



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“We Would Be One”

© by The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

A sermon delivered September 8, 2013

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth. Bahá'u'lláh (Bahá'í founder)

Harmony exists no less in difference than in likeness, if only the same key-note govern both parts. Margaret Fuller

Religions are many and diverse, but reason and goodness are one. Elbert Hubbard

We don't act in the world in order to make everything One; because we are One, we act! Roshi Bernie Glassman

Sermon

Back in May when I penciled in ‘Unity’ as the theme for September services, I had no idea that world events might make this subject particularly appropriate. You probably know President Obama seeks unity at home and abroad regarding a limited military response to chemical weapon use in Syria. I fervently hope diplomatic means will secure an end to all wars and civil strife, though I accept that when diplomacy fails, other means may be required. I just wish I knew if we’re at the end of appropriate diplomatic efforts yet. I wish our saber-rattling would bring Syria to the diplomatic table.

Choosing whether to act alone militarily or allow inhumane acts to go unchecked is not a new dilemma. Nations sometimes have responded and sometimes have ignored human-inflicted atrocities around the world and throughout history. “Are we our brother’s keeper?” is an ancient question.

But I am weary of war and the loss of lives, American and otherwise. I am weary of fighting. I’d prefer to say, “Never mind. Not my problem.” I am weary even more of despots, dictators, and terrorists whose use their power to divide rather than bring people together as one body for the common good. I am weary and feel like Rodney King when, after being brutally beaten by white Los Angeles police in 1991, the black man despairingly asked, “Why can’t we all just get along?”

This question forms a plea for acting as one, for finding common ground which allows us to work towards our common good, instead of pitting us against each other to gain power over one another. For peace to reign there must be greater unity among people, no matter what our ethnic, religious, national, political, gender, or any other perceived barrier that would keep us apart.

When Unitarians and Universalists decided to form one denomination, we did so because we realized we had more in common with each other than we had different. Our ability to merge two separate denominations, to create one where there had been two, offers one example of why Unitarian Universalism is a poster-child candidate for how the world can get along. I'm not preaching UU exceptionalism, but we do have experience with diversity.

Besides the merger, the fact that we recognize at least Six Sources that inform our faith is another. It's ironic that this religious tradition with few theological limits is identified by two specific theological positions: Unitarian meaning the oneness or unity of God, and Universalism meaning God will save all people from an eternity in Hell. I actually like our acronym, UU, because it draws our UU circle big enough for you and you and you and every y-o-u.

Our theological name is unusual. Other religious groups are named for their organizational structure, such as Episcopalians or Congregationalists, or for a founder, such as Lutherans or Buddhists. Yet others are named for their practices, like Baptists or Methodists.

Unitarian Universalism, the most difficult to define, doctrinally free religion, arrived at this liberal place because of our originating Unitarian and Universalist heresies. But now, one God more broadly means one source (divine or otherwise), one web of creation, one community of diverse believers. And universal salvation now more broadly means all people have the capacity to be in right relationship with each other, we are one universal family, and all will be saved by universal love (divine or otherwise) in this life and possibly a next life.

Critics say Unitarian Universalism means nothing if it includes everything. I disagree. We stand for our shared values primarily expressed in our Seven Principles (which you'll find on the back of your order of service). These include a desire for the world to achieve peace—united as one for the good of all. Not united as one believing the same thing, nor separate but equal, but together, side by side, harmonizing different voices like our excellent choir. Pluralism affirms that many religious beliefs and traditions are valid and can co-exist peacefully.

We worship at the feet of pluralism. So much so, that the closing phrase of our Six Sources reads, "Grateful (grateful!) for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision." If we wished to write a credal statement (though we don't want to) it could say, "The only single religious truth for all people for all time is that there is no single religious truth for all people for all time."

Unfortunately, pluralism loses out when one or more groups make exclusive truth claims and try to eliminate ideas different from their own. They don't want to get along with difference; they want everyone to be the same. They don't want a choir's beautiful harmony. They want all voices to be one in uniformity, not unity. How much poorer the world would be with only one vocal range.

I am weary of the tension created by those who want to drown out other voices. I am weary of the violence of Muslim-upon-Muslim, Muslim-upon non-Muslim, and non-Muslim-upon-Muslim by bigots and extremists here and elsewhere. Twelve years after 9/11 we struggle to separate Muslim extremists and terrorists from liberal and moderate Muslims. Because of the horrific events twelve years ago and the continuing violence in the Middle East, some of our making, Muslims became 'the other'—the latest group to be feared.

Interfaith activist and Muslim American Eboo Patel, in his latest book, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*, he writes about an early American fear of

Quakers. Hard to believe, isn't it? But nearly 40 years after the Pilgrims arrived, Peter Stuyvesant, the colonial governor of New Amsterdam, now Flushing, Queens, New York, exercised considerable prejudice against anyone who wasn't a Dutch Reformist. He tried to outlaw Lutherans, he called Jews deceitful and repugnant, and he made it a crime to harbor Quakers who he deemed subversive rabble-rousers. When the non-Quaker town clerk in a neighboring village, Edward Hart, took offense at Stuyvesant's small-mindedness, he drafted a petition in favor of pluralism. Known as the Flushing Remonstrance of 1657, it claimed dignity for all people. Hart wrote, "the law of love, peace and liberty in the states [should] extend[ing] to Jews, Turks, and Egyptians, as they are considered sons of Adam." (*Sacred Ground*, page 13)

This was a claim of universal brotherhood, all are equal children of Adam, a person formed by God, and animated by this one divine source, whatever their religious practice. Hart further insisted that all faiths represent God's greatest gift—love—and as such should be received with grace, not hate or fear.

Despite this early plea for pluralism, America continues to experience religious prejudice. John F. Kennedy's Roman Catholicism, Mitt Romney's Mormonism, and President Obama's connection to Islam through his father have all been attacked. And woe to any political figure who dares claim to be an atheist! Everyone knows non-believers have no moral center, right?

Of course, religion isn't the only thing Americans find to divide people. Race, gender identity, class, education, occupation, politics, and more, suit that need well.

Just as we can't imagine Quakers ever being marginalized, I hope our children will be surprised to learn one day that Muslims, immigrants, transgendered, or any other identity group, was once separated from the human family, mistreated, and mistrusted.

If we allow ourselves or others to believe all Muslims are bad, then the extremists define our thinking. In hate and fear we become the bigots they claim we are if we work to limit or eliminate Muslim freedom. We must not let that happen. We must not let the world be divided into us and them, Muslim and non-Muslim, Shiite and Sunni, Protestant or Jew, or any other category that divides us.

Eboo Patel claims we must fight for pluralism. If pluralism loses, we all lose. We must remember our First Principle and our Seventh. We are all worthy and we are one. We must have faith that all Americans can embrace difference.

Patel was the keynote speaker at this past June's UU General Assembly in Louisville. Five of us from this congregation were privileged to hear him speak live, but you can see him speak on the 'UUA.org' website. I encourage you to read *Sacred Ground*. In it Patel suggests that the most American thing we can do is stand up for someone else, just like Hart did back in 1657. It is also the most UU thing we can do to stand beside one another, in solidarity with all people and all creation.

It is not enough for us to be smug in our gratitude for pluralism's riches. We can become agents of change so that more recognize we are one. This Fellowship has dipped its toes into interfaith environmental and charitable work. But we can dip deeper by forming more engaged partnerships. Not only will it be good for Athens, it will be good for us for we are a marginalized religious group in a dominant conservative Christian culture. We can work across religious lines to help us unlearn some of our own prejudices against narrower religious mindsets. By working together we can share our gratitude for pluralism's riches and perhaps increase that gratitude.

In the coming months I will work you to develop some action plans so that we share our commitment to pluralism. We already have on the calendar some pulpit sharing with non-UU speakers and musicians. We can reach out further with pulpit exchanges with other faith leaders. Forum might engage some speakers around this, too. The Green Sanctuary team is working on some interfaith environmental projects and we'll continue to be involved in interfaith charitable work, like Our Daily Bread. We can also offer a world religion class to better understand the world's diversity of faiths.

I find it difficult to embrace those who hate pluralism, who stand against everything I stand for. But that is exactly what I must do. I must shower love upon my enemy. I may not be able to affect change on the global stage, but I can begin here at home, in my community, and you can, too. We can model the unity in diversity we know so well as Unitarian Universalists. And maybe, when the honey drips, we'll know it's yours, mine and ours to clean up, sooner rather than later. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. When do you feel most at one with (or close to) others and most separate from others? What might contribute to your feeling one way or the other?
2. How is your spirituality best expressed? How is it affirmed or encouraged at UUFA?
3. What do you look for in a community? What do you give in return?