

PROPHETIC WOMEN AND MEN
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This sermon is the second in the series I am bringing to you on the Sources of our faith tradition. Last month I talked with you about direct experience, and how that deeply influenced our development, and marks us as different from our close cousins, liberal Christians. The Purposes and Principles is the covenant our congregations share with each other and the larger Association, and is one of the documents from which we draw our identity. We are far more familiar with the seven principles. I thought it time we explored more deeply the six sources.

This section of our covenant begins: The Living Tradition We Share Draws from Many Sources, and the second source continues:

Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

The first thing we notice when we look at this source is that it starts with "Words AND Deeds". We are a book-based faith, although we do not limit the library from which we draw to just one book. We recognize that words are important. When we craft a document, whether vision statement or covenant or sermon, we wrestle with words and how they are put together.

We grew out of the Reformation. One of the great signs of the Reformation was that we Protestants, or protesters, moved the altar and changed what went on it. We moved it closer to the people, moved the Eucharist to the side, and placed upon it a book. We said that the word of God resided in that book.

Of course we who are radical religious liberals then said that many books contain divine wisdom, not just one. However, the emphasis on words remained. Our Unitarian Universalist Association still calls for a learned ministry. Thus we can say with confidence that words remain important to our faith.

They are important but insufficient. We must be about doing also. We must act out our faith in deeds. Since we covenant to affirm and promote "the worth and dignity of every person," through the seven Principles, ending with "the interdependent web of existence", we are obligated to enact the meaning of this covenant. Because we encourage each person to name his or her personal faith path, such as theism, humanism, or naturalism, everyone must use their own lens to determine what their faith calls on them to do.

We often find that we agree on a path that we can walk together. The point is that words are insufficient, and must be accompanied by deeds.

We can think of people throughout our history who used both words and deeds to challenge and inspire us. The Bible tells us that before the psalm-writer David was king of ancient Israel, he defeated the giant Goliath in battle. Although we often refer to Jesus of Nazareth as the gentle rabbi, there is that story about driving the moneychangers out of the temple.

In our Unitarian history we learn about Francis David in Transylvania, who engaged in a week-long debate with traditional Christians and convinced the king

to become a Unitarian. This same Francis David was superintendent of the churches in that small nation.

In the modern era, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave speeches that moved literally millions and are used in Persuasion classes as examples of great oratory. And he led marches that put him in significant personal danger.

Words and Deeds—we are called to both.

The next phrase in our source is Prophetic Women and Men. You will note that the phrase is not the usual men and women. This seems unremarkable now, but when this document was being crafted in the early 1980's it marked a change, a significant change. And it is because of the Women and Religion Committee.

In the late 1970's (you will note that date is that of the last great movement of feminism), a group of feisty UU women decided that our faith needed to reflect the values of all of our people. They approached the General Assembly with a motion to form a Women and Religion Committee to help move us toward a faith that included the talents, energy, values and vision of women. And they wanted our documents to reflect language that included women. The General Assembly approved the motion, which included a requirement that the president report to the Assembly yearly on how this work was proceeding.

This version of the Purposes and Principles is a direct result of that action, as is our current hymnbook. It is not random chance that the order of words in this phrase is women and men.

So, who are some of these challenging women? Let us look at Esther in the Bible. Esther is a short book, and tells a very interesting story. Like some other characters in this great source book, it is questionable whether there was a real Esther. However, the effect of the story remains. For Esther, a member of the Jewish race considered second class in Persia, married the emperor, the great Xerxes. In a complicated plot, she brought about the destruction of Haman, the king's principal advisor, who was plotting the death of the Jews. However, not only Haman was killed but his family, friends, associates, etc. Esther challenged the prevailing society of the time, and she continues to do so today. If you read her story, you may be disturbed by its violent outcome. Esther remains a challenge in many ways.

Mary of Magdala represents all of the women who followed that teacher and prophet who challenged the status quo in Ancient Israel. Only in the last few years have scholars translated the Gospel of Mary that gives us her purported words. Her brave action of following Jesus to the Mount and staying with other women as he died has been part of the Jesus story since antiquity.

In our religious history, Olympia Brown, native of the Kalamazoo area, was the first woman ordained by a denomination, and a noted feminist of the first wave. And Martha Sharp joined her husband, the Rev. Waitzell Sharp, during the second World War to help save refugees, especially children from the ravages of war and genocide.

Some of the men we might lift up for recognition would include Elijah, the prophet of ancient Israel who personifies our stereotype of prophet. He challenged the Israelites to live out their faith, to stay true to their god, to enact justice. And Paul, who began life as Saul of Tarsus was so inspired by his vision of Jesus that he gave up a life of privilege to earn his living as a tentmaker while founding churches across the Middle East.

John Murray swore to give up preaching and live a sedate life, but found that the call to spread the word of Universalism was irresistible. Sometimes men act together to challenge and inspire us all. When Martin Luther King, Jr. called upon ministers and people of faith to join the march for voting rights in Alabama, the board of the Unitarian Association was meeting in Boston. (They were all men in those days.) They voted to recess their meeting and fly to Selma, then joined King on the march to Montgomery.

The next phrase is a long one: Challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil. Now, challenge is a fairly simple concept, and we have already discussed it a bit. We UUs are often good at challenging and confronting. But then comes that next small phrase, powers and structures of evil. What do we mean by that?

We liberal religionists are often uncomfortable discussing evil. We have an optimistic view of the cosmos, and really don't want to acknowledge the presence of evil-unless it is embodied in a structure. Why do we get so worked up about politics? I submit that it is often because we see a structure that is, not just inefficient, but damaging to people. Traditional Christians, on the other hand, usually see evil as residing within a person or persons.

As I write this, the financial and economic structure of our nation is crumbling. Government representatives and financiers are working around the clock to devise ways of rescuing it. Thus far it is costing us, the taxpayers, increasing billions of dollars to shore up the structure upon which our economic survival depends.

The two major candidates for president have responded in ways that illustrate the two ways of defining evil. Senator Obama has an economic plan, laid out in some detail, and crafted a two-minute commercial in which he explained it to the American people. He saw the problem in the structures that support the current system, and proposes to change those structures.

Senator McCain's immediate response, since modified, was that the "fundamentals (structures) are sound," and that the problem was that individuals were greedy. (Advisors have coached him, now he has added to that analysis.) For the sake of this discussion, it doesn't matter who was correct; it matters that we see the two ways of defining evil.

Although the source does not say this, I personally believe that both are true. There are structures of society that fail to support all the people, (and I name that as evil), and there are individuals who take advantage of these structures to greatly benefit themselves.

Let us return to the meaning of the source thus far. We recognize that women and men throughout history have spoken and acted in ways that challenge us to confront evil. Challenge US. How might we, as a group respond to evil?

Our history during the Civil Rights era has many examples, as I have noted. Let me share the story of one small church that acted together. It is my home church, First Unitarian Universalist of Jackson, Mississippi. I was not there during this time, but it is one of the reasons I walked through the door of that church.

Mississippi, the bastion of Old South culture, provided perhaps the biggest challenge to what is known as The Movement. The culture in that state forbade the interaction of what was then known as "blacks" and "whites" in an equal way. They did not go to school together nor officially meet together, nor did they play sports together.

The church challenged all of these norms. They declared themselves open to meetings of mixed groups. Thus they became a center of the Civil Rights movement. There was a basketball league of "white" churches. The UU church joined, recruited a few "ringers" of African Americans, and integrated the system-which shut down shortly after a few games.

Most significantly, they became the home of the first integrated Head Start program in the state of Mississippi. Young children, African Americans, the children of the church, and few other brave souls, met and learned together. That school survived and eventually became the state-approved and supported Alternative School in Jackson. My daughter benefited from attending the school.

Let me suggest that this is a good example of how we, as UUs acting together can challenge the powers and structures of evil. For surely there are few things more evil than racism, whether it lies in structures or in the hearts of people.

And I might suggest that it helps illustrate the last phrase of this, the second source of our faith: With justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. We are not called to violence, although violence may result from a challenge, as it did in Selma, and it did in Jackson. (The church was fire-bombed, with little effect. The minister was shot, then left town when his family was threatened.)

We are called to challenge with the goal of justice, yet with compassion and love in our hearts. In the Civil Rights era, we sought the right to vote for all people. That is a justice issue. Martin Luther King, Jr. drew on the example of Ghandi, who drew on the example of Henry David Thoreau, and espoused non-violence. He, and we religious liberals, did not fight with nightsticks and dogs, guns and beatings. They fought with compassion and love.

When I was here in August, I talked with you a bit about our church in Nashville, the Tennessee Valley UU Congregation. The church was gathered for Sunday services, with guests from a sister church in attendance, when a man entered the church and shot eight people. Two died. If you missed Bill Moyers' story a week ago on the probable cause of the man's motivation, and an interview with the Rev.

Chris Buice, the minister of the church, I encourage you to find it on the web and listen.

Here are some of the things that followed after that horrendous event.

Within two days there was a banner in front of the church that read, Love Is the Spirit of this Church.

When the Rev. Bill Sinkford, president of the UUA helped lead a community service of remembrance and healing, attended by many UUs and people of all faiths, someone asked him if he believed the shooter would burn in hell. All over the church UUs began to laugh-quietly as one does in a worship service, but quite clearly laughing. The non-UUs were puzzled. Bill smiled and said, "We don't do hell."

The Tennessee Valley UU Congregation responded with love and compassion to the attack upon them. And they were attacked because they challenged the structures of hatred in their community.

I know that you have donated to this church. I'd like to share with you some of what you are helping to support. The church is hiring a part-time pastoral care minister for 3-6 months to assist the Rev. Chris Buice with the tremendous demands for pastoral care in the congregation and to help TVUUC set up a lay pastoral care associates program. They hired a trauma-trained mental health specialist to be onsite to work, especially with the children and parents on Sunday mornings and to hold parent and other groups throughout the week.

TVUUC hired a part-time temporary RE Assistant to help with the intensified demands of the RE program following the shooting. The church grew by about 25% in the last two months. People were so impressed with their actions they wanted to be a part of the group.

Loss of income by the victims is one the biggest needs for the shooting victims. Five of the eight victims, including the two who were killed, were primary breadwinners in their families (the others were retired). The three who are recovering anticipate being out of work for six months to a year. We have provided grants to these families from the Fund already but we do not have enough to replace all of the anticipated lost income.

One of the victims who has extensive injuries (she was blinded, and her mother was killed) is a single parent with two children (6 year old and 14 year old). Both require fulltime childcare - this might have to be continued for a year or longer.

Help with counseling for members of the congregation who are experiencing trauma is also a need.

Thomas Jefferson district reimbursed the UU Trauma Response Ministry Team for a portion of their expenses (and hope to provide them with more). Over ten ministers provided phenomenal support to the congregations in the ten-day period following the shooting.

This congregation responded with love to the tragedy that struck on a normal Sunday morning. We hope and pray that no more UU congregations will suffer such an attack. However, they have been added to the list of many prophetic women and men who challenge and inspire us.

This second source provides us with a rich tapestry of people from whom we can draw strength and inspiration, as well as challenge. For there are always challenges to which we could, perhaps should, respond. Our history calls us to do so effectively but lovingly. May we be equal to the challenge.

Shalom and Saalat.

Blessed Be and Amen.