



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“A Faith Perspective”

© by the Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

A sermon delivered May 5, 2013

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

*He has shown you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8*

When you pray, move your feet. African proverb

*Charity depends on the vicissitudes of whim and personal wealth; justice depends
On commitment instead of circumstance. Faith-based charity provides crumbs
from the table; faith-based justice offers a place at the table. Bill Moyers*

Sermon

I love welcoming new members because it indicates they found something they were seeking—a community to be a part of that shares their values and hopes. And we make a ceremony of their newfound commitment because it marks a transformation, a change in their lives and it reminds all of us why we belong to this community. The mission and vision and seven principles keep us together and I say Halleluiah to that!

Together, we *are* building the land we envision, we are mending what’s broken and we are creating the beloved community. Did you hear the good news this week? Rhode Island became the latest state to write marriage equality into law! Halleluiah!

Before signing that bill, Gov. Chafee wrote, “I personally feel that Rhode Island is a better state, and America is a better country, when we are as inclusive as possible.” Inclusive—Halleluiah! Yes, shout it out whenever the spirit moves you!

I celebrate this political act which affirms several of our UU Principles. It affirms our belief in the worth and dignity of all people and our desire for greater freedom and equality. It also moves our country closer to being one, a time when we will not be divided into those who can and those who can’t be married. As ten other states and the District of Columbia have gone, so will Georgia one day go, too. Halleluiah!

Marriage is becoming available to all couples, regardless of their sexuality or gender identity, because people turned their love into action. Halleluiah! People spoke out and turned their faith and values into public policy. America took another step toward becoming more inclusive, more like us.

But marriage equality is only one issue where we Unitarian Universalists stood up for love; where our love increased the amount of justice in the world. But despite all of our yesterdays, all of our past accomplishments, more justice work awaits us today, tomorrow, and for tomorrow's tomorrows. The beloved community is not yet here. But, halleluiah, there is hope.

In Phoenix, at last year's General Assembly, the annual gathering of UUs from around the world, delegates voted on two new Study / Action Issues to be discussed within our congregations. These are 'Immigration as a Moral Issue' and 'Reproductive Justice'.

The purpose of the Study / Action process is to give congregations the opportunity to consider issues and determine what action we are called to do as a result. The Unitarian Universalist Association has developed study guides with resources and questions for our education and reflection. True to form, the UUA doesn't give us answers. Our Association leaders don't tell us we should harbor undocumented workers, nor do they say we should report undocumented workers. Our Association leaders don't tell us we should be in favor of abortion, nor do they say we should shut down abortion clinics.

The study process is meant to help us understand the full scope and impact of the issues so that we can make better choices privately and publicly. As individuals and as a congregation, we can choose how or when or if to take a stand. True to our congregational polity, only we can decide what our Fellowship stand will be. But let there be no doubt, we are encouraged to take a stand because Unitarian Universalism will not be left out of creating the beloved community. What do you say? Halleluiah!

Several years ago one of my sons asked me a question. I've forgotten the question but not his reaction to my response. I gave him a UU-centric answer, perhaps I called on a Principle. It wasn't what he expected and in exasperation he shouted out, "Does everything have to be religious with you?"

You may laugh, but you can probably guess my response. "Of course. How can it *not* be?"

I see everything through a theological lens. That's why justice work is religious and spiritual work—everything in life is. And when I ask myself the deep questions justice demands, my sense of spirituality and my commitment to our UU values becomes stronger and deeper. I grow my spirit by asking tough questions. So do you. And I believe you have a theological lens through which you see and interpret the world, too.

Sometime in your life you have answered some of religion's traditional questions. Should I be good? What is the meaning of my life, of any life? Since I'm alive, what is the purpose of my life? What is my connection to others? How should I or we treat one another? What kind of world do I or we wish to create?

Answers to questions like these create the lens through which you see the world, your theology. It may also include ideas about God, truth and death, but theology is not limited to these ideas. Whether you know it or not, you have answers. You live your answers each day by the choices you make each day. I call it theology, you might call it philosophy. A rose by any other name ...

Ralph Waldo Emerson said everyone worships something. He meant each of us holds something to be of ultimate value. He also said we need to be careful what we worship for we become what we worship. If we don't pay attention to what we hold to be of ultimate importance, we may discover too late it's not what we thought. The study/action process is one way we can examine issues and determine if what we are worshiping needs to be changed.

When we examine the current congregational study action issues on immigration and reproductive justice, we may respectfully disagree on how public policy can solve some of the issues. But I hope is that we'll consider these issues through the lens of our Seven Principles, our faith perspective. Do current laws and traditions affirm the worth and dignity of all people? Does the status quo separate us or help us become one? Do our actions heal or maintain the world's brokenness? These are the questions our principles demand we ask.

Briefly, here are some education and reflection questions around 'Immigration as a Moral Issue.' The study guide includes information about why migration occurs and what some challenges to legal immigration are currently. It includes learning about the history of ethnic and racial discrimination in becoming an American, and asks what it means to be an American. It includes the economic impact of documented and undocumented immigration on national and local communities, and of low-wage labor's impact. It includes the human suffering caused by policies and whether basic human rights are protected. It includes knowing who benefits and who is harmed by the current situation. It includes exploring what a just immigration policy from a broad UU perspective might be. Finally, it includes asking who are our neighbors in Athens and how we are called to be in relationship with each other.

Politicians in Washington, DC, finally seem poised to deal with some immigration challenges. Let us be no different. We can address this issue so that we can respond from a faith perspective, especially in our own community.

The 'Reproductive Justice' study guide focuses on the right of all women to have children or not to have children, and the ability to raise children in safe and healthy environments. What are the cultural, political, economic, and structural constraints that limit women's access to health care and full reproductive choice? What are the current discriminatory obstacles to women's health care based on sexual orientation, race, or economic ability to pay for birth control? It asks us to name what is healthy sexuality, a process which may challenge us. It asks us to reflect on various religious perspectives regarding life, pregnancy, and abortion. It asks us to look at sexist and gendered attitudes in the ongoing political dialogue.

Georgia politicians will continue to consider bills curtailing abortion, restricting access to birth control, and limiting medical clinics and doctors from meeting the needs of their patients. No

matter where we stand on these issues, reproductive justice, as with immigration issues, are not hypothetical or theoretical. As engaged citizens it is our duty to be informed about what's going on. As Unitarian Universalists, it is our responsibility to examine the issues from a faith perspective. Let us not leave it to others to make our choices for us. Let our voices be part of the conversation.

To close, I want to quote the UU theologian James Luther Adams. His words were written in the late 1930s, when our Fellowships, Societies, Congregations, and Churches were all called churches, something we have moved away from more recently in our effort to be more inclusive. He was also writing in response to what he saw as the inaction of European Christians to Hitler's atrocities. Adams wrote:

This much we can say. A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in history for human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not attempt to interpret the signs of the times, is not a prophetic church. The prophetic liberal church is not a church where the prophetic function is assigned merely to the few [*be it a committee or committed individuals*]. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of being merely pushed around by it.

[From, "Taking Time Seriously," from *The Prophethood of All Believers* , ed. By George K. Beach, as quoted in the UUA's *Social Justice Empowerment Handbook*.]

May this Fellowship make history and not be merely pushed around by it.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What may call you to change the world, to make it a better place for all? Please explain.
2. How is your Unitarian Universalism connected to your concern for the common good?
3. How do you feel about your level of engagement in activities that reflect our UU values to foster greater peace and justice? Please explain.