simply this.....

We Believe:

In the beauty and power of each life and the unity of all life. ... here is our home. This is where we belong; each one of us, every living being. Let us help one another feel welcome.

A prophetic vision for "Welcome Home" is put into words by contemporary Ceramic Artist and Feminist Judy Chicago. It comes from her larger work "Dinner Party": And is found in our Hymnal #465 Entitled "And Then"

And then all that has divided us will merge.
And then compassion will be wedded to power
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind

And then both men and women will be gentle
And then both women and men will be strong

And then no person will be subject to another's will
And then all will be rich and free and varied

And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many
And then all will share equally in the Earth's abundance

And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old
And then all will nourish the young

And then all will cherish life's creatures

And then all will live in harmony with each other and the Earth
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.

-Amen