

GOING FORWARD

May 12, 2012

In the forward to the book we give to our newcomers, *A Chosen Faith*, The Rev. Robert Fulghum, author of *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, reconstructs a conversation he says often occurred in a bookstore.

“Mr. Fulghum, is it true that you’re a minister?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s your church?”

“We’re standing in it.”

“But this is a bookstore and it’s Friday.”

“Yes, but you might also choose to see it as a cathedral of the human spirit—a storehouse consecrated to the full spectrum of human experience. Just about every idea we’ve ever had is here somewhere. A place containing great thinking is a sacred space.”

“Really? Just what kind of minister are you?”

“Unitarian Universalist.”

“And you hold services in bookstores on Fridays? You’re putting me on.”

“No, but I am giving you an example of how Unitarian Universalists think. More than anything else, our religion is defined by an attitude. An open-minded point of view. Almost anything and everything.

What we have most in common is an uncommon way of looking at the obvious. A church is not just a specific building, but also a way of looking at the building you are in at the moment. A minister is not just a person who stands in a pulpit and preaches on Sunday mornings, but also the way some people engage the world. A religion is not contained in a single book, there’s something religious in almost any book”

Fulgham continues the conversation, which ends, naturally, with the person deciding he or she would like to know more about this faith.

A month ago, when I was last here, I talked with you about change, and how all of us, the congregation, Dawn, and me, were facing change.

I told you it was difficult, but that I was sure that you could and would rise to this challenge and emerge stronger and healthier and growing. Today I want to give you some grounding for that transition. I will draw on our faith tradition, which goes back to the founding of the Hebrew faith, over 6000 years ago. This is a classic three-point sermon and here are the points:

1. We are people of the book. In truth we are people of many books
2. We are, in the eyes of traditional religionists, heretics. And we claim the label.
3. And we are also The Love People.

The Rev. Fulgham was correct to place us in a bookstore. We are, indeed, people of the book.

Ministers from traditional faiths are astounded at the variety of resources available to UU preachers. We can draw from many faith traditions, from philosophies, and from the hard and soft sciences. We can draw from the Hebrew Bible, one of the oldest religious books still used for current teaching, and we can draw from today's newspaper. All learning is available to us. Some UU ministers measure their bookcases in yards, and the newer ministers recount the tech gadgets that store whole libraries in the palm of their hands.

The phrase, *people of the Book*, in theological circles, or history of religion circles, refers to the faiths that ground their truth in what we know as the Bible. It is composed of the Torah and what Christians call the New Testament,

plus some other writings. Our farthest back religious ancestors walked the Judean desert and settled the still contested land of Israel or Palestine. They based their faith on the Torah, which was credited to Moses, although scholars today consider that highly doubtful. Some of them broke away to follow the teachings of a radical rabbi from Galilee who taught lessons of love, and mercy, and anger at the bankers who got wealthy selling sacrificial animals to poor people. Sounds like his lessons could be used in today's society....

Some of his followers wrote down what they thought he said and did, and recorded the history of the church that formed after he died, plus some other writings, and this formed what we call the New Testament. Another book. And the two were joined together for the newly formed Christian church as The Bible.

The church grew in size and influence after the Emperor Constantine converted and united his empire under one faith. It is far easier to control the people when they all follow one faith. For centuries only the wealthy were educated, and this included the

wealthy who controlled the church and the priests who were taught enough to read from the sacred text during services.

Then something happened to change this medieval society. Actually several things happened in 1492 and thereabouts, but the thing I want to lift up is the invention of the printing press. Books could now be published cheaply.

Books and manifestos and articles and pamphlets multiplied, and soon the people learned to read them. And when they did, they could read the Bible for themselves, and *use their minds* to decide what was true and what was false.

We know this era of history as the Reformation, and it was from the left wing of the Reformation that we Unitarians formed. Our forbears read the Bible, and the pamphlets, and manifestos, and said, "I don't see any mention of the trinity of God in here." And they broke off to form their own faith communities. Many of them paid a very heavy price for their independent thought. However, the point is that they were basing their beliefs on this *Book*.

They might interpret it differently from others, but it was still the primary Book.

It still is for many of our close cousins. We are some of the few who both moved away from the primacy of this one specific book, and kept together as a faith community. Now we include many books in our library of religious truths. We are still, however, people of the book, and meeting in a bookstore is not unknown in our history.

I said that the second point on which we can ground our faith is that we are heretics. In any other church that would be an impossible statement, and any minister who promoted such an idea would be run out of town. But we take pride in the identity.

We ARE heretical to the traditional Christians who are our reluctant ancestors. We don't claim that Jesus is the One Way, or that he died and rose for the forgiveness of our sins. We claim that Jesus taught many good lessons. Most of us admire his teachings, and wish someone, sometime, would take them seriously enough to give them a good try. Let me hasten to say that there have been ample numbers of Christians who have actually based their lives and actions on the teachings of Jesus. However, the established church seems always to stumble in that regard, especially as it becomes more successful in the eyes of the material world.

We embrace, however, the truths and teachings of many faiths, many leaders, many gurus. We pride ourselves on thinking for ourselves.

We read many books, and debate their merits, and use our minds (some might say God-given minds) to discern what embodies truth for us. We include in the mix the

teachings of science, and, unlike our traditional cousins, we have no problems with them.

Sir Isaac Newton, sometimes considered the father of the scientific method was a Unitarian, as was Joseph Priestly, who was both Unitarian minister and scientist. Alexander Graham Bell and Maria Mitchell, Lewis Latimer and Luther Burbank found their faith contributed to rather than contradicted their scientific endeavors. Darwin was from a Unitarian family, and his wife attended church faithfully. And Michael Servetus, doctor and theologian, was burned at the stake by Calvin for his anti-trinitarian writings.

Servetus lived in the dangerous world of post-1492 Europe. He grew up in Spain, where he lived in his wealthy uncle's house. The mansion contained an extensive library, much of it in Arabic, for Islam was then the home of the scholarly and learned thinkers. He became a doctor, but was very interested in theology. He published a pamphlet, called "The Errors of the Trinity", that argued that the doctrine of the trinity was a huge error. "God," he declared, "is One." When he sent the pamphlet to Calvin, he suggested they meet and discuss the arguments. Calvin responded by declaring him a heretic.

Servetus lived in France under an assumed name practicing medicine. However, he could not keep away from theology, and resumed publishing his independent thinking. He approached Calvin again, who invited him to come to Switzerland under a safe travel passport. When he arrived, thinking to have a gentlemanly debate, he was seized and imprisoned. As was usual with heretics, his captors gave him many opportunities to recant, so that he might be mercifully killed, rather than suffer the heretic's fate—burning at the stake. He refused. Calvin gathered as many of his pamphlets as possible, sending soldiers searching throughout Europe. He ordered them piled around the wood that surrounded his stake, so that his heresy would die with him. Servetus died a martyr's death.

Bibliophiles believe there are now only two copies of his "On the Errors of the Trinity" in existence, and name them the most expensive books in the world.

We are heretics according to traditional religion, and we embrace that identity.

I told you that we are also the Love people. During most of Unitarianism's existence, we might not have been labeled as such, nor would we have claimed it. However, we are now Unitarian Universalists. And that makes all the difference.

The Universalists were people who identified God with Love. "God loves his people too much," they said, "to sentence them to eternal torment." Therefore, they claimed in the theological debates of the late 1700's, all people would be saved. The message was a radical one at that time. It was the heyday of *man is a worm, and is only saved by*

grace, theology and preaching. Universalists were also considered heretics, but they had a very attractive theology, one that was based on hope and love.

There is a famous story recounted in John Murray's autobiography that illustrates this. It seems Murray was walking in the woods, bound for the next preaching gig, when he passed a small cottage. He heard great sobs and lamentations coming from the modest residence. Walking to the front door, he knocked and let himself in. He found a woman nursing a baby as she rocked, while around her two other children played and tried to comfort her.

"Madam," he cried, "What ails you? Why do you weep so as to break my heart?"

"Ah, sir," she replied. "I weep for I know not which of my beloved babes will go to heaven and which to the fires of hell. We know that the Bible teaches that only a few of all of humanity will be blessed with Heaven. I cannot bear it that my babes will suffer."

"Oh, Madam," cried Murray. "Be comforted." And he pulled out the Bible he always carried, with specific passages marked. "The Good Book offers a different view. ALL shall be saved. God loves ALL his children. Your babes will join him—and you—in Heaven." And he read the appropriate passages.

"Oh, good sir," replied the Goodwife, "may you be blessed with long life and health. You have healed a mother's broken heart."

Both John Murray, and his wife, Judith Sargent Murray, who assisted him in writing his autobiography after his stroke, knew how to tell a good story.

The story illustrates, in a dramatic manner, both the stress of living in a society that considered humankind as inherently evil, and whose theology taught that only those humans who experienced the grace of God would join him in Heaven, while all others would suffer in Hell, and what the message of Love offered by Universalism meant to people.

It is no wonder it was embraced by many people, and that traditional denominations eventually coopted its message.

When Unitarians and Universalists merged in the 1960s, both faiths brought gifts to the united association. One of the gifts brought by Universalists was an emphasis on love, which stemmed from their classic understanding of the Divine. A simplistic understanding at the time was that the Unitarians brought head stuff and the Universalists heart stuff. While the truth is more complex, the statement is based on reality.

Now, one of our favorite hymns is “Standing on the Side of Love”, and we have tee shirts with that logo,

and we have a social justice movement that wears them and sings the song. In many places, when the gold shirts with their logo appear, folks say, “Here come the Love people.” Let us also embrace this identity.

As you traverse this time of transition, you can ground yourself in these identities: we have a long tradition of being People of the Book, we are also Heretics who are unafraid of science or of exploring many truths in many books, and we are the Love People.

Remember who you are: remember your history, remember your stories, remember who you are called to be.

Shalom and Salaam.

Blessed Be and **Amen.**