

What Does It Mean to be a Unitarian Universalist?

preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland,
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This sermon is the second in a series reflecting on questions essential to our life together as a religious community. The series is part of a larger process of reexamining our congregational covenant, the text of which can be found on the back of your order of service. Let's take a moment to read it together: We warmly invite into membership all who share our purposes as expressed in our Bond of Union: mutual helpfulness in the search for truth and for enduring values in ways of life; advancement of sound morals among ourselves and in our community; encouragement and protection of individual freedom of religion.

The topic of this month's sermon, and the conversations that fed into it, is: What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist? Last month we explored the question: What does it mean to be a religious community? In our conversations in March and my sermon April we will unite last month's topic with this month's and talk about: What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist religious community?

Many of you have participated in the conversations feeding into this sermon series. I hope that more of you will participate in the next, last, round.

When I sat down to write this sermon I thought it would be easy. After all, I have been a Unitarian Universalist for more than thirty years, I attended a Unitarian Universalist seminary and I am a minister. I figured that if the subject gave me any trouble then there was probably something wrong with me. Predictably, the sermon did not prove easy to write; perhaps a punishment for hubris.

My original intention had been to begin with a humorous historical anecdote about a 16th century Polish Unitarian who casually, or recklessly, picked a theological fight with some conservative Protestants over the Trinity. The confrontation occurred when the Unitarian theologian was a guest in the conservative Protestants' house. They were sheltering him from the Inquisition. One evening the Unitarian picked up the conservatives' Bible and asked them, "Where in this book does it say that there are three Gods?" The conservatives did not have a good answer.

The point I wanted to make this story was that for many Unitarian Universalists, Unitarian Universalism begins with a negation. During the conversations on what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist, many people talked about the faith that they had left behind. Like our religious ancestors they evaluated orthodox Trinitarian Christianity or Judaism or whatever faith they were born into and found it wanting, based on faulty logic or false interpretation of sacred scripture. As someone from the congregation observed, "We spend a lot of time describing what we are not."

I rejected building my sermon around this story for two reasons. The first was much simpler than the second. After about two hours of searching through various thick texts on 16th century Polish Unitarianism--more properly called Socinianism--and digging through my seminary class notes I could not find it. I have enough of a scholarly impulse in me that if I cannot source something then I will not use it.

The second reason that I rejected the story is more important, Unitarian Universalism does not start with negations. It starts, like other faith traditions, with a sense of awe and wonder. We take serious Ralph Waldo Emerson's insight that we can all enjoy "an original relation to the universe." Only after affirming this insight do we reject those doctrines, creeds or religious teachings that contradict it. Negations are part of our tradition but they are not the central or most important part.

I resonated with whoever said that three words stand out for them when trying to describe Unitarian Universalism, reverence, reason and hope. Even the order the words were placed in makes sense to me. Religious experience is often an experience of reverence. All of the experiences I have had that I would describe as religious are experiences that filled me with a sense of reverence.

It is only in trying to understand these experiences and this sense of reverence that I resort to reason. Reason helps me place my experiences within a broader context and evaluate where both my experiences and I fit into the order of the universe. I suspect that most people are the same. Reverence first, then reason.

And, hope, well, hope is essential to religion in general and to Unitarian Universalism in particular. The universal salvation of our Universalist forebears was derived from hope, a hope in an afterlife where all souls are united with a loving God. Classical Unitarianism is also rooted in hope. Early Unitarians rejected the belief that humanity was inherently sinful or wicked. They trusted that each of us is born with the possibility of goodness. Looking back at the bloody wars of the 20th century, the carnage of the 19th, the tortures of the Inquisition, the horrors of slavery and the genocide of the Western Hemisphere's indigenous peoples that seems like some kind of hope, almost foolhardy.

Hope is the feeling that the world can be different than it is. It is not the same thing as optimism. Cornell West makes a distinction between optimism and hope. He says, "Optimism is a notion that there's sufficient evidence that would allow us to infer that if we keep doing what we're doing, things will get better... hope, that's something else. [It is] Cutting against the grain, against the evidence... stepping out on nothing and landing on something... that the future is open-ended, that what we think and what we do does make a difference."

Hope is not unwarranted. Just look at what is happening across the world right now. As recently as a couple of months ago few people would have had any reason to think that autocratic regimes across the Middle East would be toppled, or be in danger of toppling, by pro-democracy movements. Hope is the political activist who day after day, month after month, year after year, protested the Mubarak regime, even though it meant jail and torture. The activist had no reason to think that Mubarak would lose power but he had to hope that he would. Hope is both a source and a reason for action.

Enough cannot be said about hope. Reading through all of the notes on your conversations it was clear that hope was an ever present but frequently unnamed theme. So many of you felt that to be a Unitarian Universalist was to engage in the struggle to remake the world for the better. There was one perspective on this that I particularly liked. Someone said that they love our faith tradition because they know that no matter the issue, whether they agreed with it or not, there was some Unitarian Universalist out there somewhere working passionately on it. As many of you said, Unitarian Universalism is more about doing than it is believing.

This is, not incidentally, why covenants are so important to us. The covenants we make with one another as members of this congregation--whether explicitly or implicitly--are about how we live together as a religious community. The scholar Conrad Wright observed that at the core of any Unitarian Universalist community is a belief "in the capacity of men and women of good will to walk together in religious fellowship, despite... doctrinal differences." We do not have to agree upon what we believe. We just have to treat each other decently. Francis David used to say, "We need not think alike to love alike." David's dictum was true in Unitarian congregations in 16th century Transylvania and it is true in our congregation today.

It is also challenging. Unitarian Universalist communities thrive, or not, based how a congregation's members treat each other. When people behave badly--when they are nasty, mean, shout, yell, insult, belittle, undermine or otherwise attack each other--that is a sure sign of a community in distress, a community that is not living out its values. There are plenty of ways to disagree but raising your voice does not have to be one of them. Tolerating diversity should not mean tolerating bad behavior.

In my experience, diversity--any kind of diversity, be it of theology, gender orientation, sexual orientation, race or otherwise--only comes when people feel safe to be themselves. If they do not feel safe then do not feel welcome. We honor each other's inherent worth and dignity in how we treat each, or we do not honor it at all.

Like I said, this can be challenging. I can be grumpy or ill-mannered from time-to-time. Honestly, I find preaching somewhat anxiety provoking and it is difficult for me to be fully present and pleasant if I am not happy with the text of my sermon. But I always try to bring my best self because I know that bringing it is part of my covenant with you. If I do not honor our covenant then I can have no reasonable expectation that you will either.

Living in covenant means calling each other out when we fail to meet expectations. It means that some Sunday if I am stressed and snappish before the service you say to me, "Hey, Colin, relax a little, you are wound up so tight that you are acting a little bit like a jerk. We expect more from you." You can challenge me and hold me accountable when I do not live up to our covenant together. I can do the same for you.

This brings me to another point about our faith tradition. It is relational. You cannot be a Unitarian Universalist all by yourself. To be a Unitarian Universalist, you have to participate, on some level, in the life of a congregation or other Unitarian Universalist community.

The rabid individualists in our tradition would probably be offended by this statement. I am sure that Henry David Thoreau would not like it. He resigned his membership in a Unitarian congregation because he found it constricting and uninteresting. Then again maybe Thoreau would have approved. He ceased to identify as a Unitarian after he resigned his congregational membership. Of course, despite his choice to formally disaffiliate with our tradition he owes much of his career to the circle of Unitarians and transcendentalists that surrounded Emerson. Even Thoreau would not have become who he was without the community around him.

There is a question of authority in all of this. Does authority come from the individual or the community? 19th century transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau had complicated and convoluted relationships with Unitarianism because they placed ultimate authority in the individual. Since Emerson believed that each of us can have "an original relation to the universe" he did not think mediators were necessary in religion. In this he was a sort of hyper-Protestant. The Protestants believe that everyone can read and interpret the Bible, and through the Bible come to know God directly. Transcendentalists like Emerson dispensed with the necessity of the Bible. The things necessary to know the divine are the self and the divine. Ultimate authority in religious matters rests with the individual.

This truth helps explain the tension we Unitarian Universalists often have with our religious communities. On the one hand, because of our covenantal and relational nature, you have to participate in a Unitarian Universalist community to be a Unitarian Universalist. On the other hand, since religious authority rests in the end with the individual, that community cannot tell you what you have to believe to be a member.

What the community can, and does, do is challenge you to question your beliefs and offer you a place to share and tools to interpret your experiences. As someone said during one of the conversations, "As Unitarian Universalists we have the opportunity to create our own ways, guided, supported and questioned by others." We have our own beliefs and experiences but as members of a community we are always in relation with others. Or as Alice Blair Wesley put it, we "examine together our own deepest loves."

That we have the ability to create our own ways means that our faith tradition is constantly changing. It would be almost impossible to define what Unitarian Universalism has been or will be for all time. We are an evolving faith. As human knowledge and human community change, we change likewise. Unlike some tradition, we do not hold that truth is immutable. Rather, it is something that we each discover for ourselves and what we discover will be a little different for each us.

Thinking back to the beginning of my sermon and why I had such a hard time writing it, I realize that my trouble with shaping my sermon stemmed from the reality that what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist is a little different for each us. It is not really possible for me to sum up the sentiments of our community into one definitive statement. The best I can do is reflect back a little of what I have heard, tempered by my own experience and studies.

William Sloane Coffin once observed, "it is not the preacher's job to tell you what to do, but only to remind you who you are..." I hope that this sermon has reminded you a little of who you are as Unitarian Universalists--a covenantal people rooted in reverence, reason and hope and united together in a search for truth. As someone from the congregation said, "For me being a Unitarian Universalist means being on a journey. How I live as a Unitarian Universalist is how I participate on that journey."

So that we may continue that journey together I say Amen and Blessed Be.