

“UU4U”

A Sermon by

The Reverend Bill Clark

Heretics! Heresy! These are terms often connected to our faith of Unitarian Universalist. We have always been known as heretics. We are heretics because we desire to choose our faith – not because we desire to be rebellious. Heresy comes from the Greek meaning “choice.” We are heretics because we believe we have choices in connection to our faith.

A little historic context.

During the first three centuries of the Christian Church, believers could at that time, choose from a variety of tenets about Jesus. One such belief was that Jesus was an entity sent by God on a divine mission. Another tenet was that Jesus was the “son of the living God.” Another religious choice in the first three centuries of the Common Era was “Universal salvation.” This was the belief that no person would be condemned by God to eternal damnation in a fiery pit. All people would be saved.

All of this changed in 325 CE when the Nicene Creed established the trinity as the ‘official’ dogma. Of Christianity. The idea of a religious choice was gone and thus Unitarian and Universalist were persecuted and labeled heretics.

Much of this was true until the sixteenth century when the Protestant Reformation took place in the remote mountains of Transylvania. For it was here in 1568 when the first ever Unitarian King, John Sigismund, declared the first ever edict of religious tolerance; called ? The Edit of Torda.

Once established well in Europe it was the scientist, Joseph Priestly, after having his lab burned and being hounded out of England. As a heretic – he moved and established the American Unitarian churches in the Philadelphia area.

It is interesting while growing up in New England, I had never heard of Unitarian-Universalism. I know that must sound strange as New England seems to have the most UU churches of any regions in the USA.

I do remember my elder brother complaining one summer as we drove to the St. Mary's Catholic Church we attended, that, his two best friends were indeed Unitarians and they close for the whole summer – “now that,” my brother said “is a religion I can definitely get behind.”

There is another story, where a heretical nature comes to light. It occurred at a church picnic one Sunday, where the head teacher stacked a pile of apples on one end of the table with a sign saying: “Take only one apple please, --- God is watching.”

On the other end of the table was a pile of cookies on which a second grade UU had placed a sign saying: “Take all the cookies you want --- God is watching the apples.”

There have been numerous jokes and comments made about us, Unitarian-Universalist. I am sure you have heard most of them – so they don't bear repeating. They don't bear repeating because in the words of the Reverend Scott Alexander, I am not laughing any more!

From the very first time I entered a Unitarian-Universalist house of worship it felt like a homecoming – my entire self was accepted, celebrated and honored just the way I am. To say that walk into that UU Meeting House of Provincetown changed my life forever – would be an understatement.

As a UU minister I often hear that same expression: “it felt like coming home.” One of the elements, which separate us from other faith traditions, is that our congregations are made up of mostly “come-outers” meaning members often come out of other religious denominations. How many do we have here amongst us? Anyone here born into Unitarian-Universalism? Ah, the lucky ones!

It appears most of us have come to this faith from another. To better explain the process of coming out from other faiths, The Reverend Arthur Foote uses the term “shredders”. Taking the term used by Maine lobstermen to describe the tender moment in a lobster's life between its first hard shell and its mature one. It is a vulnerable time, the moment of transition from one life to the next.

The shredding of one set of beliefs and values for another are tender, truly vulnerable times. This transformation leaves us open and often unprotected. Yet our whole lives long, our only work is transformation.

Transforming from a place of dissatisfaction, disbelief or woundedness to a place of acceptance, wholeness and healing, the shredding must be complete. The religious wounds from the past will only hinder this new found transformed faith to take flight. This is also an important aspect to the freedom and responsibility of Unitarian-Universalism.

From my practice as a Catholic to taking up Christian Science, as taught by Mary Baker Eddy, there were many beliefs I needed to shred. This was a very vulnerable time – as I truly felt I had nothing of substance to hold on to. The one thing I was able to grasp onto I found in our hymnals. One of my favorites which we sing together every Sunday is Carolyn McDade’s Spirit of Life. The two lines which always stick out to me; “roots hold me close; wings set me free.”

The roots of our faith are strong and deep. From their beginning in the 1500’s in Transylvania, to the edict of religious tolerance, to exploring the humanity of Jesus rather than his divinity – to examining his life as a way of living in the world – instead of the blind worshiping of the image of Jesus. This is what often separates us from other Christian denominations.

On the Universalist side we have the belief of universal salvation – that all are saved and no one is condemn to eternal damnation. Thomas Starr King, the namesake of Starr King School for the ministry in Berkley, CA is credited with describing the difference between Universalists and Unitarians: “Universalists believe that God is too good to send them to hell; Unitarians think they are too good to be damned.” So there you have it!!!

In the UU4U class I am facilitating this afternoon there are some wonderful exercises we will be doing, however, there is one I would like to try now. Are you up for it? Everyone need not participate – but it is called Making Our Diverse Beliefs Visible – Belief Spectrum Exercise.

You can see this tape running down the middle of the aisle. Think of each set of choices on a spectrum and figure out where they fit in and you fit into with the relationship to the two poles/options.

- 1). UU for a year or less _____ for 20 years or more.
- 2). I am religious _____ I am spiritual.
- 3) I am a theist
theist _____ agnostic _____ atheist/non 4).

4). Humans are good_____humans are flawed

5). Jesus inspires_____Jesus another look_____Jesus centered spirituality

(READ OFF PAPER)

Any reflections on what you have observed?

If you could ask any question about Unitarian-Universalism what would you ask?

An important part to the UU4U class is sharing your own spiritual and/or religious journey and what (if any, beliefs and values are you willing to let go of? What can you retain?

Much of the class is about listening. Listening to others as they share some of their religious history and how they ended up here – in a Unitarian-Universalist house of worship

When I first entered a UU house of worship it was the winter in Provincetown of 1989, someone told me to go to the church it was a good place to meet people. I remember I thought; “church – you must kidding me! Winter being winter I went one Sunday morning. A few things happened that first Sunday. First they announced their sign language interpreter had just resigned and they were looking for another one – keep in mind sign language is the only other language I use – hmmm interesting I thought. Then two couples stood up: 1 lesbian couple celebrating their 20 years together and another male couple stood up and held up their newly adopted son!

I looked around shaken and thought what religion is this that totally accepts and celebrates my life? I noted Unitarian Universalism – I was home.

Unitarian-Universalism is not club where you can believe what ever you want. It is not a place to critic other faiths with a superior attitude. It is not a weekly social gathering.

It is a true and tried religious faith where people have been put to death for their beliefs. It is a religion based on the sacred promises (covenants) we make with one another. It is a religion of integrity, honesty and love. It is my religion, which totally saved and transformed my life

In the words of Rev Temerson: “Religious truth, therefore, can never be fully or definitively found in just the words of one person, one sacred text, or even one religion because truth is always emerging, always unfolding, always carrying us along a marvelous journey of discovery and exploration.”

My friends, Come and join us today on our marvelous journey of discovery, examination and adventure. Learn about this faith you have taken up and let us explore together its history, its hopes its challenges and unimagined possibilities!

Amen and blessed be.