

A Sermon on United Nations Day 2012

Good morning and welcome to United Nations Sunday.

The cover of order of the service this morning features, in United Nations Blue, the symbol of the United Nations. That lovely addition to the Order of Service almost didn't happen and the story of what did happen is instructive.

You see, back in September I was reminded, in a particularly graphic way, by our gentle but determined envoy to the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office, that I should preach an appropriate sermon on United Nations Sunday... or else.

Of course I was happy to plan for such a service and made note of it in the service planning schedule and in the newsletter. Then I went on with the other activities of a new minister.

Last Friday, the office was its usual bee hive of activity, even more so, with preparations for the Semi-Annual General Meeting today. One of the things done late on Friday is the printing of the Order of Service and we had that pretty well in hand when the phone rang.

It was our gentle but determined, UU-UNO Envoy asking if the Order of Service had been properly printed with the United Nations logo prominently displayed. Well, in fact we had not done anything special for the Order of Service for United Nations Sunday.

You see, your minister was delighted to preach on the topic, but it seemed to him that this was just another topic for a great Sunday service and that no special attention to the Order of Service was required.

Well, to make a long story short, your gentle but determined UU Envoy swung into action and within the hour we had color printed pages in hand and we were re-doing the Order of Service to give you the impressive result that you have in your hand this morning.

I tell you this little anecdote this morning because it marks a significant point in my new ministry here in Halifax. I thank Valerie and Colin for their commitment to the United Nations and for the inspiration they have provided. I should also tell you that at the time of the printing of the Order of Service, my sermon for this morning was still a rather vague and disorganized collection of platitudes about the United Nations.

The one theme that I had in mind was reflected in the prelude music. God is watching us from a distance. This metaphor reminds me that we live on a tiny blue green ball floating in the vastness of space. From a distance there are no national boundaries and from all that I can observe, if there is a God, God is indeed watching from a distance. If we are to solve our problems on planet earth it will be entirely up to us. "The hope of hopes, the love of loves, is in the heart of everyone."

After reflecting on the topic of the United Nations and doing my research, I realized that a Unitarian Universalist sermon about the United Nations should call forth the minister's passion and commitment. Everything about United Nations Sunday including the printed Order of Service and the sermon deserve special attention. I hope that, if like me, you have, in the past,

considered United Nations Day, just another commemorative day on the calendar, I hope that you will feel differently by the end of my sermon this morning.

As I think about the work of the United Nations I am ashamed of the extent to which I have taken that body and the men and women who have dedicated their lives to establishing, nurturing and defending it, for granted. The establishment of an international body representing every nation on earth dedicated to peace and alleviation of human suffering is at the same time miraculous and absolutely essential for the future of the humanity.

I know that I am not alone in taking the UN for granted. I searched in vain in the pages of the Chronicle Herald for any reference to United Nations Day in its Oct. 24 issue. Nothing there, not even in the "Today in History" column.

Our passion for the United Nations, as Unitarian Universalists, should begin with recognition of the close parallels between our Seven Principle and the Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations its foundational document. That Preamble is in our Hymnal #475 and was read this morning for our chalice lighting.

A second foundational document of the United Nations also resonates with our UU principles. I will read here from the preamble to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

"Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world;

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people;

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law;

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations;

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom;

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms;

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge;

Now, therefore the General Assembly proclaims this universal declaration of human rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by

teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.”

The preamble is then followed by 30 Articles describing specific human rights.

It is no coincidence that this document resonate with UU values. Here I quote from the writing of CBC’s Michael Enright:

“John Peters Humphrey was one great Canadian. Odds are few other Canadians have ever heard of him. He was born in 1905 in Hampton, New Brunswick. In his childhood years, both his parents died of cancer and he lost one of his arms while playing with fire. It was that accident and the subsequent teasing from playmates that gave him a strong sense of moral fortitude. He became a lawyer, taught at McGill and in 1946, joined the fledgling United Nations human rights division.

In December, 1948, as its principal author, Humphrey presented the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was called ‘the international Magna Carta of all mankind.’ That was the illustrious beginning of Canada's deep relationship to the United Nations. It has lasted decades and given Canada a well-earned reputation for effective diplomacy and commitment to international cooperation.”

Here ends the quote from Michael Enright.

I searched on line biographies of John Peters Humphrey for a reference to his religious affiliation. His history and his work mark him as a UU, but none of his biographical sites list any information about his religious affiliation and the CUC and UUA sites make no mention of him. However, I finally found a sermon delivered by Bruce Knotts, the Executive Director of the UU-UNO that makes it clear that he was indeed Unitarian.

Once I do a little more research, I hope to edit the Wikipedia page for John Peters Humphrey and notify the CUC and UUA web sites. Ignoring my blind spot regarding John Peters Humphrey, I consider myself to be pretty well aware of Canada’s illustrious relationship with the United Nations. I have personal memories of Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, and of Canada’s proud Peace Keeping record. Canada is the seventh biggest cash contributor to the UN and the second largest contributor to the UN’s world food program.

As an aside, I am proud to say that my first contact with a Unitarian Universalist Congregation was at the invitation from Dr. James Gibson, a much honoured Canadian diplomat and scholar, who in 1945 he was part of the Canadian delegation to the first United Nations conference in San Francisco.

After living in the United States for seventeen years, eight of them under the presidency of George W. Bush, I was looking forward to coming back to my home country where the United Nations was held in high regard. Well, I was in for a bit of a surprise when I returned to Canada. I need not tell you about our Prime Minister's insult to the United Nations in September of this year, or Canada's retreat from the Kyoto Climate Treaty. It appears to me, at this early stage of my repatriation that it is time for Canadians who identify with the goals of the United Nations, and particularly Unitarian Universalists, to elevate our appreciation and understanding of this great institution of worldwide humanity.

If you will pardon me for using the C-word twice in one month, it is clear to me that the relationship between the countries of the world, including Canada, and the United Nations is one of covenant. We are bound together by this covenant and committed to work through our differences.

The planet is too small, too fragile, to allow individual governments to set agendas without consideration of the effects on all of humanity and on the interdependent web of life of which we are all a part. There is work to be done to mend our relationship of covenant with the other countries of the world.

Our understanding of the word covenant owes a lot to the scholar George Mendenhall who postulated that the biblical concept of covenant found its roots in the ancient near eastern convention of suzerain treaties. These suzerain treaties were made between countries in the ancient Middle East.

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, just like the preamble to the UN Charter.

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, just like the preamble to the UN Charter.

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. More about that in a minute.

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. I think it safe to presume that the signed charter of the UN is kept in a suitably safe and honoured location.

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.

The annual celebration of United Nations Day is the modern equivalent of a 4000 year old tradition of reading a covenant in public. If we as Canadians celebrated annually United Nations Day and spent a fraction of the money that our Government has spent commemorating the War of 1812, I wonder if it would have been as easy for Prime Minister Harper to become

the only head of state in New York who failed to address the UN General Assembly. Or for his Minister John Baird to blast the UN condemning it for its failures and saying nothing of its successes.

Why would the Prime Minister of Canada choose to insult the fellow members of our United Nations by missing the opportunity to speak to the General Assembly when he was in New York just a few steps away from the UN? Perhaps it is because Canada has taken actions that put us out of covenant, out of that sacred relationship established by the UN Charter.

Perhaps our potential to make vast sums of money from our Tar Sands has blinded us to our obligations to the people of the planet. Perhaps we, as a country and a signatory to the charter of the United Nations, need to be called back into covenant.

The UK's Guardian newspaper reported on Canada's decision to withdraw from the United Nations Kyoto treaty on climate change. According to the Guardian, "Canada's inaction was blamed by some on its desire to protect the lucrative but highly polluting exploitation of tar sands, the second biggest oil reserve in the world."

Well, a lot has happened to this minister since Friday, when I helped to reprint our Order of Service, giving the UN logo its rightful recognition for UN Sunday. But, after all, only two days have passed since my epiphany, and so I need to allow myself some time to reflect.

However at this point I am definitely feeling that my ministry and the ministry of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax needs to take on the issues of Canada's participation in the United Nations.

Some ways we can do that:

- Achieve Blue Ribbon Congregation status along with our sister congregations in Toronto, Montreal, Kingston, Ottawa and Montreal.
- Make the history and objectives of the United Nations an important part of our revitalized Religious Exploration Program for children and youth and make that program available to the wider Halifax community.
- Continue the inspired initiative of our annual PEACE Symposium set around the date of United Nations Day, October 24.
- Provide leadership in interfaith work among Halifax religious institutions to promote the United Nations.
- Start planning now for our 2013 United Nations Sunday service complete with colourful Order of Service prominently displaying the UN logo.
- And vow to ensure that another United Nations Day will not pass in Halifax without at least a pointed letter to the editor of the Chronicle Herald from the Minister of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax.

I look forward to absorbing the wisdom of the congregation in this matter.

May it be so. Amen