

"Your Mother Was a Liberal!"

A Sermon Preached at Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens GA

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SERMON SUMMARY

The title of my remarks -- "Your Mother Was a Liberal", is from Forrester Church's book *God and Other Famous Liberals*. I'm not making a partisan claim about mothers. Another possible title for today is: "The Heart is a Little to the Left", from William Sloane Coffin. This also is not meant as a partisan claim. Rather it's an invitation to reflect on two questions: Number One: Why has the "L-word", "liberal", come into such widespread derision, especially in our country, where "liberty" and "liberation" were the touchstones of the freedoms enshrined in our nation's early history? Number Two: How does that "L-word" embody the essential spirit of parenting, and mothering, which we honor today? My purpose this morning is to restore dignity to the L-word. To re-claim the heritage of religious liberalism, which we have unwittingly surrendered to those who would exploit and intimidate, widening the gaps between the privileged and the anguished; between "us" and "them".

My remarks speak to the heart of our liberal faith. Often we refer to our denomination's Seven Principles and Purposes. Today I want to take a different angle, and consider what James Luther Adams calls the "five smooth stones" of religious liberalism. The five smooth stones. What are they?

*Number One. **Openness.*** The unfolding of truth is ongoing, never finished. Meaning is never finally decided. Nothing is exempt from studied reflection. Events are not sealed. In every moment we have the capacity to either bless or to curse; to create or tear down; to take the givens with which we are presented, and to project them with faith into the future-- a future which is always open to receive the creative power which each of us brings.

*Number Two. **Humility.*** I bring respect, reverence, and humility to every encounter. Every relationship I enter into must be grounded in mutual respect and free consent -- never on coercion, manipulation, humiliation, or any other form of dishonor to another person. However well grounded we may think we are, that grounding should never be a coercive power over others. None of us is at the center of the universe. None of us has any monopoly on "the truth".

*Number Three. **Prophecy.*** The imperative to create loving communities. Religious liberalism says: We have a moral obligation to reach out beyond our private journeys. We are to direct our skills and resources toward establishing just and loving communities. Not only close to home, but in places where darkness and fear may have dwelled for so long that light can scarcely make its way in.

*Number Four. **Shaping.*** We must give concrete shape to our values, through particular forms of expression. And this can't happen alone. We must do so with others, in the complexity of forming religious community. There is no such thing as abstract goodness. Or even a "good person", as such. Enduring forms of goodness are institutional forms, given shape and concrete expression. No one should rely upon personal virtue alone, for that runs the risk of self-absorption. Our liberal faith must inspire people to energize and shape the institutions of our common life. Such shaping of values requires the organization of power. Power is not a dirty word. In fact, it is when we deny our legitimate uses of power, and walk away in surrender, allowing the zealous forms of absolutist power to steal the microphone, that we've given away the store.

*The Fifth Smooth Stone of Religious Liberalism. **Hope.*** The liberal spirit trusts that there is a goodness which sustains us, and toward which we can move. There is something in the liberal spirit which knows the depths of human suffering, and yet will not become mired in cynicism or indifference. At the depth of human nature and at the fragile edges of who we are, there are resources that prevent our

retreating into whines of resignation. This is the test of liberal religion. In response to the question of whether our lives can have richer meaning, the answer is an overwhelming YES. The affirmative answer of liberal religion is not an indifferent shrug of “whatever”. No way! Don’t ever let anybody tell you that a liberal faith is a “whatever” faith. A liberal faith is a constant struggle between justice and injustice, between blessing and cursing. Between sneering on the sidelines, and rolling up your sleeves and getting down to work.

Thus, with realism and resolution, we religious liberals gather our *five smooth stones*: Openness; Humility; Prophecy; Shaping; and Hope. With no guarantees; but with gratitude. In particular, gratitude for others with whom to share the journey and the struggle.

Question: Might these five smooth stones of liberalism also be the touchstones of mothering, of parenting, care-giving and compassion?

“Over the carnage and desolation, there shall arise a prophetic voice: Be not disheartened. Affection shall solve the problems of Freedom yet: Those who truly love each other shall become invincible.”
(ad. from Walt Whitman)