

Association Sunday 2009
Sermon Outline by Norman Horofker

Introduction

We began the service this morning with the image of our tiny blue/green plant and the voice of Kathy Mattea singing “From a Distance”

- From a distance there is harmony
- From a distance we all have enough to eat, no bombs no guns no hungry mouths to feed.
- From a distance, we are instruments marching in a common band,
- From a distance you look like my friend even though we are at war.
- From a distance I can't comprehend what all this war is for.

What I hope to do this morning is to spend some time with you thinking about the “big picture” the view that you can only get “from a distance.”

Today we celebrate Association Sunday with the approximately one thousand congregations like us who voluntarily come together to form the Unitarian Universalist Association. It is an ideal time to step back from our own beloved community at the UU Fellowship of Columbus and look at our connection to the bigger picture.

I have decided to shape this sermon about Association Sunday around some specific religious terms: Ritual, Faith, Spirituality, Relationship and Covenant.

Ritual

Ritual is something that can make some of us a little uncomfortable. The problem is that one of the primary functions of ritual is as a “teaching tool.” Sometimes it is not clear what a ritual is teaching. As UU's we cherish our individual responsibility to accept or reject a teaching, but if it is not perfectly clear what is being taught, we get nervous.

Our little congregation has allowed some rituals to become a part of our lives together and we cherish them for the manner in which they unite us. Some, like our “lighting of the chalice” at the beginning of the service are almost universal in UU congregations and unite us with others who are participating as UU's around the world. That ritual teaches the importance of the fire of commitment and the light of truth and our solidarity with other UUs.

Other rituals are new and are being developed and tested by congregations who are sharing their new experience. The recent adoption of the practice of “giving away the plate” one Sunday each month is something we heard about from other congregations and decided to adopt for ourselves. That ritual teaches us the importance of generosity.

And some of our rituals are truly unique to our congregation. The “toast to life” that we celebrate during each service here at the UU Fellowship of Columbus was originated by our own

Ed Wilson and has become a powerful teaching tool. For example, the words: "...not fixing blame or credit of the outcome of chance" signify that we do not look for a reason or for God's hand behind every misfortune or blessing.

And now, we are participating in a relatively new ritual: "The Celebration of Association Sunday." This is a way for us to teach the importance of our commitment to the covenant we share with Unitarian Universalist congregations across this country.

Faith

Faith is another one of those words that UUs sometimes stumble over. I am greatly influenced by the writing of James Luther Adams, arguably the most respected Unitarian Universalist Theologian of modern time. Adams built his understanding of faith on the work of H. R. Niebuhr and Paul Tillich for the formation of his ideas about faith. Both of these theologians argued that faith is a phenomenon that transcends the narrow Protestant view of religious belief. For them, understanding an individual's faith centers around a person's answers to questions such as: What is the ultimate value and power? To whom am I finally loyal? What am I ultimately concerned about? What gives my life meaning?

Human beings without exception must deal with these questions. There is something in the "gift" of human consciousness that requires that we build a conceptual model of the world into our own unique consciousness in order to make sense of our experience. We could not contemplate the future, the next day or the next hour if we did not have a faith that the universe will unfold in some predictable manner. In this context we can speak of the faith of a Marxist, the faith of a Capitalist, the faith of a Humanist or the faith of an atheist as easily as we can speak about the faith of a Christian. In the words of James Luther Adams:

"The question concerning faith is not; Shall I be a person of faith? The proper question is, rather; Which faith is mine? Or, better; Which faith should be mine? For, whether a person craves prestige, wealth, security, or amusement, whether a person lives for country, for science, for God, or for plunder, that person is demonstrating a faith, is showing that she or he puts confidence in something."¹

Faith determines the way we live. What we do about the homeless, what we do about our health care system, what we do about global warming... etc. Adams argues that we can not escape choosing a faith, nor can we escape the responsibility for the choices that we make. Writing in 1946 he said: "The differences among people do not lie in the fact that some have faith and others do not. They lie only in a difference in faith. The Gestapo put its confidence in obedience to the Fuhrer, in obedience to the call of 'blood and soil.'"²

¹ (Adams 1998, 27)

² (Adams 1998, 24)

We must realize that we all act out of faith and that we must examine that faith for it is the single greatest determinant is shaping who we will become.

We are celebrating this day, the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations. The purpose of the UUA is to help Unitarian Universalists to examine their faith. To help us to examine and modify our faith, so that our faith is not a matter of chance, something we adopted as a default or out of unthinking convenience. Rather Unitarian Universalist faith is intended to be something we hold up to examine and to change as we learn and grow, so that we may become the people we want to be. That is the role of the UUA and that is what we celebrate today.

Spirituality as “Relational Consciousness”

I came across a definition of spirituality that appeals to me. David Hay and Rebecca Nye define spirituality as a four dimensional “relational consciousness” with self, relational consciousness with God, relational consciousness with other people and relational consciousness with the world. Let’s explore this definition for a minute: spirituality as “relational consciousness.” Does your spirituality reflect your relationship to the world, to other people, to God?

According to James Luther Adams, “There is no such thing as a completely isolated being. Human beings are in relationship, and bonding is a characteristic feature of this relationship.”³ Adams is famous for espousing the need for active participation in voluntary associations in order to make democracy function. In his words, “The living democratic society requires the disciplines of discussion and common action for the determination of policy.”⁴ I am proposing this morning that the most important voluntary association you belong to is this Fellowship and that your effectiveness is greatly multiplied by the fact that this Fellowship is affiliated with other UU congregations through the UUA. This voluntary organization belongs at the center of your activities because it is here that you can explore and develop your faith, your model of how the universe works, or should work. Through our voluntary relationship with others in the Unitarian Universalist Association we have a mechanism to multiply our individual voices and realize the full potential of our humanity.

Have a look with me at this satellite picture of the City of Columbus Georgia. Once again we can take the big picture view. All of the things that seem so important to us, our houses and cars and schools and factories and office buildings disappear and become part of something that looks more like a scab or sore on an otherwise beautiful forested landscape. Is there anyone else here, beside me, who sometimes despairs at the small effect that they have had on the world. Even looking at this picture of Columbus I can feel insignificant, for I didn’t build any one of those bridges or buildings or roads. And yet, I am part of a human community that did just that, and could not have done any of it without the small contributions of hundreds of thousands of

³ (Adams 1998, 223)

⁴ (Adams 1998, 193)

people like us. Whether it is through our taxes or through our use of the roads or patronizing of the businesses we, through our associations, make all the difference. Similarly as one small congregation in the Association of Unitarian Universalist Congregations we make the work of our entire denomination possible.

Covenant

Before we discuss covenant, let us return again for a moment to the idea of faith. I noted earlier that we all have a faith and that we live out our lives based on that faith. Many of us are not even aware of our faith or ideology. It is something that we adopted along the way and may have modified in the light of our experience. But as noted earlier, if we are to have some conscious control over our own lives, then we must hold up our faith for examination, evaluation and modification. Unitarian Universalists take this responsibility seriously and we commit one to another to support each other in the development of our personal faith. This commitment is a measure of the seriousness with which we take our responsibility to live up to our own standards. In our faith this commitment takes the form of a covenant. That covenant begins between members of a congregation, like ours, and extends to a covenant between congregations. That covenant between congregations is the basis for the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Our understanding of the word covenant owes a lot to George Mendenhall who postulated that the biblical concept of covenant found its roots in the ancient near eastern convention of suzerain treaties, between a powerful empire and its less powerful vassal state. According to Mendenhall, a covenant had six constituents. First, the covenant contains a preamble describing the past that has led up to the moment of the covenant. Covenants are embedded in a historical understanding of reality. Second, the covenant spells out what has been agreed between the parties. This is more than a contractual statement. These agreements are bound up with an understanding of the very meaning of life and the way in which the individual and the collective are responsible for the consequences. Third, a provision is included that the agreement must be periodically read in public. This confirms the collective nature of the covenant and its quality as a living document. Fourth, the covenant includes a provision that the written covenant will be kept in a sacred shrine. This reinforces the spiritual and religious aspects of the covenant. Fifth, in the covenant, blessings are invoked upon those who loyally maintain the agreement and sixth, curses are invoked on those not loyal to it.

A covenant differs from our modern concept of a contract in that it was expected that there would be failures to fulfill all aspects of the covenant. It was held that the relationship between the parties was the important thing, knowing that humans will inevitably fall short of their aspirations at times. As long as the desire for relationship exists, the covenant remains in effect and what ever problems intervene will be worked out. The covenant spells out legal responsibilities but it is based on trust and affection as much as it is on law. Breaking the covenant involves breaking faith and violating affection.

The covenant is also clearly a faith document. The rewards and punishments that keep the signatory parties in compliance are blessings and curses not material punishment. The covenant is not only between the agreeing parties but is also, in the words of James Luther Adams; “with the creative, sustaining, commanding, judging, transforming Power.”⁵

The Work of the Unitarian Universalist Association

I have talked a little about the importance of active membership in voluntary organizations as eloquently argued for by James Luther Adams. He points out that there are two kinds of voluntary organizations that we can participate in. Special interest organizations like the American Association of Retired Persons primarily exist for the benefit of their members. The second kind of voluntary organization exists to promote the general welfare. The American Civil Liberties Union is an example of the second type. Members of the ACLU are generally not supporting the organization so that they will personally reap any immediate benefit.

Most organizations are a blend of these two types, and the UUA is like that.

We benefit from our membership in the UUA directly through educational opportunities provided by:

- the Annual District Meeting,
- the Healthy Congregations Workshops,
- Religious Education Summits,
- the UU World publication,
- Administrative guidance from UU staff,
- the development of religious education curricula etc.

The UUA also is tremendously effective in promoting causes that speak to the general welfare:

- The UUA acts as a public witness to lobby government for social causes such as GLBT equality, immigration reform, examination of capital punishment, nuclear disarmament, non-violent conflict resolution, separation of church and state, etc. etc.
- Supporting racial cultural and economic diversity in our churches and in the community.
- The promotion of dialogue between religious groups and the advocacy of religious reason, tolerance and freedom.

Conclusion

This morning we are celebrating a new and exciting annual ritual along with a thousand other UU congregations in this country. This is our annual Association Sunday Service. This is the time to think beyond our small congregation in Columbus Georgia, a time to pull back and see the bigger vision of Unitarian Universalism as a force for positive change.

⁵ (Adams 1998, 234)

This congregation is where we are each invited to evaluate, strengthen and sometimes change our faith in the broad sense of the world. Our faith defines how we respond to the world. Our faith is who we are as individuals and what we value.

Our spirituality is defined by our relationship to the world and to each other. We have chosen to enter into a very special relationship with other UU's; a relationship of covenant that acknowledges that our aspirations will always exceed our achievements but we will keep on coming back.

We the members of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Columbus Georgia are in covenant with all the other UU congregations in this county through the Unitarian Universalist Association. This unique voluntary organization works continuously to help us to multiply our effectiveness in the world and to bring about the changes in individuals, congregations, our country and the world that we want to see. It is the very core of the Unitarian Universalist Faith and it is something we must never take for granted.

Amen