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Thunder Bay ON

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Readings

Our first reading is the original version of the Nicene Creed of 325. It's presented as a historical document.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of all things visible and invisible [the bishops wrote]
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
Begotten of the Father, Light of Light,
Very God of very God, begotten, not made,
Being of one substance with the Father;
By whom all things were made;
Who for us men, and for our salvation,
Came down and was incarnate and was made man;
He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
And in the Holy Ghost.

Our second reading is from the Edict of Torda, 1568, the earliest known general attempt to guarantee religious freedom in Christian Europe.

“His Majesty . . . reaffirms that in every place
the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel
each according to his understanding of it,
and if the congregation like it, well,
if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied,
but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve.
“Therefore, none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers,
no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, . . . and
it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else
by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching,
for faith is the gift of God,
this comes from hearing,
which hearing is by the word of God.”

Sermon

Reconciling Our Differences

How do we as religious people get along without any overarching doctrine, or without any person of authority who's in charge of the whole business?

This morning, we'll talk about creeds and authority. Along the way, we will touch on congregational polity, the history of religious persecution, some common things that motivate us, the Unitarian role in freedom of religion, and some of the possibilities for church.

It does sometimes seem like no one's in charge here. There aren't a lot of rules to be followed. The closest we come to a litmus test is to ask newcomers shyly, Would you care to -- walk together with us? (Next week, several newcomers will answer yes, when they join this fellowship.)

No one is required to believe anything. Freedom of belief is the watchword. But do we really get along that deeply? And if so, how, and why?

Who runs the show?

At the first UU church I joined, I noticed that the opening ten minutes of the Sunday morning service was conducted by a layperson, different each week. What a novelty! I knew that in some really liberal churches, a layperson might be allowed to read that week's Bible lesson. But that was about it.

In this UU church in Oakland, California, however, each week the laypersons in the chancel kept acting like they had something to say – something personal, or reflective, or passionate. What they said, set the tone for the whole service. The co-ministers seemed surprisingly comfortable with this trusting arrangement. (I found out later that they were comfortable with it, because they had invented it.)

I was both intrigued by this lay participation, and dubious. I wondered if headquarters knew about it. But that question felt uncool, so I kept it to myself.

It took me the longest time to realize that: This is headquarters. The buck stops here.

The technical term is “congregational polity” – meaning each congregation manages its own business. If this church wants roses on Sunday morning and that one prefers marigolds, fine. The same for choosing ministers. Our churches are ruggedly individualistic, every last one of them.

So: no one is in charge here,
except that everyone’s in charge here,
equally in charge, but –
some are more equal than others.

Well, consistency was never our strong suit.

Congregational polity is one reason we get along. We’ve been tagged, and we’re it.

A second thing that unites us is our common religious background. In our recent newcomers’ class, many spiritual odysseys were shared. Paulene, for example, comes from a Roman Catholic background. David Belrose, who will join me next week, is a Buddhist.¹ Suzanne Hansen, our board president, has a background in the United Church. My own religious upbringing is a blank slate: I am a recovering nothing, who has gradually become an agnostic and a theist.

All of us, in other words, have changed, and continue to change. It runs in the family. One Sunday morning, Ralph Waldo Emerson was preaching an old sermon. At one point he paused, looked up from his manuscript, and said, “I no longer believe that,” and returned to his text. Only in a Unitarian church . . .

This evolutionary belief in process might seem all over the map, and in a way it is. But many of us had found something missing in our religious practice, some hope unrealized, some deep yearning unfulfilled – and we acted on it. We found our way to churches and fellowships like this one. I include in this, birthright Unitarian Universalists, for whom the original unfulfilled yearning may go back a generation or two earlier, and then got handed down.

In my experience, this yearning is both delicate and powerful. Probably it always has been. Evidence of it surrounds us. In Jerusalem, for instance, you can

¹ David gently dissents from this characterization.

find caves and dungeons, some reportedly 2,000 years old. On the walls of tiny, dark cells, are painted crosses, supposedly dating from Jesus' time.

In St. Peter of Gallicantu Church, just outside Jerusalem's Old City, near Mt. Zion, a dungeon exists directly under the sanctuary, 20-25 feet down, entered by a steep, narrow passageway from smack dab in the middle of the sanctuary itself. In that dungeon, Jesus is said to have been imprisoned, the night before he was crucified. Imagine a hole in the floor of this fellowship, winding down to – who knows what?

UU churches are full of people who have had our share of unfulfilled yearning, and some bear the scars of the disappointing religious experiences that preceded our coming here. All churches are hospitals, of course, but our UU churches seem particularly to draw the religiously disappointed. This is a chosen faith, chosen sometimes out of unfulfilled yearnings. That fact too unites us – that ours is mostly an intentionally chosen faith.

Samuel Johnson once said, second marriages are the triumph of hope over experience That might be true for second religions too.

We are also united by a mutual sympathy that extends to other underdogs. For instance, the Christian faith, from which we mostly descend, started out as an underdog, a persecuted minority, respected for their depth of commitment, yet feared, for the same reason.

For more than three hundred years after Jesus died , they – we – continued as a distinct minority, until matters came to a head -- on the evening of October 27, in the year 312, just outside Rome.

That night, the Roman Emperor Constantine, whose army was assembling for battle, had a dream. According to one interpretation, the dream indicated, that if he converted from his customary sun worship to Christianity, the Christian God would favor his side in the next day's battle. *In hoc signo vinces* – By this sign, you shall conquer.

And so it happened. The next day, Constantine marked his soldiers' shields with the Chi-Rho symbol, and at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, over the River Tiber, he overwhelmed his brother-in-law Maxentius, who drowned trying to swim to safety. This is the Chi-Rho symbol:



Constantine and his army marched victoriously into Rome. True to his word, he made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire.

He used religion to unite his empire.

In the year 325, he convened a council of about 300 bishops at Nicaea, in present-day Turkey, where they adopted, by a vote of 300 to 2, what became known as the Nicene Creed. Its purpose was to stamp out the heresy of Arius, who rejected the Trinity of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Arius and his one-God followers became heretics, barely thirteen years after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. They were our spiritual ancestors.

The original version of the Nicene Creed of 325 contains some curious language:

We believe in . . .

One Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,

Begotten of the Father,

Light of Light,

Very God of very God . . .

The poet Kathleen Norris has said that, on Sunday mornings, she has come to enjoy hearing dignified, well-dressed people in church, babbling phrases like “Very God of very God,” because to her they sound like the mystical language of the Romantic poet William Blake. Creeds with words like “Very God of very God” and “Light of Light” – creeds she classes with speaking in tongues, and lets it go at that.

One function of a creed is to teach people, how to act in a faith tradition – what is done around here, and what isn't. Another function is to say, who's in and who's out.

Our spiritual ancestors have generally rejected creeds, in part because, like Arius and his followers, we have been marginalized too much ourselves. We don't like others telling us, how to do things spiritual. And many people, including many UUs, see creeds as divisive. After all, Quakers get along without them. So do Baptists, and Disciples of Christ.

The retired Episcopalian (or Anglican) Bishop John Shelby Spong, has called dogmas and creeds “a stage in our development . . . part of our religious childhood.”

The Rev. John Robinson, a UU minister, has said, “Creeds came into being [in part because t]hey kept heresies in check, or tried to.”

Most persecuted heretics like to be left alone, to pursue their own spiritual path in peace – except for those, like the Spaniard Michael Servetus, who just can't resist a fight. But if you want to be left in peace, chances are, you'll want to leave others in peace too.

At the time of the Reformation, and the Radical Reformation, religious freedom was not on the reform agenda. But when Martin Luther led the Protestant breakaway, he and his followers created churches that inevitably worshiped their own way. Their movement gave rise to others, including some of our religious ancestors.

Martin Luther and John Calvin proved themselves just as capable of crushing their enemies as the established church had been. At the ripe old age of 20, Michael Servetus wrote a treatise called “On the Errors of the Trinity,” which pointed out that the Bible did not support Trinitarianism – Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

The book raised a ruckus. It took many years, but in 1553 John Calvin finally succeeded in burning Michael Servetus at the stake, with what was thought to be the last copy of his book, chained to his leg. But his ideas did not die with him: quite the contrary.

UU minister Paul Hamilton Beattie writes:

“The great glory of Unitarianism is that ours was the first religious group in Western history to espouse and practice freedom of conscience. [It happened in what is now Transylvania, in Romania.]

“Through the urging both of Francis David [the court minister, a Unitarian] and [King] John Sigismund, the Diet of Torda [their legislature] gave its seal of approval to an edict of the King which was published in 1568. This edict [of Torda] was the first legal enactment of religious toleration in Western history, and it was issued by the first and only Unitarian king in history.”

The heart of the edict says:

“[T]he preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well, if not, no one shall compel them . . . [T]hey shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve.

“[N]one . . . shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone . . . , and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching”

Freedom of the pulpit, freedom of the pew, and congregational polity, all in one fell swoop. Those who had survived the persecution that the Edict of Torda was meant to prevent, banded together, sometimes far from the madding crowd. In the mountains of southeastern Switzerland, in the area called the Grisons, groups of our religious ancestors settled. It's still a beautiful, remote country, of Alpine meadows and the headwaters of the Rhine, separated from neighboring Italy by the barely penetrable San Bernardino Pass. (That's where Saint Bernard dogs come from, with their little casks of cognac around their necks.)

Even today, the journey from Italy is breathtakingly scary, along a narrow, two-lane road that hugs the mountainsides, hundreds and hundreds of feet above the rocks below, which you do not look down at too long. The Grisons offered safety for those of our forebears who believed differently.

And to this day, our faith remains creedless. The second purpose of the Unitarian Universalist Association says: “. . . [T]o promote the full participation of persons . . . without requiring adherence to any particular interpretation of religion or to any particular religious belief or creed.”

So, we have gotten along in part because of our lack of a creed; a shareable history of persecution; our common religious background of yearning for something more; and the principle of congregational polity.

But how do we get along without an authority figure, someone or something at the top of the food chain, to decide the really important stuff?

The simple answer to “Who’s in charge?” is: not God, not the Pope, or whoever.

It’s you who are in charge. And you, and you, and you. Your individual conscience is the court of last resort. Just as congregations are in charge of themselves and what they do, and therefore responsible for the choices they make, so are we as individuals.

Some people call this a noble idea, or an elegant idea, or a daring one. But mainly, I think, it’s practical. Individual conscience, way down deep, is how people actually behave, or at least some people -- our kind of people. This reliance on individual conscience acknowledges that, while some people may comfortably follow leaders, others insist on deciding for themselves about things. You know where we UUs wind up – all leaders, no followers. Giving pride of place to individual conscience just recognizes what people will do anyway – some people, at least.

When individual conscience gets the last word, some things become more difficult -- unified group action, for example. One UU minister, Rev. Beattie, quoted a moment ago, waged a lifelong, quixotic battle against bringing social justice into the pulpit. According to a biographer,

“Beattie reported abundant testimony from numerous churchmen stating that the church’s primary purpose is to reform society. He stated that church involvement in initiating social action is nothing new and that the history of church-induced social activism has been astonishingly disastrous. Even with the church’s long-standing commitment to promoting social justice, society remains almost unmodified by the church’s pronouncements. [Beattie] insisted: ‘The invention of refrigeration and its widespread use has done more to save lives and improve health and living standards than the combined church social action programs of all denominations.’”

He’s certainly entitled to his interesting and unusual opinion -- as well as our tolerance.

Retired UU minister John Robinson said: “This free pulpit is not a debating society, though some would make it that; it is not a lecture about the facts, though facts better have a part of it. It is an odyssey of faith. It is not a once-a-week sampling of religious opinions or beliefs that happen to be in or out of vogue. It is not about doing Judeo-Christian this week, Humanist next week, Pagan the following week, and social activist the fourth week. It is about a passionate encounter with our finitude, our awfulness, and our beauty.”

What kind of church might really work?

Rev. Beattie had his own idea: “The . . . [ideal] church is . . . a community of healing and wholeness. We exist to help those individuals who come to us to restore a balance and tone to their lives. We exist to lift people when they feel down and to goad consciences when they become too comfortable. But how can a church be a place of healing, a place of worship, a sanctuary for the spirit, if it is constantly a place of acrimonious debate?

“The church I am describing [he adds] is a religious community which is committed primarily to the educational process. It sees religion as a search rather than a set of answers [-- ‘as a search rather than a set of answers’]. Such an approach to religion involves a conscious attempt to develop religious communities which are *pluralistic*. To live comfortably in such a community one must have a tolerance for religious or philosophical life stances different from one's own.”

Many of us want to belong to a church that welcomes people who believe and act differently from us. One church I served that undertook the Welcoming Congregation Program found out afterwards, to its surprise, that some gays and lesbians were drawn to it, but many more were drawn to it who were not gay or lesbian, but wanted to join a gay-friendly church. We had not expected that.

This comfortableness with the Other, whatever form it takes, is part of how we get along, different as we may be. Even though I’m not an atheist, for example, I want a church that is atheist-friendly. Why? Because atheists can be fun to talk with! So can Christians, Buddhists, Jews, all the different kinds of people you can meet here, trying our best to practice partnership.

Because the last reason we get along is that, as one colleague says, “We believe in the conversation.” We believe in give and take, back and forth, seeing things from another person’s perspective, and noticing what happens in the

process. If we keep the doors open and the lines of communication clear, the spirit can flourish, and all of us will grow -- whether we want to, or not.

So how do we get along?

No creed,

a hundred Popes,

plenty of good conversation.

That's us.

Amen.