

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“Conservatives Among Us”
The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins
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Reading (By Davidson Loehr, from “The Simple Gifts of Liberal Religion: And How “UUism” has Betrayed Them”

The Buddhists talk of all great teachers as “fingers pointing to the moon.” The object, say the Buddhists, is to see the moon, not to worship the finger. (The Buddhists obviously don’t think people need a simple place to start). . . . That “moon” is the view of life lived more whole, more connected, more aware and responsibly and the rest of the callings that have inspired the religiously gifted people. The “fingers” are the people who were great only because they let their lives be directed by that deeper awareness, broader sense of connection and higher calling. To turn them into objects of adoration in our little club, while ignoring the many other religious figures who were far better, demeans us and dishonors their memory, doesn’t it?

And let us stop talking and acting like a political cell of the Democratic party. Fighting for laws that enshrine only one set of values may be part of what democracy is about, but that intentionally fragmented and partial view of life is not what any religious vision has ever been about.

And above all, let us once more seek and serve that molten core, that deep, life-giving, terrifying spirit of healthy vision and uncompromising courage which has given such vibrant life to 25 centuries of religious liberals and might yet again give life to us.

Let us seek that ancient and honorable spirit, that spirit: nothing simpler, nothing less. Starting here. Starting now – Amen!

Introduction

First, I want to thank Tony Perrino, Bob Kieffer and Rob Craighurst for the service last Sunday. I have heard wonderful feedback about this service. I have read it and agree. It was brilliant. I must listen to the music of Paul Robeson again. I have said this to Tony, but I also want to say it publicly. We have been very fortunate to have Tony Perrino as the Minister of Pastoral Care this year. Thank you, Tony.

Now to the topic for today. One of the most well-kept secrets among Unitarian Universalists, is that we don’t all belong to one political party, we don’t vote for the same people, and are not all political, social and economic liberals. This sermon is designed to open Pandora’s box, and encourage us to admit that we are a diverse association politically, as we are in our religious points of view. Next week I will look at that which unites us. Today I will acknowledge some of our differences.

My guess is that we have many more Republicans in this room than we have been willing to admit. Stefan Jonasson, Coordinator of Service to Large Congregations for the Unitarian Universalist Association, makes a surprising observation about UU churches. He concludes that we probably have 25% Republicans in our Association. I told someone this fact, and he said, “Well, I guess I am 25% Republican.”

I quickly thought, maybe we should have a Democrat and Republican meter as you join the church. In fact the new UU class asks that very question in its first class. I am never surprised to learn that many of our new members are either Independents, Libertarians or Republicans. My main thesis this morning is that we should be slow to say that we are all alike.

We have liberals, conservatives and radicals among us. Each of these positions have their strengths and their weaknesses.

My belief is that all the positions need to be expressed in our churches. If one is not being expressed we are missing an important piece of the Unitarian Universalist pie. We need the whole pie. I am afraid that the conservatives and the radicals among us feel like they are marginalized. In some of our churches it is the radicals who rule the roost and any other position is admonished.

I happen to call myself a liberal, but I have some of the conservative position though I doubt that it is 25%, and at times I want to affirm the radical within me. We need to be open and honest, accepting of all that we may believe, so that we can be responsible in our search for truth and meaning as our Purposes and Principles say.

Conservatism

Let's look at the conservative position, its strengths and its weaknesses, First, the strengths:

1. The conservative is a person who chooses to preserve the past. The past may not be perfect, but it should be preserved, and not given up easily. The conservative according to Webster is a person who has a "strong sense of tradition and social responsibility, preferring gradual development with preservation of the best elements of the past to abrupt change."

2. The conservative is usually identified with love of country, and patriotism. They are those most likely to support a strong military. They want us to be concerned about our soldiers who are risking their lives for freedom.

3. Conservatives are usually strong institutionalists. They like procedures and rules. As a person who loves history, I want to tip my hat to the conservatives among us. We need their strong voice to help us preserve the institutions we support. We need more institutionalists among us.

In the 19th century it was Ralph Waldo Emerson who was the leader of the radicals among the second generation of Unitarians. Emerson has a wonderful message which has become the heart of 20th century Unitarian Universalism. He was a radical in his day. But his message, along with Henry David Thoreau, is a message of conservation of our natural world. I want to say that the conservation movement is a conservative movement, in that it attempted to preserve the natural world so that our children and their children may enjoy it. I also acknowledge that the environmental movement also has its radical elements. Green peace is a good example.

4. The conservative is one who follows the rules, helps us to set boundaries, puts the group before their individual desires. This was the criticism of Emerson and the Transcendentalists. They are often thought to be elitists, intellectuals, concerned more about "self reliance" than the institutions they supported.

5. Another characteristic of the conservatives among us is that they remind us of the value of the religions that came before. Christianity may have been corrupted, but it still has a lot of good in it. The conservatives are those who are most likely to turn to the Bible for wisdom. I want to affirm this position this morning. The Bible has many problems with it but it is still an important book for UUs to read and understand.

6. Finally, the conservative is most likely remind us that we need money to run our institutions. We should sacrifice ourselves, not just for the political organizations we support, but also the religious institutions we love. Money and the need for it is not something that we should avoid as evil.

7.

Weaknesses of Conservatism:

1. Conservatives can be uneasy about change. I have never served one of our UU churches in New England. I never could get to first base with our New England churches, probably because I am from the Midwest, and have served churches mainly in the Southeast. When I decided to apply for TJMC, UU, I received a call from the Transition Department of the UUA. He said one of our UU churches in New England was interested in me as an Interim. I hadn't applied for the positions and preferred to come to Charlottesville, so I said, "Thank you but no thank you." I considered it a moral victory.

The challenges of our New England churches would be very different from those I served. Yes, I would enjoy their appreciation of their past, their probably openness to UU Christianity. I would also like to have a big endowment, which many of those churches have. But I would also find it a challenge to change their order of service, welcome new people, and suggest new programming. Change would probably be more difficult.

2. Conservatives can also glorify the past. I am the first to admit that the past is not always good.

3. Third, conservatives can sometimes lack a sense of humor. I find the most healthy churches can often laugh at themselves.

4. Conservatives often over-emphasize security. Audre Lorde reminds the conservative that safety is an illusion and that we were never meant to survive. Lorde writes:

When the sun rises we are afraid it might not remain
When the sun sets we are afraid it might not rise in the morning
And when we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed
But when we are silent we are still afraid. (p. 587, *Singing the Living Tradition*).

My hope is that the conservatives among us will not be afraid and will speak out, because they need to be heard. We need the balance in our midst. Henry David Thoreau's famous words should be the battle cry of the conservative:

Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived. I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear. Nor do I wish to practice resignation, unless it is quite necessary. I wish to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. I want to cut a broad swath, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. If it proves to be mean, then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it is sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it.

Yes, the ecologist is a conservative wishing to conserve what is meant for us to enjoy. Webster defines conservative as "having the power or tendency to preserve in a safe and entire state."

Conclusions

What I want to say this morning is that one can be a religious liberal and a political liberal. Political parties change, but religious liberalism is consistent in its basic principles. David Brooks, the political commentator, acknowledges that liberalism and one could admit the Democratic party are both evolving as they always have. He is referring to the decline of multiculturalism and some would say of the notion of political correctness. I quote from David Brooks: "Democrats are purging the last vestiges of the older civic liberalism of the 1950's and early 1960's." What he is referring to is the liberal notion of support for this which is best for the common good, which may not be for individual rights or diversity. Some may be more comfortable supporting a new kind of political candidate, and that person may not be a Republican or Democrat but may be an Independent or a Libertarian or a member of a Green Party.

I am sure there are many in this room who are comfortable with the label Republican, the party of Abraham Lincoln, not Barack Obama. Others may have supported Adlai Stevenson, who was the last openly professing Unitarian to run for the Presidency. I don't even have to mention William Howard Taft, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, all openly Unitarian with quite different political, social and economic views.

I would also like to make room for those who are not at all comfortable with the label liberal, but may stand behind the likes of Ronald Reagan or Barry Goldwater. I could never have supported Reagan, but always admired Goldwater, though I disagreed with him on the Vietnam War.

James Madison Barr

I am often reminded of one of the most successful Unitarian ministers of the twentieth century--a man with whom I rarely agreed with but grew to admire his legacy in our movement. James Madison Barr, was minister for many years in Memphis, Tennessee. James was a Republican through and through. I can understand this. However, I could never understand how he could support Richard Nixon to the bitter end. It would have been appropriate for James to have given Nixon's eulogy along with Billy Graham.

We should always remember that there are representatives of more than one party in this room. We should not assume that just because someone is a religious liberal, that they are a political, social, or economic

liberal. Much too often we make this assumption and it should be corrected at every turn. I wonder how many religious liberals we have lost because we expect them to be political liberals.

The message I give today to you is also a message I would give to the liberal Democrats in congress. I have been disappointed in the “State of our Union.” There is much too much division in our political world. I support our President in holding out an olive branch to the Republicans in the House and Senate. Now I hope to see some results so we will be a less divided nation.

As congress needs to hear all voices, so do we. Our religion needs to hear the conservative voice. Though I am an unabashed liberal, I need to hear the conservative response to balance my liberalism. If liberals only talk to liberals how can we grow as individuals? We need the voice of James Madison Barr, and William Howard Taft, an active Unitarian and former President of the United States.

We need the voices of the radicals and the conservatives from the past which remind us to preserve the past, while changing it. The conservative will tell us that change isn't always good. Don't just accept something new because it is new. The radical will say something similar: The past is not always good. Don't accept something just because it was the path of our forefathers and mothers.

The conservative will remind us to hold on to the institutions that we hold most dear, and support them. We want this institution to be here for the people who will follow us. We need to be concerned about organizational matters, have some boundaries for our behavior, and rules to follow. The radicals will remind us that institutions can become flawed and must change.

The radicals will take us in new directions, say things that have not been heard before. They will tell us to turn to the wisdom within. The conservative will encourage us to look to the wisdom of the great teachers in history, including the Bible, to help us create our own faith. Self reliance is an important goal, but it does not refute the need to have a community of faith. This dialogue between the radicals and the conservatives among us is vital to an ongoing faith that reveres the past but moves beyond it.

If there is some question about the need for the conservative in a “liberal religious community” all we should do is turn to the words of Mark Morrison-Reed:

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community (and I would add a long tradition). The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

As a liberal religious institution, I hope you will always keep the conservative and radical voices in mind—that voice that speaks for the past and that voice that moves beyond the past, the voice that speaks for the need to hold on to part of the past as we change and grow; a voice that speaks for gradual change and that voice that calls for dramatic change; the voice that reminds us of the importance of the institution in our lives and the voice that speaks for the truth that comes from deep within; the voices that say it is the community that must rise about the individuals that create it and the voice that protects the rights of individuals, and the voice that says we all need one another and the voice that says there are times when we must challenge a unified voice that may be wrong. May the conservatives always be with us to teach us about responsibility and freedom.