

Beyond Tolerance

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Two weeks ago, following my sermon on Radical Hospitality, I heard two important reactions. The first was, now that the choir is processing into the service, will they be wearing robes? The answer is no. If the Mormon Tabernacle Choir challenges us to a “battle of the bands” then perhaps we’ll talk about it. Short of that, however, I don’t see robes happening.

The other reaction was more to the point of the service: Do I have to be radically hospitable to Sarah Palin? Apparently she was much on people’s minds that Sunday, and had I thought of it I might have included her in the sermon. Well first of all I am not getting into partisan politics my first month in the pulpit as your Senior Minister. It is Barak Obama and John McCain’s job to convince you who to vote for, not mine. I prefer to talk about issues rather than candidates.

However, one thing this brought up for me was how wide a range of belief, both political and theological, there are here at First Unitarian Church. The diversity of opinions is deep and wide here. The choir

robe issue is an easy one by comparison. I have heard that there is too much God-talk in the service and that there is not enough God-talk in the service. Once I heard both in the same day! I mention Buddhism too much. Only to be followed shortly after: “Boy Rev. Josh you should really start a Buddhist study group.” What is a UU minister to do?

Well first I think this is indicative of the unique character of Unitarian Universalism. Most denominations cover up or in some way gloss over their theological diversity. There are Methodists who believe in creationism and evolution. But where some churches might be embarrassed or openly hostile to such diversity of opinion, Unitarian Universalism embraces it. We revel in having more than one point of view present. While we risk divisiveness and it makes it hard to articulate a cohesive message sometimes, UUs also understand that, like the gene pool, diversity breeds health. The consequence of this, though, is that no one group within Unitarian Universalism ever feels completely at home. There is too much God talk for the atheists and not nearly enough of it for the Christians. There is one measly minute of silence for the Buddhists instead of thirty. None of us will ever get one hundred percent of our personal theology reflected back at us ever single Sunday, in every religious education class, or in every church publication. This morning I wish to suggest to you that this is part of the genius of Unitarian Universalism, particularly as we move further into this century.

There are some religions of course that demand a uniformity of religious belief. If you do not believe what has been taught everywhere, always, and by all, then that is OK, but there is the door. Prior to the world being as connected as it is through communication technology, it was pretty easy to project all kinds of evil assumptions onto the people who practiced a different religion or lived in another country or looked different from us. And so if you are preaching only to your particular choir, be they in robes or not, then it is easy to assume that everyone else must have it wrong. I suppose it's their business, but this approach to the beliefs of other people strikes me as narrow minded. It is about as mature as a group of boys forming a club and then not allowing the girls to play in the tree house.

Universalism is a hard word to live up to. It means we intentionally try to include everyone. We include Republican and Democrats, Vegetarians and non-Vegetarians, fat people and thin people, smokers and non-smokers. The Unitarian historian Earl Morse Wilbur wrote that the Unitarian movement throughout world history shares three common values: freedom, reason, and tolerance. It is the latter that blends so well with Universalism and its refusal to put a limit on love. No one is outside the human experience or the love of God if you prefer, and therefore all people are of concern to us. We now refer to this as "inherent worth and dignity." This week is Rosh Hashanah which marks the beginning of the High Holy days, the Days of Awe and

reflection in Judaism. Given the history of rampant discrimination, persecution, and extermination that Jews have faced over the centuries, tolerance is a refreshing practice.

Wilbur's notion of tolerance is a good one, and at the points in history he writes about it is surprisingly forward thinking. But these days mere tolerance isn't enough. Gustav Niebuhr writes, "If I am asked to tolerate someone, I hear it as a call to leave that person alone, unhindered to pursue his or her own way. Tolerance is often a low bar to clear. It does not suggest people might learn about—and possibly from—one another. Toleration serves as a basis for a cease-fire, but it does not offer a vision for what might follow." In Acts chapter five we have a unique situation. For once the Jews are in power over the Christians and they have captured Peter and some apostles. One rabbi, Gamaliel stands up and says, "Let's not kill these guys like we did the others." The other rabbis agree, and so instead of killing the Christians, they have them flogged and order them not to preach in Jerusalem anymore, which of course they do. Talk about just clearing that low bar of tolerance! Granted, getting flogged is better than getting killed, and apparently the Christians rejoiced at their treatment, but it seems to me that our standards should be higher than this.

The goal should be mutual understanding of one another, not merely tolerating another person's presence. So in that vain, have you heard the one about the Priest and the Rabbi that went to a picnic? A

rabbi and a Catholic priest both serve congregations in a small town. And they are good buddies; they have known each other for years and are old friends. So they go to the town's Fourth of July picnic, and begin teasing each other.

The priest says to the rabbi, "This baked ham is really good! You ought to try it. I know it's against your religion, but I can't understand why such a wonderful food should be forbidden! You don't know what you are missing. You just haven't lived until you've tried Mrs. Hall's prized Virginia ham. Tell me Rabbi, when are you going to break down and try it?"

The rabbi turns to the priest with a big smile and says, "At your wedding." That is mutual understanding, when you can joke around like.

But in order to reach that level of mutual understanding you first need dialogue. Niebuhr writes, "To put it simply, you can coexist with people without ever having to speak meaningfully with them. What holds society together is not just people who will tolerate each other, but people who will actually go beyond that, to provide the glue that holds society together." It is as important to listen as it is to speak. Listening to another's point of view, be it a religious or political point of view, implies a mutual respect of the other. It does not necessarily imply agreement, just a recognition that what you say is important enough to

me that I need to be open to it. Dialogue acknowledges that we are equals. It means that I have to be a bit humble and recognize that my point of view is limited and that by listening to others, truly listening, that I might just have something to learn. I might be transformed by their opinion or I might reaffirm my own thoughts and feelings about a particular subject. But at any rate, it is about recognizing the other and showing them respect. What if an atheist could read the Bible and see in Jesus' gospel an ethic of love that is relevant to all humanity? Or the Christian could see in atheism a commitment to the truth that would cut through an individualistic quietism of one's personal religious experiences and push it further into a pragmatic application of faith; a works based religion?

This kind of openness to other religions is very important to me. When I was a freshman in college I experienced a profound loss of faith in God that led to a period of depression. For better or worse my old concepts about who God was and what his or her place in the universe had been shattered beyond repair. I would never be able to go back to the faith that I had grown up in. This was at the time a terrible realization, because I didn't really know what options were out there for me. I had done some exploring into other religions but none seemed to fit. That made the matter only worse. I seemed to know what I was moving away from, but not what I was moving toward.

That is until I happened, completely by chance, to stumble across a book entitled “Who Needs God” by Rabbi Harold Kushner. Kushner may be a familiar name to you. He is better known for his first book about coping with suffering “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?” “Who Needs God” was a sequel of sorts to that. In it, he talks about the very issues that I seemed to be wrestling with. Indeed he even talks about that great image in the Old Testament of Jacob wrestling with the stranger at the shores of the Jabbok River. And while they are engaged in their struggle this stranger puts Jacob’s hip out of joint. But in the end Jacob prevails, and instead of making the stranger cry uncle, he demands a blessing. Jacob is renamed Israel by this stranger because he has struggled with God and won. It turns out that the stranger was God himself, and that this struggle becomes a life-changing experience for Jacob. That was the story I needed to hear just then. That God is someone you wrestle with. Sometimes he knocks your hip out of joint and sometimes you prevail. It’s like Woody Allen’s famous line: “To you I am an atheist, but to God I am the loyal opposition.”

What Kushner gave me was not the path to salvation, at least not in literal terms. He simply demonstrated that there was such a thing as a reasonable, liberal interpretation of religion. His book was well thought out and lacked the shrillness of a fundamentalist. It was a book that marked a new beginning for me: that there was something to move toward. There is such a thing as liberal religion. You will notice,

incidentally, that I did not convert to Reformed Judaism. Six months later I began attending a Unitarian Universalist church. But part of me has always felt that I owe a debt of gratitude to liberal Judaism. Being a Buddhist, perhaps in the next life I will be reincarnated as a rabbi!

That moment was possible because I happened to read a book during a point in my life when I was particularly open to other religions ideas. I am not sure I am that open anymore. But at least we can be in dialogue with those ideas. The Congregationalists in Falmouth Massachusetts understood that the Jewish folks living in their town were a part of their community. They were equals. They were not an outside group that one would grudgingly tolerate just to keep the civil peace. They were their brothers and sisters, and when they envisioned a way to help them, this Congregational church went above and beyond expectations. They understood that they were in relationship to the Jewish congregation. It didn't mean that the Christians became Jews or vice versa. They disagreed on theology and practice of religion, but they still saw themselves in relationship together. This kind of relationship, where we disagree with each other but still stick with each other, is called a covenant. Covenant is the foundation not only of Congregationalism but also Unitarian Universalism; we share a common origin after all. We see this clearly in our church. There are Atheists, Humanists, Christians, Jews, Pagans, and others who do not choose to hyphenate their UU identity. But whether or not you do, there is a place

for you here. In Omaha there was at least one member of the church, she actually was the Treasurer at Second Unitarian Omaha, who attended Catholic Mass every other week. She didn't apologize for it, and no one asked her to. I know well respected Buddhist teachers who were raised Jewish—some still identify with both.

I think that interesting mixes like this are going to happen more and more in the future. As our country gets more religiously diverse, and communication technology brings us all closer together, it will not be as easy to hide out in our little enclaves and dream up stereotypes of other groups. Universalism is a hard word to live by. We have to talk to others, and listen to others. Learn from them as they, hopefully, learn from us. That is mutual recognition. I think it is good to have sub-groups in Unitarian Universalism. It helps people go deeper with their beliefs. It provides support when you feel displaced in the Unitarian Universalist world. But it is not OK for UU Christians to want to ban every other book but the Bible from Sunday morning worship, it is not OK for Humanists to ban the word God from Sunday morning worship, and it is not OK for Buddhist to ban, well all language, from Sunday morning worship and turn it into sixty minutes of silent meditation. In each case to have a single group dominate the others would be moving from a dialogue to a monologue. Affinity groups are not political action committees. They are there to promote learning among themselves and others who express an interest.

The goal is learning, mutual understanding, of that other point of view. People, usually people brand new to Unitarian Universalism, often ask me, “How do you keep all these folks with so many religious opinions happy?” I say, “I don’t. But I keep them all equally unhappy. That way it’s fair to everyone.” No seriously I think that ministers have the freedom of the pulpit to express our thoughts unhindered. But there is also freedom of the pew: you all don’t have to agree with those opinions! To me the unsuccessful sermon or newsletter column is not the one that some or all of you disagree with. A sermon is bad when you forget what it was about by the end of coffee hour. I have done my job if I can get you thinking about something, even if it is one hundred and eighty degrees away from what I have said. Because if in your disagreement you have clarified what you think or feel, then that is just as good as if you agreed with me! No one gets 100% of their theology reflected back at them every Sunday or in some other medium. Fortunately Unitarian Universalism expects of us this dialogue with the other even when we don’t agree. Even when we disagree, the bond of our covenant as a church gets strengthened because we have taken the other seriously and shown them respect as equals just by our listening.

May we seek to cultivate warm acceptance among ourselves and everyone outside our walls. May we seek first to hear before we are heard, as St. Francis would say. And may our covenant with each other grow stronger and stronger day by day. Amen Blessed Be.