

“UU Good News”
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August 24, 2008 – UUCM

While I was living in Kansas City I was asked to be a part of a panel discussion at a lunch-time forum of the University of Missouri’s Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Transgender Student Alliance. The panelists were all religious leaders from different churches, temples and synagogues around the city. We were asked to speak to the college students about what our particular tradition teaches about same-sex relationships.

After each of the clergy members spoke the floor was opened up for questions. At one point a young woman stood up and introduced herself as Jessica and said that she was a little confused by what I had said, not about how our church supports gay rights issues, but could I please, she asked, explain just what it is that Unitarian Universalists believe?

I said, “That is a little bit of a tricky question because in our tradition we don’t all believe the same thing. We don’t have any doctrine or a creed that we all agree to— that’s not what we’re about. Instead we think it is important for each person to discern for themselves what it is that they believe.”

She looked at me blankly. I got the sense she was waiting for more.

So I went on, “But we also agree that there is really no way for anyone to know for sure the answers to life’s big questions. So we come together on Sunday mornings to: ponder the Mysteries of Life and Love, to support one another in our individual questing, to help one another celebrate life’s joys and mourn together our losses and we work side-by-side to try to bring love and justice to the world right now.”

She paused for a moment and cocked her head to one side, brows furrowed, “So y’all don’t believe in the Bible?”

At that point I could see that it might just take the rest of the hour – and probably much longer – for me to be able to explain Unitarian Universalism in a way Jessica would understand. I suggested we talk some more privately after the discussion was over.

The truth is that liberal religion is not easy to pin down or put in a box. I think that’s because it is more like a journey than a destination, a process and not a product.

Back in 1921, L.B. Fisher, the editor of the Universalist newsletter, *The Leader*, wrote: "Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand, we move... We do not stand still; we do not defend any immovable positions, theologically speaking, and we are therefore harder to count or to form into imposing numbers. We grow and we march, as all living things forever must do."

Though it can be frustrating to attempt to summarize, I think that this inability to label what we believe in common is not a detriment. It could, in fact, be seen as our greatest strength. We acknowledge and even celebrate the fact that ultimate truth is unknowable, yet we also delight in the process of striving to comprehend the farthest reaches of imagination. There is even a sense of pride in the fact that we really wouldn’t have it any other way.

Henry Nelson Wieman, the great 20th-century Unitarian theologian, pointed out that for human beings, "there is no prescribed form or limited bounds within which (we) can live

with contentment." He went on to say that the true goal in human history is "the progressive creation of qualitative meaning beyond any known limit."

These days we take great pride in the fact that we are a non-creedal religious organization. But let us not forget that prior to the joining of the two denominations in 1961 both Unitarianism and Universalism are named for their distinctive Christian doctrines. Unitarianism refers to the belief that God is one, as opposed to the predominant Trinitarian belief in a triune God.

Universalism refers to the idea that salvation is universal – that everyone goes to heaven eventually and there is no hell. Of course, these were both traditions that valued freedom and reason and the use of individual conscience. So when they came together it was a logical step to do away with any doctrinal requirements for membership.

After the forum at the University Jessica and I found one another. I spent a few more minutes talking about how people in our congregation identify themselves as UU Christians, UU Jews, UU pagans, or UU Buddhists. Some people believe in a personal God, some aren't sure and others are ardent atheists.

She said, "So, people can believe whatever they want to at your church?"

"Well, yes and no." I said, which made her eyebrows knit even closer together.

I didn't feel like I was doing a particularly good job explaining the important difference between the free and easy believe-anything-you-want-to and the disciplined quest to discern your own heart and mind's dictates.

"We don't believe what we want to, we believe what we have to." I said.

It is true that it would have been much easier for me to have stayed within the bounds of the United Methodist Church. If I were a United Methodist minister I wouldn't have to spend as much time attempting to explain my denomination to people. And, I grew up in that church, I knew the culture, my dad had been a respected United Methodist minister for over 40 years which would have given me a lot of ready-made connections. And lastly, and not that this is that important, but their seminary program was less expensive and their ministers are guaranteed income for life after ordination.

If I were free to believe whatever I wanted to, trust me, I would have wanted to believe in United Methodist Christianity. But my conscience just wouldn't let me. What it came down to is that Christianity just isn't big enough to hold all that I feel is true.

So I told Jessica that, "We believe what we have to, what our conscience dictates. Our communities, fellowships and churches are places where people can be intellectually honest. Where there is room for our integrity."

To which she said, "I guess that makes sense to me, but what holds you together, what makes your church a church? You call it a religion but it sounds like just a bunch of people having different religious thoughts."

I explained that we do have a lot that holds us together. For example, our seven Principles. I told her that in a democratic process UUs from all of our over 1000 congregations agreed as one body to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

When I had finished Jessica told me that she could go along with all our principles too, they didn't seem like such a big deal to her. But then she said, "In addition I also believe that Jesus is my savior, his death on the cross saved me from my sins. That belief gives me great comfort. My faith has pulled me through some of my darkest times. I can't imagine going to a church that doesn't teach that."

I wasn't sure what I could say to that. We parted but her comments stayed with me for a long while afterwards. I spent several weeks trying to put my finger on what it is that Unitarian Universalism offers that helps sustain people through their hard times, that releases us from our arrogance, shame and isolation. What is the UU good news, our gospel of liberation?

There are three core beliefs that we as religious liberals affirm and that I think are the basis for our good news. The first is that we don't have the answers to life's big questions. No one does. We believe that revelation is continuous – it hasn't and will not ever be captured in any scripture or research publication.

At first glance that may not sound much like good news. Many people are reassured by having the lines drawn for them. But we find comfort in the fact that reality is more vast than our imagination. That even as the island of knowledge expands, so too does the shoreline of mystery.

We believe that we are part of purposes and processes far greater than we will ever know. This knowledge gives us the freedom to explore, to experience and to think for ourselves. We believe that understanding grows in free and open discourse, and it cannot be imposed from above.

The second core belief is that it is up to us to create the Beloved Community here on Earth. We are not busy trying to keep our own noses clean waiting for our reward in some heavenly afterlife. And, as appealing as the idea may sometimes be, we are not sitting idly by waiting for some unseen power to smite all the evil-doers out of the world. No, we understand that we have a moral obligation to direct our efforts toward the establishment of a more just and loving community.

During the Reformation in Europe there was a principle called the "priesthood of all believers" which shifted the balance of power towards the lay people and away from the priests. In the last century UU theologian James Luther Adams coined the term the "the

prophethood of all believers" in effort to empower us once again. He insisted that each of us has an obligation to prophesy, to name what is wrong in our society and call one another to love and justice.

And the third core belief of religious liberalism is that there is every reason to be hopeful. That with what the universe provides and all that we can do, ultimate optimism is justified.

We have seen effort create meaningful changes in our own lives and the lives of our loved ones: recovery from addictions, healing from grief, and increased compassion for those still suffering.

We have witnessed shifts towards accountability and collaboration in local organizations: cooperative housing, community gardens, homeless shelters and advocacy for local economy and universal healthcare. We know that people working together for a greater good can prevail.

A colleague of mine wrote, "Hope is like a river's current - without it there would be stagnation; in excess there would be destruction; but a steady current refreshes and renews and leads on."¹

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of history is long - but it bends toward justice."

And a little closer to home, our very own great prophet, Utah Philips, said: "There are too many good people doing too many good things for me to afford the luxury of pessimism."

If I could go back to Kansas City and find Jessica I would tell her that Unitarian Universalism does indeed offer a gospel of liberation. This is our good news:

You are free to discover, develop and continually deepen your own understanding of the Universe and your place in it – using the tools of scriptures and science, poetry and reason.

You do this in a community of people who are striving, alongside you, to be as loving, forgiving and accepting as they can. People who will help you find the strength and wisdom to see you through your darkest hours.

And this takes place not in isolation, but in relationship with other Unitarian Universalists across the country. You are part of a vast network that is endeavoring to bring more justice and more kindness to our communities and to the world.

And finally, what each of us brings, when combined with the all-encompassing Spirit of Love, is enough to transform our world.

May it be so. Amen. Blessed be.

¹ Five Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism: The Legacy of James Luther Adams A Sermon by Rev. John E. Gibbons and Cynthia L. G. Kane