

“Our Commitment to Hope”

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Occasionally, I find that the sermon I think I will write and the sermon that I actually write are two entirely different things. But as our Unitarian forebears would have us remember, revelation is ongoing, and sometimes the sermon blurb in the newsletter becomes irrelevant.

In what has been a week filled with violence of so many kinds, we're going to focus today our commitment to hope. As Unitarian Universalists, we are part of the liberal religious tradition, which so often eludes definition.

Dean Lewis Fisher of one of the early Universalist theological schools, was once asked where Universalists stand and he famously responded, “The only true answer, is that we do not stand at all; we move.” So let us reflect on the hope that drives our capacity to move, to shift, to work together, and to commit to the task of justice making.

In our justice work as Unitarian Universalists, I think it's important to remember that we're joining a long legacy of all those who have come before us. I know next week Ellen Rutter is going to share about the justice work that her grandmother was doing decades ago. And at noon we will gather together as a congregation to envision the kind of social justice program we want to build together.

Our reading this morning comes from the book “Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square” by Paul Rasor. This book is on the very extensive reading list - like eight page single spaced reading list - that we're required to wade through in order to become UU ministers. When I was mulling over this sermon, Rev. Lisa, who preached last week, reminded me of it.

It's powerful but also dense, so instead of going through the whole reading before my sermon, I'm going to talk through it in smaller pieces. In the section I'm going to be reading throughout my sermon, Rasor is talking about the work of the scholar Dr. Cornel West and the basic commitments that make up the liberal religious tradition. Dr. West, as you may know, has studied and taught at many many Ivy League institutions and recently left his teaching post at Harvard after being denied tenure.

Rasor writes this:

“Dr. Cornel West identifies three basic commitments within our democratic tradition: the ‘Socratic commitment to questioning,’ the ‘prophetic commitment to justice,’ and the ‘tragicomic commitment to hope.’ These commitments are the spiritual wellsprings of a reinvigorated democracy and they are basic to religious liberalism.”

Which is to say, these three things: questioning, justice making, and hoping are the basic foundation of our tradition. And for some clarity, Unitarian Universalism is part of the liberal religious tradition, as are lots of other faith communities. What West is pointing to is the basic things that make liberal religion what it is. So let’s dive a little deeper into each.

We’ll start with the first: questioning. Rasor continues:

“[By the ‘Socratic commitment to questioning] West means not clever verbal sparring, but a commitment to truth-seeking and truth-speaking, requiring a ‘relentless self-examination and critique of institutions of authority, motivated by an endless quest for intellectual integrity and moral consistency’ ...[This] has always been a part of the liberal religious tradition.”

If you remember two weeks ago, I preached on freedom of the pulpit and our tradition’s commitment to truth telling. And I think the distinctions that West makes are really really important. Because it’s not about cleverness or argument for argument’s sake. As he says, questioning is motivated by “an endless quest for intellectual integrity and moral consistency” especially when it comes to power.

I think we all intuitively know this about Unitarian Universalism. The joke is that we don’t have any answers, but we certainly have a lot of questions. Maybe it’s what drew you here in the first place. And our core is a covenant, not a creed, so the thing that holds our community together isn’t belief, but a commitment to living a moral life, spiritual questioning, and striving for integrity together.

Let’s move on to the second piece: justice making.

Rasor writes, “West’s second element, the prophetic commitment to justice, can be traced to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible...Prophetic witness, says West, ‘consists of human acts of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and misery. Prophetic witness calls attention to the causes of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery. It highlights personal and institutional evil, including especially the evil of being indifferent to personal and institutional evil.’

The prophetic commitment to justice builds on critical Socratic questioning and

calls our communities to spiritual and social transformation... Liberal religion has always emphasized ethics over doctrine.”

Again, “liberal religion has always emphasized ethics over doctrine.” This second step, the prophetic commitment to justice, is important. Because West is saying that the questioning isn’t enough on its own. If we are striving for “intellectual integrity and moral consistency,” what we know must change how we behave. Refusing to be moved is its own form of evil.

Activists refer to this relationship between question and action as the “action reflection model of justice.” It means basically that our learning must inform our actions, and we need to reflect on our actions to learn more, so that our actions become more and more attuned to justice. It’s a circle and the goal is to keep moving and not get stuck in one spot. Or, in the words of Maya Angelou, “do the best you can until you know better and then, when you know better, do better.”

And yet, these two alone: questioning and justice making, are not enough. The third piece is critical.

Rasor writes, “West’s third element is what he calls a ‘tragicomic commitment to hope.’ This is not simply about being optimistic, but involves a deeper form of spirituality: the ability to persevere, to continue the struggle for justice even when all seems hopeless. He describes this kind of hope as ‘the ability to laugh and retain a sense of life’s joy--to preserve hope even while staring into the face of hate and hypocrisy--as against falling into the nihilism of paralyzing despair.’”

This tragicomic commitment to hope is about resilience, about knowing things are really hard and still believing in possibility, still remembering to laugh. And in some ways, I think this third commitment is hardest for us Unitarian Universalists. We can be so concerned about being serious intellectuals or concerned justice advocates that we forget that joy is an act of resistance. Joy is necessary medicine.

Rasor goes on, “UU ethicist Sharon Welch astutely examines liberal middle-class activists’ tendency toward despair when seeking quick or definitive solutions to social problems... We want to respond to injustice, but in our own way, on our own terms. Welch suggests that this need for control leads to discouragement when things don’t go as planned. The result is that religious liberals often have trouble sustaining [our] motivation to work for change over the long term. But a long-term view is essential if our prophetic practice is to be effective. Hope comes from acknowledging that the struggle for justice is always long-term and from knowing that our tentative and often small steps form an important part of this larger process.”

Remember our story about the bees? What if deep in your bones, beneath your questions and your fears, beneath your desire to control what scares you, what if you believed that we could build a sweeter world together?

Razor continues, “On the social level, liberals have always had a deep faith in the possibilities of human fulfillment and social progress. But West’s notion of tragicomic hope is a bit different, a gentle critique of the liberal tendency to be overly optimistic or to swing the other way and lapse into despair. He reminds us that, ‘this kind of tragicomic hope is dangerous--and potentially subversive--because it can never be extinguished. Like laughter, dance, and music, it is a form of elemental freedom that cannot be eliminated or snuffed out by any elite power.’”

Elemental freedom he called it. And we know that freedom is about connection, about the spacious calm that comes with knowing we are held in relationship. What of our interdependent web? I’m reminded of the poet Kenneth Collier who wrote, “the life once lived cannot be un-lived, and the love once loved cannot be unloved.” This is what Amanda Hall a few weeks ago called one of our core axioms, remember? We are all inextricably connected. This work of question asking and justice making and hoping, we do it together.

Earlier this week we had a Program Committee meeting and we were talking about what makes something a sermon. The idea that there had to be some kind of hope held together with truth telling came up. And I joked, truthfully, that we are indeed not Calvinists.

As Razor writes,

“Hope has always played a central role in the liberal religious tradition. In the early nineteenth century, Universalists offered a doctrinal basis for human hope. Their belief in universal salvation stood in stark contrast to the Calvinist doctrine of election that condemned most of humanity to the hopelessness of eternal damnation.”

A commitment to hope is core to our origin story as Unitarian Universalists. The rejection of damnation was the point. That is the essence of Universalism. As the Rev. Rebecca Parker wrote in our call to worship:

“Even when we have done all we can
and life is still broken,
there is a Universal Love
that has never broken faith with us

and never will.

This is the ground of our hope,
and the reason we can be bold in seeking to fulfill the promise.”

Rasor ends the chapter that we've been reading with this:

“Religious liberals seem cursed to live with the tension between energizing hope and the temptation toward paralyzing cynicism. But we must recognize that cynicism is a luxury of privilege, a negative spirituality that in the end only feeds the forces of empire. We can maintain our hope, and be true to our own religious ideals, if we remember that this very dissonance, this tension that so often frustrates us, can be creative as well as destructive. It can fuel the passion to question, the courage to be prophetic, and the faith to hope.”

As we look towards our justice visioning time this afternoon, and in the coming months, let us gather our passion, our courage and our faith to hope. As Unitarian Universalists, we belong to the community of religious liberals who hold all these things dear.

Like the bees and their honey, we do this together.

Amen