

UU Heretics or Heroes

For several years there was a popular bumper sticker among Unitarian Universalists. Some of you may even have it on your car. It read “Unitarian Universalism, The Uncommon Denomination.” It may have even been used here in the big Orange County advertising campaign that we all participated in. “Unitarian Universalism, the uncommon denomination.”

It’s catchy, it’s intriguing, and it is a huge problem. This one little phrase describes the way we see ourselves as a tradition. The Uncommon Denomination, the strange ones, the outcasts, the overeducated intellectual liberals. Why on earth, in our efforts to reach out to the wider world would we offer a message of elitism and exclusion? “The Uncommon Denomination?”

I long for a day when we can transform that slogan. I long for the day when our bumper stickers say “Unitarian Universalism, We’re Common as Dirt. Come Grow With Us!” I long for the day when Unitarian Universalism embraces it’s rightful place as a leading voice in the world rather than relegating itself to being an uncommon club, ever fighting for the under dog. That’s what we’ll be talking about today, why we identify as the underdog and what it costs us.

Even the history that we have claimed as our own reflects this underdog identity. In fact it’s this understanding of history that lead me to write this sermon. Keep in mind, Unitarian and Universalist thought have been around since the time of Christ. But these ideas have popped up under different names in different times, and in an array of different countries. There is no certain lineage that we point to. Rather we select the few moments that reflect Unitarian Universalism as it exists today.

The stories of our shared history are those of heretics and martyrs. I have preached them to you. We talk about Michael Servetus, who in 1553, was burned at the stake with copies of his blasphemous book “On the Errors of the Trinity” fueling the flame. We find great allegiance with Servetus, for his independent thought and

his proto Unitarian theology. However, we also have deep abiding roots in the man who oversaw his trial and execution, John Calvin.

Church historian David Bumbaugh writes, “There are those who insist that in significant ways, John Calvin and his Reformed Church contributed more than Servetus to modern Unitarian Universalism. They argue that ... Unitarian Universalism has inherited much from the structure and practice of Calvin’s Reform Church out of which it emerged.”

And this is the passage that fascinated me and brought me to my thoughts today.

“It remains the fact that Unitarian Universalists find it easier to identify with the martyrs than with the persecutors. It is Servetus rather than Calvin who is honored...”¹

Certainly, we don’t want to celebrate burning people at the stake or religious persecution. We celebrate freedom of thought. But rather than acknowledging the traditions out of which Unitarianism and Universalism emerged, namely Protestant Christianity, we identify with a martyr, a theologian who probably wouldn’t recognize today’s Unitarian Universalism as a church at all. We identify with the martyr, but why?

Why do we identify with the underdog? We all do it. It’s what makes for a good plot line in most movies and books. Certainly the sports fans of the world feel a special thrill at the victory of an underdog. But why? On the surface, we can read the identity as just that, a good plot line. It makes our own story special and different; the underdog adds a bit of intrigue to the situation. But I think it can be a little more complicated than that.

¹ David E. Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalist: A Narrative History*, Meadville Lombard Press: 2000, p19.

I'm reminded of a song by the pop group *Scissor Sisters*. The song is titled "Almost Sorry." And the second verse goes, "No sympathy is given to the perpetrator charged with the crime. I'm willing to admit that it feels good to be a victim sometimes. I won't ever get to thank you, for the terrible things that you said. Now I'm sorry, almost, that you're dead to the world."

It is an awfully bitter break up-song, but far from a unique sentiment. At least the writers of it had the awareness to admit that "it feels good to be the victim sometimes." For when we are the victim, we can look upon the other with disdain. And that, I fear, is why we as religious liberals identify with the underdog. It's because it feels good to be the victim sometimes. It feels good to think of ourselves as an oppressed minority voice because it allows us to look at the religious majority with disdain.

The ironic piece of this equation is, we, Unitarian Universalists are far from peripheral. There is no reason for us to have an underdog complex. Our history is replete with powerful individuals and communities that have shaped American history and contemporary society. Our history is the history of the United States, quite literally.

The parallels that we see between U.S. democracy and the Unitarian Universalist tradition are more than just coincidence. They are historically the same. Our forbearers found a common basis in their search for religious and political organization, a free community in dialog.

Most of you have been around long enough to know that our church operates as a democracy. We have a Board who is elected at an annual meeting by members of the church. The Board and the members control the finances and any major decision of the church by a vote. That's pretty simple.

You might be surprised however, to know that our national organization, The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations also operates with striking similarity to American democracy. Each year at an annual meeting, congregations send their minister and a number of delegates to vote on all of the important business of the association. They elect a board. They also elect a president, who serves a four-year term. Of course there is also the standard term limit of two terms. Does that sound familiar to any of you? It should.

The philosophical background for American democracy and the free church that we are a part of here, today, are rooted in the same commitment, and the same critical historical moment. They both depend on seeking truth in community, and valuing the input of each person. They are as American as apple pie, common as dirt.

If this intersection of thought is not enough, let's remember that the great leaders of this new country, many of them were Unitarians. John Adams, Abigail Adams, John Quincy Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson. This is not a litany of underdogs, or unlikely heroes. This is a litany of the founding leaders of our country.

And the profound influence of Unitarian Universalist thought doesn't end with politics. Social reformers and artists have also been a huge part of forming the American identity. Susan B. Anthony, Dorothea Dix, Louisa May Alcott, P.T. Barnum. Clara Barton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Pete Seeger, Henry David Thoreau, Kurt Vonnegut, Frank Lloyd Wright. These are the people that our children learn about in American history and literature classes. They were Unitarian Universalists. They are, we are at the core of American thought and progress. Pioneers maybe, but a meek minority, underdogs, I don't think so.

I want to tell you about one more moment in history, one you may not be aware of. This is a moment that Universalism played a huge role in cementing American democracy.

As we all know, separation of church and state is a hallmark of American democracy, but that was a hard won fight. That separation did not always exist, even in the colonies. There was no established state religion in the 1700s, but the established church of each town was supported by the taxes of its citizens. Of course not everyone agreed with that because not everyone agreed with the established church in town. Baptists, Quakers, and UNIVERSALISTS provided some of the loudest voices calling for disestablishment of the government-sponsored churches.

One of the strongest examples came from a universalist church in Gloucester MA. By Massachusetts state law, citizens were taxed to support the Congregational Church of the community where they lived. As Universalism was spreading, it found open minds and hearts in the church in Gloucester. Eventually, sixty-one people in Gloucester left the established church to form their own church, the Independent Church of Christ, which stood for Universalism. Then they refused to pay their taxes.

Soon after, the new universalist church they built was seized by the government and sold to pay the taxes they owed. However, the Church sued, and in 1786, they won their case. The universalists of Gloucester Massachusetts created a political idea that is completely taken for granted today. That case created judicial precedence; we set the expectations for church-state relations in this country.

We often celebrate that victory as a part of our heritage. We don't often tell the other half of the story though. Just who was that congregational church in power in MA. Who was being supported with tax-payer money? It was Congregationalists, many of which were already expressing Unitarian theology. While one side of our heritage, the Universalists were fighting for religious freedom, a hallmark of American democracy, they were doing it in opposition to the other piece of our heritage, the Unitarians.

For a large swath of American history, Unitarians, or at least their immediate predecessors maintained a vast religious majority of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and much of New England. Unitarian Universalism is not a small, meek or uncommon voice. It is in fact as common as dirt. Our history is American history, as common as dirt, as American as apple pie.

But somehow we continue to see ourselves as a small fringe voice, as the underdog. Well it might be fun to root for the underdog in football games. It might feel good to be the victim sometimes. But today we cannot afford such a luxury. These beliefs that we hold dear, that are common as dirt have a real impact on the world, and if we don't stand up for them, if we don't claim the strong and respected heritage that is our own, people get hurt.

Just this week, in Orange County, the separation of church and state was barreled over by our Board of County Supervisors. They canceled a \$300,000 contract with Planned Parenthood to provide basic sexuality education in the county. The education would have offered information about anatomy, physiology and seven kinds of birth control -- including abstinence -- as well as about sexually transmitted diseases.

But just this Tuesday, the supervisors voted unanimously to suspend the contract, saying they could not abide funding an organization that performs abortions. Supervisor John Moorlach, who placed the item on the agenda, said "I personally have a problem with government funding of an organization that provides abortion services."

Their personal preferences, their religious preferences now stand in the way of funding basic programs for public health. This is just one very small example, an example that happened this week in our county. It is an example of why we are called to forgo our identity as an underdog, for whatever reason we hold onto it. We are called to move out of our comfortable shell of a small, uncommon denomination,

and speak up for our tremendous legacy, a legacy of free thought and democratic process, a legacy of equality and compassion. For if we silence our own voice, others will fill the void with theirs.

The primary unifying theological theme of the Unitarians and the Universalists, and the historical theological theme you have heard me preach most about, is our rejection of Calvinism, our rejection of predestination, the arbitrary division of those who would be saved and those who would be damned. I preach about this piece of theology not just because it is a part of our history, but mostly because of what it symbolizes. It was, and is what we as UU's should be about, fundamentally rejecting the idea that some people are saved, while others are damned. Refusing to believe that some are worthy while others are not. As Unitarian Universalists, we claim to uphold and support the inherent worth and dignity of every person, EVERY PERSON.

But what does it mean to identify as an "uncommon denomination?" What does it mean to joke, or even embrace the stereotype of Unitarians as being overeducated elite liberals. That is squandering our message. More importantly, it is diametrically opposed to the message of equality that is our foundation. My worst fear is that we are in action, what Calvinists are only in word. My worst fear is that we exclude others, because we see ourselves as the few, the elect, the uncommon denomination.

I want to close today, by revisiting our words for meditation. These are the words of Marianne Williamson, with a bit of adaptation for our Unitarian Universalist movement of today. "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. We ask ourselves, Who are we to be brilliant, powerful, life-transforming? Actually, who are we not to be? Our playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that others won't feel insecure around us. As we let our own light

shine, we give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence liberates others.”

Identifying as the underdog is a privilege that Unitarian Universalism can no longer afford. Our message should not that we are different, an uncommon denomination. Our message must be about acceptance, and freedom . Our message must be one of commonality, because what we stand for is common as dirt. What we stand for is life-affirming community that offers hope for anyone.

-Amen-

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