

Hospitality: The Good News of Unitarian Universalism:

This morning I want to get you thinking about the role that our denomination and this congregation can play in promoting religious hospitality. It may seem that we live in a particularly difficult time to promote religious hospitality. Within our own country our politics are too often polarized by religious perspectives. I am not just referring to issues like abortion, or gay rights. The ideologies of the Liberal and the Conservative are closely tied to the way we see God in the world. Then we have issues of a religious divide related to the war on terror and the ongoing wars in the Middle East.

Well, we do live in challenging times, but let me take you back to 1553 for some perspective. In that year Michael Servetus was executed in Geneva under directions from John Calvin. Servetus' "crime" was his insistence on teaching that the doctrine of the Trinity was non-biblical and false. For this he was burned alive at the stake, the ultimate act of inhospitality.

Shortly after that event, Sebastian Castello wrote an amazing letter to Calvin, pleading for a measure of tolerance. Servetus and Castello were our ancestors in the role of promoting freedom of religion and religious hospitality. I quote from Castello's powerful letter:

“Christ’s doctrine means loving one’s enemies, returning good for evil. Having a pure heart and a hunger and thirst for righteousness... Before God, and from the bottom of my heart I call you to the spirit of love.

By the bowels of Christ, I ask and implore you to leave me in peace, to stop persecuting me. Let me have the liberty of my faith as you have of yours. At the heart of religion I am one with you. It is in reality the same religion; only on certain points of interpretation I see differently from you. But however we differ in opinion, why cannot we love one another?

There are, I know, persons who insist that we should believe even against reason. It is, however, the worst of all errors, and it is laid on me to fight it... Let no one think he is doing wrong in using his mental faculties. It is our proper way of arriving at the truth.

In the words of Sebastian Castello, I hear the Good News of Unitarian Universalism.

After delivering my first sermon in “Preaching 501” Dr. Teresa Fry Brown asked me “Where was the Good News in my sermon?” She had been pointing out in her lectures that every sermon should include “The Good News”. For most of the students in that class, her meaning was simple; the good news was Salvation through Jesus Christ: not necessarily so simple for a UU. But, the idea that a sermon should contain “good news” has an undeniable attraction. There certainly are problems and “bad news” that needs to be addressed from the pulpit, but if there is no “good news” to provide hope and inspiration, why would anyone want to come back and hear that preacher a second time? It is the good news that feeds our spirit.

I have been thinking about this question; “What is the “good news” of Unitarian Universalism?” ever since that experience with Dr. “T”, and as I considered my topic for this sermon I could think of nothing more important to our understanding of religious community, than this simple question: “What is the good news of Unitarian Universalism.”

My conclusion that I will attempt to advance this morning is this:

“Unitarian Universalism provides a uniquely joyful, supportive sustaining and unconditional religious environment.”

- **Exploring meaning and purpose in community is what makes us a religion.**
- **Trusting each member to be their own judge of what is true makes us unique.**
- **Doing so in a joyful, supporting and sustaining environment is what keeps us coming back.**

In order to make a claim about who we are I need to address our traditions and History.

Our faith has blended two paths of thought that at times seemed to be divergent. There was a spiritual path, from our Judeo Christian roots and a rational path with roots in the Enlightenment, that found its most recent expression in Secular Humanism. What both of these paths share, in our Unitarian Universalist community, is a respect for the ability of the individual to work out his or her understanding of the meanings and purposes of life.

The spiritual path finds its roots in the Jewish wisdom literature and the earliest Christian history. Unfortunately much of that spirituality was perverted for 1500 years while the church focused on consolidating its power and became a tool for emperors and kings. To unite the people the focus was put on creeds and the “correctness of belief” rather than on ethical behavior. In the 16th century religious freedom re-emerges in Europe in an incredibly violent and merciless struggle between Christian denominations. Most histories of Unitarianism include among our spiritual ancestors, Anabaptists, who argued that religious faith required a conscious and responsible decision and therefore that baptism should be reserved as an adult decision. They also bequeathed to us the ideas of separation of Church and State, based on their belief that religion was a matter of individual choice, not something to be determined by the state. Add to this heritage the idea that individuals and religious communities had the right and obligation to define religious truth for themselves. The congregational polity we follow today, whereby matters of religious belief are determined at the congregational level and not imposed from a higher church bureaucracy is an inheritance from these radical reformers.

The letter from Sebastian Castello certainly appeals to rational thought that would find its real flowering in the Enlightenment. This led eventually to the ideas of secular humanism that have been such a strong strand in our modern UU heritage. This rational path is made up of a

broad category of ethical philosophies that affirm the dignity and worth of all people, based on their ability to determine right and wrong by appealing to universal human qualities. Here again we see trust in the individual to find truth.

Our spiritual and rational roots have in common a belief in the inherent trustworthiness and therefore, the good nature of human beings. I am always moved by the words of William Schultz that were read at the opening of this service. William Schultz was one of most influential presidents of the UUA and past president of Amnesty International.

**“This is the Mission of our Faith
To teach the fragile art of hospitality;
To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;
To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;
And to witness to the all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.”**

Why did William Schultz begin his statement of mission with the idea of hospitality? And why did he choose the phrase “Teach the Fragile Art of Hospitality.” Recall my opening premise. The good news of Unitarian Universalism is not just that we encourage an individual search for meaning and purpose, but that we do so in a uniquely joyful, supporting sustaining and unconditional environment. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines hospitality as offering a pleasant and sustaining environment. The Greek word used in the Bible and translated as hospitality is philoxenia: love of the strangers. (The opposite of xenophobia, the fear of strangers.) The Latin root from which our word hospitality derives has a similar connotation: love of strangers. In the UU context our love of strangers includes love of the pluralism of religious traditions. We are not afraid of the Buddhist, the Hindu, the atheist or the Wiccan. We love the stranger and their strangeness for they provide an opportunity for each of us to learn.

If both our spiritual and rational roots teach us that people can be trusted in their search for purpose and meaning and that people are therefore inherently good, then it is only logical that hospitality would not only be something we do because it is pleasant, but something we do as a spiritual discipline. Hospitality is part of who we are as religious community.

It is rare to attend a UU conference where discussion of the manner in which we greet newcomers is not discussed. Too often it is discussed as something we should do to encourage people to come back. We assign greeters whose job it is to welcome the stranger and think that we have delegated a task like making the coffee or setting up the chairs. When we think of it that way, we have got it wrong. Hospitality is something we should do because it is at the core of what we believe and it is a spiritual discipline for us, and something we should be training our children to appreciate. I am just now aware that I have missed the point of many UU social functions.

Are you familiar with the idea of circle dinners? At our congregation in Canada we set up sign-up sheets where members could be grouped into circles of 8 people. They would then take turns being the host for a dinner for the group and when rotation was complete, another sign up list would be prepared. I saw this then, as an enjoyable social experience, but now I see it as a spiritual practice.

In William Schultz's words, we must teach the fragile art of hospitality. It must be taught, because it does not always come easily or naturally. Hospitality is indeed fragile, even brittle in some ways. An unkind word, a thoughtless comment, and unintended rebuff can shatter the spirit of hospitality, and it is indeed an art, a skill that is attained by study, practice and observation.

I like the idea of hospitality as spiritual discipline and I encourage each of you play with the idea. For some it may be hard to think of extending hospitality to those who belong to religious traditions that would consider UU's to be heretics or worse. For others UU's our introspective nature may make it difficult to open up and demonstrate our love of the stranger. Well, Church is a growth opportunity and it should not always be easy.

Maybe our bumper stickers should read:

“Unitarian Universalists: Practicing Hospitality Religiously.”

I think we are uniquely qualified to make that claim. What other denomination invites people of all faiths to discuss their beliefs without the goal of converting anyone. What other denomination treats religious pluralism as a social art.

Our Principles and Sources

I set out to answer the question: “What is the Good News of Unitarian Universalism?” Unitarian Universalists have no dogma and no doctrines... with, I would argue, one exception that I will address in a moment.

There is no well defined process whereby a person becomes a Unitarian Universalist. There is no creed and the process varies from congregation to congregation, and as we know, sometimes from day to day. But there is a well defined process for how a congregation becomes a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association. A group of people may form a congregation and apply for membership in the UUA, just as this Fellowship did back in 1975. The congregation, not the individual members, must covenant with other congregations to affirm and promote our seven principles and our six sources.

In our church polity an individual is not required to believe any religious creed. This, ironically is the only doctrine that I can identify for our Church:

From “Writing Bylaws for your Congregation”

“Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used in any society unless such is used as a creedal test.”

Sometimes when I hear new comers to UU, I am reminded of a teenager who has just learned that his or her parents are going out of town for the weekend. “Wow, now I can do anything I want.” Well we are an adult religion and you can’t really destroy the house just because the parents are away.

Of course we have our seven principles and 6 sources. These are not however dogmas, doctrines or creeds in the proper sense of those terms. They are principles. The difference between dogma, and doctrine on one hand and principles on the other is that principles imply some flexibility. They provide guidance and they are not considered invalid just because they may not be followed in every circumstance.

Are these principles and sources consistent with my proposal for “The Good News”

There are seven principles which Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Unitarian Universalism (UU) draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Reflections on Our Hospitality

We recently held another Long Range Planning Dinner Meeting. I think that meeting can be a model for hospitality. The consensus opinion was that it was a good blend of a social evening and some serious discussion about our future. There was a very strong feeling coming out of that meeting that our Mission Statement should include words to remind us of our role to spread the news about our Unitarian Universalist faith.

- Does the idea of hospitality as religious discipline make sense to you?
- Does our membership reflect that we are serving a metropolitan area of approximately 300,000 people?
- How do we invite the people moving to Columbus to become a part of your Fellowship?
- Do we extend our hospitality to the Fort Benning community?
- As an individual can we see becoming more hospitable as an opportunity for personal growth?
- Gathering before and after the service for social contact is a spiritual practice that is not on our order of service.

I now see the pot luck lunch is a symbol of our religion and commitment to hospitality on many levels. Think of our First Sunday pot luck lunch. Many Sundays several of us get together to go out to a restaurant for lunch. I often participate in these lunches and my intention is not to criticize that activity but let us consider how that alternative, which seems equally hospitable, compares to a pot luck lunch? For a pot luck there is no financial barrier to participation. There is no discussion or worry about how the costs will be shared. There is tremendous diversity and the welcoming of ethnic foods that may be a "stranger" to us. There is a commitment to sharing culture and creativity and a commitment of personal time and effort; an open invitation for all to be in community.

Conclusion

So I leave you with the proposition that the good news of UU is that Unitarian Universalism provides a uniquely joyful, supporting, sustaining and unconditional environment and that Hospitality is one of our defining religious practices.

If we conclude that our unique hospitality is our Good News, what is the appropriate response?

How can we enhance this symbolism and sense of spiritual practice?

We should be known as the most hospitable congregation in town. What would that require?

I will close with words from an Australian cartoonist and philosopher Michael Leunig:

We pray for the fragile ecology of the heart and the mind.
The sense of meaning so finely assembled and balanced and so easily overturned.
The careful, ongoing construction of LOVE.

As painful and exhausting as the struggle for truth, and as easily abandoned.
Hard fought and won are the shifting sands of this sacred ground, this ecology.

Easy to desecrate and difficult to defend,
this vulnerable joy, this exposed faith, this precious order.
This sanity.

We shall be careful.
With others, and with ourselves.

Amen.