

Breaking Down Barriers

A sermon preached at the UU Church of the Lehigh Valley

August 21, 2016

the Rev. Libby Smith

Reading:

The challenge today is to seek a unity that celebrates diversity, to unite the particular with the universal, to recognize the need for roots while insisting that the point of roots is to put forth branches. What is intolerable is for differences to become idolatrous. . . . No human being's identity is exhausted by his or her gender, race, ethnic origin or national loyalty. Human beings are fully human only when they find the universal in the particular, when they recognize that all people have more in common than they have in conflict, and that it is precisely when what they have in conflict seems overriding that what they have in common needs most to be affirmed. Human rights are more important than a politics of identity, and religious people should be notorious boundary crossers. (From William Sloane Coffin, A Passion for the Possible, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, pp. 7-8.)

Sermon:

So we come to the final sermon in this summer series on being religious. I've had a great time with this, laying out some of the qualities that I consider essential to the religious life, and that I believe we need to lift up as Unitarian Universalists seeking to be authentically religious people. You've been so welcoming, and it's been a pleasure to work with the extremely talented people here – the worship team, the musicians, the office staff – all those folks who make worship happen. I am grateful to Rev. Don Garrett for inviting me into this role and I hope it has allowed him to enter fully into his sabbatical time so that he can return refreshed and inspired.

I've enjoyed the chance to play with some of these ideas, talking about cultivating compassion and living with reverence. I had a harder time talking about wrestling with the holy, mainly because I know it's an uncomfortable subject for some of us, but so near and dear to my own heart that I was grateful for the chance.

But this final one has been really tough. Congregations I've served for any length of time know that I always struggle with sermon writing, putting it off, getting frantic at the last minute. I've worked over the years to just accept this as my creative pattern and trust it. But I've also noticed that if the pattern gets particularly bad, it probably means there's something about the sermon that I don't really want to tackle. And this week, I had to admit that was the case. Our topic this morning is breaking down barriers. I genuinely believe that this is as crucial a piece so being religious as any of the others – maybe more so. But I find it so much harder to do, and feel that I have so far to go in being able to live it out, that it has been very hard to write about it. Finally I decided to simply name that at the start, so that you know this is a work in progress, that I struggle mightily to find the energy and willingness to do it. To preach it any other way would feel hypocritical.

Once I came to that conclusion, things begin to flow a bit better. So here we go.

About 4 years ago I was struck by a piece by our UUA president Peter Morales, who identified three things that Unitarian Universalism needs to do if we want to thrive in these

times. He said we need to “get religion,” and that has been at the center of this whole series. He said we need to grow leaders – I’m sure he’s right but it’s not on my agenda this summer.. And he said we need to cross borders. That’s my theme for this morning – and for me a central theme of what it means to be religious people. Crossing borders. Breaking down barriers.

So often, religion is used to reinforce the boundaries and borders. It defines who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong. That’s one of the qualities of religion that Unitarian Universalists have emphatically rejected. We like to think we’re beyond that, at least theologically. We don’t insist that we have the Truth with a capital T – we respect the wisdom of all the great religions and seek to learn from them. We insist that the value of a faith is seen in the way it helps its followers live compassionate lives and make the world a better place.

We don’t do this perfectly. We can be dismissive of faith traditions that we find irrational, naive or superstitious. But for the most part, we can separate our discomfort for the beliefs from our feelings about the followers of those beliefs, and judge them by the lives they live rather than the creeds they recite. I believe our ability to honor a wide range of theological perspectives and reach across religious boundaries to do interfaith work is one of our greatest strengths. I don’t need to preach to you about that.

But there are other kinds of barriers that give us a harder time. In my sermon on compassion I quoted Bill Schulz, past president of the UUA, saying that what the world aches for is not louder voices, but kinder hearts. I want to go back to his essay now and share some more of it with you, asking you to think with me about our tendency to be very loud voices indeed. He suggests that as a religious movement we have learned two lessons very well – first, that because each person is precious, we need to respect their individuality. And second, that it’s good to stand up for what you believe, that (and I quote) “it is important to confront the principalities and power with the scepter of truth and the mantle of justice.”

But he goes on to point out a few things we have failed to learn. And the first is that, and again I quote, “Cherish our individuality as we do, we still have to build a world with those people across the road. We don’t have to like the way they manifest their fear any more than they like the way we manifest our righteousness. But, like it or not, we have to build a world together, and the only way to build a world together is to find, beneath all the rhetoric and rancor, some common core, common metaphor or myth, some basis upon which to signal to one another our mutual humanity.”

Recently I heard someone from another faith addressing a bunch of Unitarian Universalists on issues of social justice. I think it was The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, a Disciples of Christ pastor who has started the Forward Together Moral movement to bring folks in his state of North Carolina together to address moral issues in ways that cut across lines of creed and political parties. Dr. Barber addressed the General Assembly this year. But I heard a previous talk, on video, from a different conference, and then heard someone else giving commentary on the talk, so now I’m not entirely clear which ideas came from whom. But essentially, we were praised for the fact that when there is justice work to do, the UUs always show up. And we were also reminded that we’re always so sure we’re right. To go back to Bill Schulz’ words, he was reminding us that our kind hearts were sometimes overshadowed by our loud voices.

Now, of course if you make the effort to show up to protest or march or demonstrate about something, you probably do think you're right. Why else would you bother? But we were asked to consider – are we doing it because it's right, or because we need to be right?

If we need to be right, then we need the other side to be wrong. That's when our voices start getting louder and our hearts a lot less kind. As soon as we find ourselves thinking in terms of “sides,” we're already losing our ability to find common ground for resolving differences. Even beautiful slogans like “Standing on the side of love” serve to emphasize the gulf between we who are right and they who are wrong. If we stand on the side of love, then does that mean anyone who disagrees with us is unable to love? Are they on the side of hate? I'm not saying it's not a great rallying cry, but we need to be mindful of the dichotomy it can create in our minds that makes the divides between us deeper.

The more we put ourselves on opposite sides of some immovable line, the easier it is to begin to write off the people who disagree with us as something less than human. But when we vilify the people with whom we disagree, we de-humanize not only them, but also ourselves. And we erode any possibility of finding common ground, of breaking down the barriers between us. As Bill Schulz reminded us, “we still have to build a world with those people across the road. We don't have to like the way they manifest their fear any more than they like the way we manifest our righteousness. But, like it or not, we have to build a world together, and the only way to build a world together is to find, beneath all the rhetoric and rancor, some common core, common metaphor or myth, some basis upon which to signal to one another our mutual humanity.”

Bill's comments were intended to be heard in the context of the big picture – national and international conflicts. We could wrestle with how to apply them to the Arab-Israeli conflict, to extremists and terrorists, to any of countless big issues our world faces.

But I'd like to narrow the focus and bring it much closer to home, because I think we have the same kind struggles in our own communities and congregations and that we need to start where we are.

I've been saying all along that these various qualities of the religious life are all connected. If we take our communities seriously and live by our promises to one another, if we cultivate a sense of reverence, if we experience our place in a larger reality, if we approach one another with compassion – then we're naturally led to a desire to improve the world. I quoted Galen Guengrich as saying that religion is comprised of a sense of awe and a sense of obligation. We explored that sense of awe when we talked about reverence and wrestling with the holy. Today we get to that sense of obligation – how do we give back? And I quoted James Luther Adams as saying that people come to liberal religious congregations seeking intimacy and ultimacy – and defined those essentially as deep community, and that connection to something beyond ourselves. But others have added a third reason that people come to our churches, and called it efficacy – the need to make a difference.

So today we move on to the religious sense of obligation, or the need for efficacy – our inherent longing to make the world better. I believe that is a fundamental piece of what it means to be religious. And it's a huge topic, and could cover a vast range of actions/projects/ideas.

I'm focusing on just one, and that is this idea of breaking down barriers, or, as William Sloane Coffin put it, being “notorious boundary crossers.” We have to start somewhere, and for me, that willingness to reach across the aisle, whether the aisle is theological, or political, or social, or cultural – that willingness to break down barriers is where it all starts.

I've seen so often – even within our own congregations – how hard it is for us to welcome in people with viewpoints different from our usual party line. We don't say they're not welcome, but we keep them out by making announcements, or even statements from the pulpit, that assume a shared perspective – and sometimes that go beyond that to ridicule or insult people who have a different perspective. We do this most often around political and social issues, but also around theological and economic ones. It can be very lonely to be a Republican, or a Christian, or working class, in our congregations. I've heard many times from people who feel they have to keep their mouths shut because if they speak honestly they'll be ridiculed.

It's not that I think everybody belongs in our congregations. We have a clearly stated set of values that we expect people to share and seek to live by, anchored on either end by our commitment to respecting each individual person, and to respecting the “interdependent web” in which we and all living things exist. The thing is, it's entirely possible for people who share those same deep values to have different ideas about how best to bring them to life. I know people in both the Hillary camp and the Trump camp who are deeply committed to living by our stated values. I know people on both sides of the pipeline debate who are deeply committed to living by our stated values. I could give you countless more examples.

Because you don't have to be a left-leaning democrat to hunger for liberal religion. We're not all at ease in our minds and hearts about abortion. We can't all afford to go on that women's group outing when the tickets cost \$35 – even though the announcement says all women are welcome. And we don't all think jokes that make fun of Christians are funny. When we make those assumptions – and we make them all the time – we are keeping people out who might need us – and people whom we need. We are a shrinking movement. It might be at least in part due to our cultural rigidity.

For so many of us, if you ask us what we value most about our congregations, it's the chance to gather with like minded people in a community we perceive as “safe space.” We want to be comfortable. And it's natural and good to take joy in that experience.

But religion also asks us to reach across the boundaries to welcome those who are not like us. Religion asks us to remember that we're part of something bigger than just ourselves, and to be willing to be uncomfortable sometimes in the service of deeper compassion, deeper reverence, deeper humility. This is a spiritual and religious question, but it's also a deeply practical one. Are we willing to watch this religious movement die to preserve our own comfort? Or will we learn to break down some of those barriers and learn to widen our welcome?

So why do we come to church? Do we come here to ensconce ourselves more deeply in our worldview, to reinforce and justify our assumptions, to retreat into our comfort zone? Or do we come here to learn and grow and be strengthened, to practice our ability to respect and seek common ground across the differences – even significant differences - here among

people who do share our deepest values. Because as hard as that may feel, it's a lot harder to do out there in the wider world, where we may be meeting people who don't share all of our values, but with whom, nonetheless, we have to build a world.

I said I struggled with this sermon. I admit that most of the time, I prefer to be with people who think like I do, who value the same things I do. I struggle mightily to be open to the kinds of differences I'm talking to you about. Because really, don't most of think that the world would be better if everyone else just realized that we were right?

But William Sloane Coffin reminded us that we are fully human only when we recognize that all people have more in common than we have in conflict, and that it is precisely when what we have in conflict seems overriding that what we have in common needs most to be affirmed. This does not mean that we stop protesting and marching and demonstrating in the face of inhumane behavior. But it means we do it in a way that honors the humanity of the people on the other side of the barricades, and remember that they too believe they are standing on the side of love, and that underneath all our differences we are still more alike in our common humanity than we are different.

This is very hard work to do. And I believe that part of the value of a religious institution has be to giving us a place to practice this hard work where it is just a little easier. We are here not only to be comfortable, but to be stretched and challenged, to become more open to ways of thinking, feeling and seeing the world that are different from our own. If we can practice the art of living with real diversity here in our intentional communities, we have a much better chance of being able to go out into a much more diverse and challenging world ready to engage in more creative, embracing, life-giving ways. May we have the courage to make it so.