

Our Besetting Sins, Part 2: Exceptionalism

Have I told you all lately how very grateful I am for this ministry? For this congregation, your mission, your passion, your resilience? Have I told you lately that when I'm planning worship, I visualize you sitting in the pews – listening, singing, sharing silence, sharing fellowship. I see you. And sometimes I hear you. This is what I heard earlier this week as I was writing this sermon.

Voice #1: So, Roberta, what are you doing preaching about sin? You think we come to church to hear about how bad we are? Isn't that why Unitarian Universalism exists? As an antidote to the hell fire and brimstone preaching of the Great Awakening, the very emotional and fear-based religious movement that gave birth to liberal religion?

Voice #2: Well, yes. But haven't you ever been accused of belonging to a Pollyanna-like cult that thinks that everybody is good and everything is wonderful? Do you ever just look around and see all the evil in the world? If you believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, how do you explain Hitler? (That one is always a conversation stopper!)

If I spent all my worship preparation time listening to those voices, I'd never get a sermon written. Yes, I know sin is a hard word for some of you to hear. To those of you I say, "Not that sin." And I know that sometimes our faith in humanity is hard to hold onto while reading the daily news. And to you I say, "Inherent worth, not necessarily behavioral worth."

Over the past year, I have been engaged, at the request of the Board, in a study of what makes congregations grow and what keeps congregations from growing. This three-sermon series is, in effect, my report on that study. I have learned a great deal about the general place of institutional religion in American

culture, and I have learned a great deal about the particular place of liberal religion. And to be honest, there's no way to get at what is holding us back, what has prevented us from becoming what sages over the centuries always thought would be the quintessential American religion, without using some strong language. Words like sin.

Fred Muir, the author of our reading this morning (thanks Jim; it was a complex reading) and of the book on which this sermon series is based, identified three sins, corporate misunderstandings if you will, that make it hard for us to grow and thrive. The first, discussed last month, is individualism. Now Fred is not advocating that we turn our backs on our first Principle: affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person. He is simply urging us to be acutely aware of the shadow side of honoring individuality; that is idolizing the individual at the expense of the community. Taking such pride in being creedless that we forget that we are a covenanted community, that we owe each other something, that we need to voluntarily sacrifice sometimes for the good of the whole. That was America's first statement of faith. Before our fear of so-called godless Communism drove us to start putting "In God We Trust" on our money, we simply had "E Pluribus Unum." Out of many, one.

The antidote for individualism is not a blind conformity. It is, according to Fred, generosity of spirit. It takes courage to practice spiritual generosity. You must take a leap of faith to believe that there will be enough, always, to share. To live from an assumption of plenty rather than scarcity. Most particularly in the current political climate, in which fear mongers are urging us to hoard, to scapegoat, to clutch what we have to our chests – a spirit of generosity gently nudges us to unclench our fists, move past our anxieties, and open up to still unseen possibilities. Fred writes, "When we are around those whose spirit is

generous, who give of their time, presence, and resources, we leave them feeling refreshed and whole and ready to engage another day; maybe we hope to spend more time with them or even emulate their actions and words.” That kind of experience is a foundation for growth, my friends!

And so, let us, with courage, move on to confront the next sin in the trinity: exceptionalism. Again quoting Fred Muir (whose book is available for sale in the Book Corner after the service), “Here is how the Unitarian Universalist version of exceptionalism sounds to many: Unitarian Universalism is a faith shaped by perceptions, ideas, intuitions and ambitions which posits, among other things, that our way of religion is uniquely virtuous . . . (You know this is true. We have all been guilty being prideful and even boastful about our incredibly enlightened approach!) . . . uniquely powerful . . . (You know this is true. We brag about the outsized effect we have had historically, in spite of our small numbers, then point to the accomplishments of the late 19th century as proof.) . . . uniquely destined to accomplish great things . . . (Thomas Jefferson said that within a generation every young man in America would be a Unitarian. One of many things he turned out to be wrong about.) . . . and thus uniquely authorized to act in ways to which (we) would object if done by other (ways of faith).” (We are so proud of not imposing a creed on ourselves, but there are some orthodoxies among us that new people at their peril. I once saw a new member reduced to tears after she made the terrible mistake of bringing a donation to a potluck that had been purchased at Walmart. She was told, in no uncertain terms, that ‘we did not shop at Walmart.’ The person who scolded her had no idea that this single mother could not afford to shop at the upscale grocery store being touted as the ‘ethical’ alternative to Walmart.)

Embedded in our sense of exceptionalism are several assumptions. One is that we are smarter than everybody else. And better educated. Come on, you know

that many of us who are atheist or agnostic or humanist secretly believe that our faith is more evolved than the faith of those who cling to their ‘superstitious’ belief in God. Am I pushing anybody’s buttons yet? Well let me just power on. We too often make the mistake of assuming that everybody in our congregations must be college educated. That because we advocate the use of reason in religion, our members must have a degree or two in order to follow our path. It is important to remember that all people, no matter their educational status, are capable of thinking critically about their own life experiences. “Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information.” Educational philosopher Paulo Freire from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I love his words and his root idea; it has always felt to me like a corrective to our UU tendency to over-intellectualize. Look, I know this room is pretty full of people with Ph.D.’s. This congregation more than some. I don’t have a Doctorate. I started work on a D.Min. degree once, but quickly realized that what I needed, and what my congregations needed, was not more information, but more depth and more love and more passion. My humble offerings to you as you each, no matter your level of education or development, reflect on your lives in thoughtful ways.

And that is what theology is for Unitarian Universalists, is it not? Reflection on lived experience? (That is the phrase Dick Gilbert uses to describe our way of doing religion. Dick Gilbert, who penned the words of our prayer this morning, is the author of the incredibly popular adult education curriculum called Building Your Own Theology. The kind of reflecting we do in our small groups (Soul Matters or otherwise), in our team meetings, and in worship.

So, there’s the sin of exceptionalism; it is the assumptions we make, sometimes unconsciously, about intelligence, education level, class, experience, and resources. Again quoting Fred Muir, “We must stay conscious of how we

explain, defend, or share, lest we come across as elitist, insulting, degrading, isolating or even humiliating to others.” What, then, is the antidote to this sin? It is the genuine embrace of pluralism. We must cultivate a firm belief that our way is one way, a good way for those who choose it, but it is not the only way of faith.

The promise of pluralism moves us past the celebration of diversity. As Muir points out, diversity simply means differences. Everybody in our nation now lives with diversity, whether they like it or not. But for diversity to deepen into the spiritual practice of pluralism take intention, and courage. Eboo Patel writes that, “Pluralism is an achievement characterized by three elements: respect for different identities, positive relationships between diverse communities, and a commitment to the common good.”

Now I feel like we’ve come full circle, back to the common good. It takes courage to achieve pluralism the way Patel defines it. The courage to respect rather than fear difference. The courage to lean into the differences and engage with those we might otherwise fear. Engage in a true conversation, a give and take from which we all learn. And the courage to commit to the common good, to be willing to sacrifice for it. Our theme for the month of October has been courage, and it snuck into this sermon even though I wasn’t expecting it to. You know what the theme for November is? It’s abundance. What does it mean to be a people of abundance?

And that has also snuck into this sermon. The corrective for excessive individualism is generosity; the spiritual practice of living into and out of faith in the abundance of resources. The corrective for exceptionalism is pluralism; the spiritual practice of living into and out of an abundance of ways of being in the world.

We have begun in earnest to renew our membership processes. New ideas, new teams, new volunteers. We are offering new training for ushers and greeters, and later in the year we will be offering training in radical hospitality for all our leadership. But those organizational fixes will only move us a little bit closer to our goal of growing into a thriving and diverse UU congregation. The real key to growth lies with those of you who do not have a job on the Membership and Engagement Committee. Those of you who, when you come to church on Sunday, deliberately seek out the person you don't know rather than your old friends. Who put on your name tag first thing, even though it really is so hard to remember. Those of you who, when beginning a conversation, do so with an open-ended question that is free of assumptions about who might choose to come to a UU congregation. Those of you who can, when asked, articulate something positive about your UU faith rather than comparing it unfavorably to other religions.

Let's atone for the corporate sin of exceptionalism by being, both individually and corporately, extraordinary. Extraordinarily intentional. Extraordinarily hospitable. Extraordinarily bold in our openness to the whole range of human experience. As we move from October to November, from courage to abundance, I offer you one of my favorite poems. The Fountain by Denise Levertov.

Don't say, don't say there is no water to solace the dryness at our hearts.
I have seen the fountain springing out of the rock wall and you drinking there
And I too before your eyes found footholds and climbed to drink the cool water.
The woman of that place, shading her eyes, frowned as she watched-but not
because she grudged the water,
only because she was waiting to see we drank our fill and were refreshed.

Don't say, don't say there is no water.

The fountain is there among its scalloped grey and green stones,

it is still there and always there with its quiet song and strange power
to spring in us, up and out through the rock.