

Sermon - Crossing Political Borders by Rev. Scott Sammler-Michael

Imagining how we can build stronger communities of justice and welcome, I will reflect on theology. Theology is a composite science. It is informed by many investigations, including:

- Anthropology - our doctrine of human nature
- Cosmology - what is the nature of ultimate reality, of Being, the cosmos, and God?
- Epistemology - how do we learn?
- What sources do we hold as authoritative?
- Ethics - how do we live our values?

Theology was known as the ‘queen’ of the sciences – the discipline giving connective reflection informing all other studies. Joseph Priestley, Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal - most of History’s great scientists explained their scientific labors as secondary to their theological curiosity – they investigated science hoping to reveal knowledge of God.

Theology explores our notions of what is of ultimate value. Ultimacy is never completely discovered in one individual – this is why we need community. Beloved Community requires humility, gratitude, praise, nurture and surrender to something greater. Religion is about discovering the beauty of what we can do when we connect deeply, revealing that whole that is always greater than the sum of the parts. Unitarian Universalism is never about just you or me; we live our religious duty by inviting a true diversity of people into community to evoke the most accurate rendering of the truth.

Unitarian Universalism is a ‘free faith,’ emerging out of the radical reformation of 16th century Europe, but Unitarian Universalist theological roots are ancient - emerging the first time people cried “God is One” - singing the first time humans intuited ‘all are worthy of wholeness.’ Those radical roots combined with the many peoples who migrated to America from Europe, people who shared no single religious creed or image of the divine. Distancing themselves from their more explicit Judeo-Christian past in both liturgy and proclamation, they focused their ministries more and more towards repairing the world. This prompted them to become engaged in the political process; it is in public

policy implementation that justice is either permitted by government or at best remains an empty promise or campaign slogan.

Yet as Unitarian Universalists have become good at standing up for justice, many have also distanced ourselves from the deep conversations and proclamations of the spirit that sustain religious institutions *during* our social justice struggles. Many resist the difficult work of walking together to compose and live into a mission of sacred community, divining the holy call that sustains us through crises of the spirit and tragedies in the public square. This results in losing touch with the sustaining power of an abiding faith to which we should devote our love and power, a loving community providing comfort during the long, arduous struggle of midwifing justice into the world. James Luther Adams reminds us that our power lies in surrendering part of our selves to something larger, getting over our petty grievances for the sake of justice, healing and praise. Perhaps Commander Spock said it best when he sacrificed himself to save the Enterprise: the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one.”

Let’s examine some *political* assumptions among us. The word ‘Liberal’ means open to the ways of others but initially, our religious forebears were neither politically nor socially liberal. Prior to World War II, UUs were supporters of alcohol prohibition, they issued a gag order against pacifist preachers during World War I, and many supported Eugenics, a racist plan to make sure only the ‘best class’ of babies were being born. They *were* the establishment, and often stood in the way of justice. Over time social reformers were drawn to our religion, and our churches were transformed. By the 1960’s, many of us fought against the Vietnam War and *for* the freedom movements for blacks, women, immigrants, gays and lesbians. In those days it was the Democratic Party who declared support for those liberation movements. Many among us became devoted to the Democratic party because of that legacy - often, uncritically. However, our support for Democrats became frozen in that time, and perhaps this is why today some UU’s act as if our Churches are the ‘religious lobby’ for the Democratic National Committee. That is not the call I answered as minister – and it is no foundation for a life-saving faith. It also violates our basic theological claim that all have worth and dignity, denying the fact that

in order to be justice seeking we must be critical of the culture and its politics and not be a reliable source of support for one party. Party affiliation is a corrosive substitute for theology; political parties change all the time. Recall it was the Democratic Party before 1962 that stood in the way of Black liberation. Our favorite 20th century prophet, Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. first registered as a Republican - the Alabama Democratic party did not allow blacks into membership. Labels are fluid; partisan politics does not a good religion make.

Politics is conversation, and the best conversation invites and encourages differences of opinion in a spirit of deep listening. A potent theology of salvation and public witness that seeks all political perspectives opens us to different public policy avenues of achieving the same goals – goals most of our conservative UUs share – goals *they* believe can be accomplished in very different ways than the liberal UU majority.

Our too-easy-leaning towards the Democratic party confuses religion with politics in the worst way – begging the question: *without a strong theological grounding, without an inspiring proclamation of the power of the spirit, without crafting worship and communities that make it clear we are a life-saving faith before and after the protest rally, what will become of Unitarian Universalism?*

Consider the example shown by African American churches in the Civil Rights movement. Those churches existed as central parts of the community *before* the movement began; they were houses of spiritual knowing during and after the movement; they preached a gospel of transcendence and power that sustained the workers during the movement - continuing to this day. They knew why they existed, they had clear missions as promoters of the spirit of life, they surrendered their individual will for the greater good. Reverends Fred Shuttlesworth, Billy Miles and Martin Luther King, Jr led churches that were places of power and salvation - for this world and the next - long before and long after Freedom Summer and the Call to Selma. Their ministry and mission sustained their justice work. It was from the well of their deep-rooted spirituality that the power of the Civil Rights movement emerged.

This is where too many Unitarian Universalists get confused. Too many believe that social justice work *is* the faith, not the *expression* of faith; too many believe that public witness is the only prayer – or the only one that matters; too many believe churches should be at the beck and call of activists of the party instead of prophets of the spirit. These mistakes corrode our longevity and vitality as a religion. Unitarian Universalism is not a movement, movements die; religions, if they speak life-saving truth, live on; religion points the way to the next social justice movement, religion asks us to walk with our leaders and provide nourishment for us in the struggle.

The roots of the word ‘religion’ mean “that which binds us together” ; religion entails connection. A robust Unitarian Universalist theology of connection aims to challenge us, to hold before us lofty goals into which we are called to live powerful lives of purpose, asking us to make tough choices to change the world by first changing ourselves - asking us, in the words of Rev Rob Hardies, to be Born again and again and again our entire lives.

We are saved by striving to live authentically

We are saved by openness of heart and spirit

We are saved by embracing the other and loving our ‘enemies’ - by connection and commitment

We are saved by communities of challenge that praise the holy in reverence and awe

We are saved by committing ourselves to a faith that challenges us to transform ourselves first, to be open to altering assumptions and behavior, and to cultivate humility so we can bring our best selves to the work of justice.

We are saved by love that challenges the person we find in the mirror to listen more than speak, to learn more than teach, and partner with people who are not like us – no matter their political persuasion - so we can achieve the goals of our sacred mission.

The philosopher Foucault says, “Normality is the greatest tool of domination and oppression.” The unspoken rules in our congregations establish edicts of intolerance. Think of what so many of our churches say is not allowed: no discussions of economic

justice that remind us that economic justice begins with our church budgets – how we pay our professional staff; no talking back to the preacher; no rock music - heck no drums, bass or electric guitar; no clapping; no knitting. Churches that engage in such practices are guilty of oppressing the spirit of truth and community. Church people who their thoughts with preoccupation with such rules have lost their way; our focus should be on our mission, on deepening our connections.

This oppression lives in many churches in the tacit assumption that only people who vote a certain way are truly welcomed; the rules you create in our congregations that shame people are the farthest thing from holy embrace imaginable and have no place in church. Mark Morrison Reed teaches that Scorn is deadly in religious community.

Consider the arrogance in the assumption that I can change the world before I have transformed myself?

Unitarian Universalism is only worthy of our most sincere devotion if it saves the world one soul at a time, beginning with our own.

We need a deeper and more robust theology that encourages a doctrine of the church – an ecclesiology that reminds us that church is not about you or me or any one of us.

I challenge you all to invite Republicans and conservatives into your houses of worship
To not do so belies a woeful lack of understanding what our mission is and what our faith can be, and dooms our faith to be heaved upon the ash heap of historical irrelevance.

Theology explores the notion of what is of ultimate value - Ultimacy is never completely discovered in one individual – this is why we need community

Community requires humility, gratitude, praise, and surrender to something greater
Religion is about discovering the beauty of what we can do when we connect deeply, revealing that whole that is always greater than the sum of the parts.

Unitarian Universalism is never about just you or me

Religious community is not a collection of walled-off, isolated beings, people in their bubbles bumping into one another.

It is about transforming ourselves – shredding that bubble so we can connect intimately, honestly, openly in an attitude that assumes we never have the final answer until we engage one another with integrity and invitation.

Live the interdependent web with all those who enter your churches.

Justice work without deep theology is shallow and dies easily.

Faith sustains and nourishes justice.

Justice enables faith.

As Micah says -

“Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”

I think it works in that order.

Dare to make our leaders preach an inclusive doctrine

Dare to make yourself be born again and again and again

The word 'Liberal' means 'openness to the ways of others.'

We have allowed too many to preach a superficial faith that proclaims nonsense like 'born right the first time' or 'you can believe anything you want' as if they have entered Burger King instead of a house of holy worship.

May we create a world informed
more by truth than dogma,
more by practicality than pipedream,
more by values than ideology,
more by justice than order,
more by compassion than command.

In so doing may we make gentler avenues of freedom, power and wholeness for the next generations.

Unitarian Universalism challenges us to live lives of meaning in a spirit of radical hospitality, promoting justice while embodying transcendence and love.

[Two examples point this out -

First is our witness on marriage equality.

The holy work we are doing to secure same-gender marriage rights has energized us in ways for which we should be proud;

we speak with authority and power to the systems and structures that stand against love; we have become known for this work in some corners as the 'love' people, with our yellow shirts and all.

But the reality is that the fight for marriage equality, as important as it is, is a generational one; all the studies show this.

In roughly 20 years an overwhelming majority of Americans will support same-gender

marriage - it *will* become the law of the land.

So as we continue witnessing for marriage equality in the halls of power, how are we nurturing our houses of worship and the systems that sustain those who toil for justice?]

A religion is not merely the mobilization of money and people to address certain public policy concerns - that is merely one important piece of what we are about.

I believe what has occurred in our free faith has been an overuse of an adjective - the word, 'liberal.'

To describe our theology we were given the title 'liberal' long ago to distance us from the orthodox preaching of the age.

Our openness to different ways of religious belief and practice gave us the label "Liberal" referring to *theology*.