

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

5.19.13 Sermon: “Loyal Heretics”

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Many people gravitate to Unitarian Universalism because they are heretics. They dissent from established religious dogma, disavowing a revealed truth. For many of us, that dissent began while saying the Nicene Creed. Let me remind you of what many of us dissent from, here is the latest version in use by the Catholics:

I believe in one God, the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.
I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial (vs. one in Being)
with the Father;
Through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate (vs. born)
of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.
For our sake he was crucified
under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end... (I'll end here, it continues on)

You could embrace this statement and be a member of this congregation, but you'd be in a tiny minority. Most of us do not, and do not for a number of reasons. And we choose to trust our reasoning process more than we trust the accuracy of the transmission of Truth through the Catholic Church.²

Historically, Unitarians and Universalists were part of the Protestant dissent from the authority of the Pope. Today, that dissent, beyond the Nicene Creed, includes papal decrees on when and with whom we can engage in sexual intercourse, if and how we may control the size of our families, and the role of women in the church and in society. Again, we reserve to our conscience the decision making process about sexual activity, birth control and, if needed, termination of a pregnancy.

Many of us go much further in our heresy than whether God is three or one. We are a faith that arose during the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason. Many of us go to science and natural law to seek truth and to explain the world rather than supernatural causes. We may retain the idea of divinity, but an idea that doesn't violate and is compatible with the laws of physics and chemistry. And given how strange all that has become with quantum mechanics and Higgs bosons, science and religion may yet find more common ground than there is today. Whatever that common ground may look like, it will likely not look like what is revealed to us about the cosmos by sacred text written by people who thought the sun and moon revolved around the earth.

Sadly, heretical thinking isn't very conducive to building a tightly knit community. Dissenting just doesn't tell us what will hold us together. When we listen to different drummers, sometimes the music we make together can be rather dissonant. Heresy tends to lead to more of it. Reflect on how many Protestant denominations there are. And we are on the fringe of the Protestant world having abandoned any creeds to hold us together.

On the other hand, we are genetically programmed to be groupies. Like many fish that school, crows that form flocks, geese that form gaggles, zebras that form herds, and lions that form prides, over the last 100,000 years or so, homo sapiens have survived much better in groups than in single family units. We can witness this human propensity as it wakes up in middle school children. Group identity, all of a sudden, becomes extremely important. Personal well-being and in some situations, like Southern California gangs, survival, may depend on fitting in with a group.

Those tribal survival mechanisms have been incorporated into our limbic system and cognitive structures of our brains. We are able to identify categories of things in order to treat them as a single group. If I see young man covered in tattoos with purple hair and a ring through his nose, he will likely stimulate a categorical stereotype based on other people I've seen who look like that, seen, but not known. I'll think I recognize that young person through the filter of my stereotype even though the individuals with skin art, colored hair, and piercings may actually have little in common with each other as a group.

Another way our brains are programmed is to see groups of similar individuals and relate to them as a single entity. At a protest rally, the police, in their common uniforms, appear as one entity just as the demonstrators chanting and holding signs appear to the police as an entity, an unruly mob. If the protest heats up, the police and the demonstrators easily stop seeing each other as individuals and start seeing only a threatening group. 3

Now let us consider stepping inside a group and consider how an individual develops a sense of belonging to the entity. British anthropologist Robin Dunbar noticed stable groups tend to be in the range of 100 to 230 individuals with a nominal stable size of 150, called Dunbar's number. Dunbar proposed there are some brain features that encode this, possibly the number of relationships we can comfortably sustain with people in a group.

Hunter gatherer bands work well in the 100-230 size. But when people settled down to raise crops about 10,000 years ago, group size exploded due to the abundance of food.

Unfortunately, evolutionary selection processes haven't caught up. Yet today, we are living in a world with hundreds of thousands of people, even millions of people living together with a brain optimized to live in groups the size of hunter gathering bands.

Solving this problem has been the ongoing task of human civilization for thousands of years. Among the most prominent solutions people have tried are uniting people through common categories such as physical attributes, and allegiance to kings, creeds, and ideology. The

Hebrew scriptures are a wonderful resource to study the transition from tribal culture, to agriculture and empire. Throughout the Bible, Jews struggle with what will hold them together and be the basis for their identity. Is it circumcision? Is it our covenant with God? Is it our king? Is it our common history and tradition? Is it the law? Is it our nationhood? And what do we do when these identities conflict?

The problem for the heretic with any of these ways of organizing people into a group is they interfere with the dissenting process of individual conscience. My race, skin color, cultural background, political affiliation and belief system, will not form the glue that will hold a group of free thinkers together.

So what will create the basis of loyalty for a group of heretics?

The way I'm attracted to today is a pluralism built on personal relationships.

Jesus was a genius of the pluralistic vision. By caring about and being in relationship with the poor, the dispossessed, the unclean, the widow, the orphan, the marginalized of society he stepped out of "us vs. them thinking" naturally programmed into the brain. He challenged the authority of the temple. He challenged the authority of the law as interpreted by the Pharisees. He challenged outer authority that wasn't consistent with inner authority. Jesus was the dissenter against the Judaism of his day. Jesus envisioned an egalitarian divine realm brought to earth that we inherit through Unitarianism and Universalism.

The democratic vision balancing liberty and equality born in the 13 colonies is another precious heritage we can claim for the pluralism we are striving to develop in our congregations. Though there is much to criticize in our Puritan and Pilgrim heritage, the democratic impulse they used to organize themselves in covenant, and their faith in the ability of individuals to govern themselves through the divine working through the members, are the roots of our vision of the inherent worth and dignity of every person.⁴

We witness every day how the brain works to drive us toward categorical thinking. That categorical thinking works against striving develop a sense of belonging in people who see each other as different. A transformative way to move beyond categorical thinking and develop a sense of belonging is through developing personal relationships. Personal relationships can dissolve our biases inherited through cultural stereotypes and prejudice and accumulated through limited, overgeneralized personal experience.

This is why we put such a high value on small groups in our congregation and encourage everyone to participate in them. When we meet around a table at one of our circle dinners or our potlucks, sit together sharing our experiences in a small group ministry session, exchange ideas in a book club, the Tuesday morning philosophy group or sewing a quilt with the Projects and Quilts group, we get to know each other as persons rather than categories. We find our common ground in the trials and tribulations, joys and celebrations of the human condition. We witness directly our common humanity.

And in these small group settings we create the connections that naturally facilitate our identification, commitment and loyalty to the group, the congregation, that isn't dependent on a common belief or a common ideology. Our experience of loving each other beyond belief happens when we build personal relationships with each other. This experience of community can be the center of our heretical approach to religion.

Call it ... pluralism with heart.

Our pluralism with heart allows us to directly experience the inherent worth and dignity of every person so it isn't a theory but a lived reality.

Our pluralism with heart moves us to work for building a world community with justice,

equity and compassion for all.

Our pluralism with heart creates the fertile environment for us:

- to challenge our limited thinking and reactive emotions
- to practice acceptance through witnessing the worth and dignity of others
- to stimulate our desire for personal growth and development and
- to accept shared responsibility for sustaining this community.

I'm so grateful and inspired to be serving a religious tradition seeking to work out a way for us all to get along with each other. To get along with each other in ways that the genetic programming of our brains hasn't figured out yet. We know, today, that life flourishes in climates rich in diversity. We know that diversity is integral to the interdependence of life of which we are a part. Heretical thinking is part of that social diversity that we celebrate and think supports the spirit of life. And loyalty supports the healthy functioning of any community.

May the tension between loyalty and heresy find a balance in this congregation. May that balance support the flourishing of life and love between us and within us as we participate together in the process of life as it continues to evolve,
right here,
right now.

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