

New Member Sunday/ A Church Without Walls

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March 19, 2017

I want to read just a portion of the Lenten Homily that I preached at the First Presbyterian Church of Black Mt. I must admit, it did cause a bit of a stir, but I will share it with you because what I spoke about is the theology of our Universalist heritage.

The homily was preached in March on the suggested topic of, *Saving Love of God*.

I do not want us to be angry or judgmental to the reactions of some of those who had a problem with our beliefs. I just want you to know this morning, especially for our New Members who are here, why it is so crucial that we have a presence in this community, and this incident clearly spells out why we need to be here as a Free Religious Community. I also want us to remember that it is not so much the goal of our journeys, individual or collectively speaking, although goals are important. More important however, is the kind of people we become on our journey. What kind of people are we becoming because of our professed beliefs? By our fruits they shall know us, and we shall know them.

Here is that homily....

In the preface to the first English edition of his book, *The Philosophy Of Civilization*, Albert Schweitzer (A Unitarian, who also wrote a book on the Historical Jesus) states that nothing of real value in this world is ever accomplished without enthusiasm and self-sacrifice.

The word *enthusiasm*, is important here. The etymology of the word stems from the Greek, *enthousiamos*, which means to be inspired, or *entheos*, which means *inspired from God*.

The other word to be unpacked here is "self-sacrifice." Suffice it to say that this can best be explained by the example that I realize that what I would have done has involved me in choices that would not have been necessary were it not for the commitment which sent me forth.

In other words there are times when an individual gives up her rest, her peace of mind, her health, her personal ambition, her security, and even her very life, because of her enthusiasm for something else which she holds more significant than whether she lives or dies.

Whenever we are in the presence of such a spirit, we are caught up in the magic of its power. Thus the Schweitzer statement that nothing real is ever accomplished in this world without enthusiasm and sacrifice.

The prolific theologian, mystic, author, and mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Dr. Howard Thurman, once wrote that he recalls hearing his grandmother say on her 91st birthday, when a friend had asked her if she was ready to die replied, “Yes, I am ready to die, but God has yet to make me *willing*.” (Mediations of the Heart, p. 145, Howard Thurman).

The fear of death is often one of the final conquests of the courageous spirit. I have this witnessed on more than one occasion while serving as a hospital chaplain. The fear of death has many reasons. One of the significant reasons is the fact that there is something which seems much too final and absolute about the separation that death implies. Yes, we know intellectually that all is energy and that energy cannot be created or destroyed, but only transmuted or transformed to some other thing.

This knowledge does not however conquer the fear of death, at least not completely. And so to meet this fear, many things have been contrived by religion and the imagination of human beings. In the first place, it is a universal experience in which all living things share. It confirms the oneness of life and it is a vital part of the life process.

The life of Jesus reminds us that there are some things in life that are worse than death. Death is something that is an event in life; it is something that occurs *in* life rather than something that occurs *to* life. This is crucial to remember, because in this way of thinking, death takes its place alongside an endless series of events, none of which exhausts or defeats life. This is the basis of the belief in life after death. The form varies but the issue is basically the same.

The wonderful thing that may be possible about our encounter with death is the fact that what an individual discovers about the meaning of life as it is lived, does not have to undergo any serious change as he or she meets death. It is the final tribute to the mature soul and to the character of the individual, if one can die as full blown as one has lived. Perhaps one has learned on the journey that what was sought without was found within. In the words of French Existentialist Albert Camus, in the mist of winter, he had found within himself, and invincible summer. Some would call this, The Kingdom of Heaven. Perhaps the individual discovered that the truths found in religion are in the religion because they are true; they are not because they are in the religion. Perhaps they have learned that one does not have to think alike to love alike. Perhaps they have discovered that with this wisdom, with this peace that passes all understanding, with this everlasting love, one can truly ask the question, of whom or what should I be afraid, and to truly know the answer. Such an individual goes down to their grave with a shout; a shout of authenticity, a shout of integrity; the shout of one who has learned to live and love well.

Early Universalist—and later Unitarians--- were convinced that the greatest power in the Cosmos, the greatest power in the Universe was an all- encompassing love and that no one could go beyond its embrace. They believed that this love was the source of all the happiness and harmony that this world would need to exist. To this end, the legitimate use of punishment was not to be about destruction, but instruction; to teach and to reconcile. There was no everlasting hell for folks to go to, because to go to hell as it were, offered no chance of renewal or regeneration. We Universalist preached a gospel which proclaims that nothing, nothing in this world or the next, could or would separate us from the love of god. This love would remedy all so called sin.

And so if no action can separate us from this love, than certainly no human being even had the right to try to. If god's punishment is only to teach and reform, then if it is to be legitimate, than human punishment must have teaching and reform as its goal as well.

If god rejects vengeance, than human beings must reject it as well. If god rejects abandonment of any human being, then we are to reject abandonment of another human being as well. In short, the Universalists, argued that unconditional love was not only a description of the relationship between god and its creation; it was a prescription for all human relations. But not only human relations--- All relations. Those relations include this planet of ours of which we are so, so, fortunate to reside on; with our brothers and sisters whether they be two legged, four legged, those with wings and those that crawl, as well as those that swim. In this way we may seek and gain the enlargement of our hearts, to make room for serenity and peace. This belief, in my opinion, is proof of the saving love of God!

This is the Universalist side of our history, a history that continues to resonate for some even in the year 2017.

Ours is a denomination without walls. Ours is a church without walls. It is a living church if you will as we have a living tradition. It is a place where people of all faiths gather, to love, to support, and to honor one another. Are we human beings? Yes. Do we make mistakes? Yes. Yet we have nothing to do with any dogma that separates people. All are welcome in our church; the indigent and the wealthy, the sick and the healthy, the Republican, the Democrat, and the independent, those who believe in a god and those who don't; those who don't know and don't care to know. As new members, this is what you have gotten yourselves into. And we're delighted to have you.

When you enter here we encourage you to be open-minded. Not so your brains will fall out, but to be open to life. When you enter, you don't need to take off your coat or your hat, but please leave your biases and prejudices at the door. They have no place in this church. You don't have to wear a special hat or robe to enter the sanctuary, but you do have to be aware of the equality of all sentient beings. A church without walls provides a climate of understanding, safety, and love. It is a place where very deep connections can be made. See what you've gotten yourselves into?

Acceptance (not being tolerant) for differences is essential to the creation of a safe and loving space. This does not mean we have to think alike to love alike. Diversity does not have to mean divisiveness. Fellowship occurs in spite of the mind, not because of it. Love, not agreement, is the bond that will keep us together.

Our 4th principle affirms an individual's free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Each person is free to pursue his or her own spiritual path. She is granted total freedom in this pursuit, and in return grants this freedom to others. He agrees not to try to convert or to "fix" anyone else. We give as good as we get. We are not here to shame or to embarrass anyone when mistakes are made or violations occur. Mistakes are to be acknowledged and forgiven. It takes courage to disagree. Those acting out in ways that hurt others will be asked to look at their behavior and to see how they impact others and themselves. Correction and forgiveness go hand in hand. Without forgiveness, correction is impossible. And without correction, forgiveness is incomplete.

Our 5th principle affirms the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. This refers to church governance but not always. Basically, our governing body, our Board of Trustees is a representative democracy.

Yet democracy is not so much about agreement as it is about respect for different points of view. Folks with different points of view not only must be heard, but must feel that they are being heard. This requires the foresight to maintain an environment of equality in which all perspectives can be considered. It is not an easy path, yet this is what we strive for.

In The living Church, power always lies in the hands of the congregation. The role of the minister is to lead by example and to empower others to walk his or her own unique spiritual path. The more successful the minister is in empowering others, the more participatory the organization becomes. The minister's role is to assist in transforming old paradigm congregations into new paradigm ones. This occurs by igniting and facilitating others to take responsibility, to share their gifts, and to co-create the organization with him or her.

These are just a few of the goals we have and are trying to achieve within this community. Obviously, you resonate with this way of being in the world, which is why you have decided to join. This is the living church. This is the living tradition. This is the church without walls. We are delighted to have you. Welcome home!