

Sermon: Emerson In Our Lives
Location: First Unitarian of Toronto
Date: July 5, 2009

1

Reading - Selections of Walt Whitman's Song of Myself

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books,

You shall not look thorough my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them for your self.

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,

And I have said the body is not more than the soul,

And nothing, not God, is greater than one's self

I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand

God not in the least,

Nor do I understand who can be more wonderful than myself.

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and

Each moment then,

In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my

own face in the glass;

I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one

is signed by God's name.

And I leave them where they are, for I know that others

will punctually come forever and ever.

Good morning to all of you. I was delighted when Shawn reached out with the offer to lead a few worship services here in Toronto. This past April I finished my

1

congregational internship and I have been spending the past few months as a stay-at-home Dad, while I search for my own congregation. I've been out of the pulpit since then and really missing it. I was also excited to be able to return to Toronto. From 2001 to 2005, prior to entering divinity school, I spent about a third of my business travel time in Toronto, Ottawa or Montreal – all very different and very wonderful in their own way. I even made it to at least a half a dozen Maple Leaf games and during the season always enjoyed Don Cherry at intermission during Hockey Night in Canada while in my hotel at the Sheraton on Queen St.

Now, let's be clear, I'm only sharing this with you to soften you up. Shawn was adamant about having me write culturally sensitive sermons. On this 4th of July US Holiday weekend, I understand that although we are all Unitarians, I am still a stranger in a strange land so you will forgive me if I unintentionally offend – for that as we all know is the way of the citizen of the US – and you will have to forgive me because forgiveness is a theological practice that even UU's should engage in once in a while. However I will try not to disappoint Shawn and keep my sermon and its references as culturally neutral or Canadian friendly as possible. To that end, I've watched as much Trailer Park Boys as I could and stopped in the first Tim Hortons I could find once I crossed the border to get me in the right frame of mind for today's worship. I'm kidding, of course, about the Trailer Park Boys.

Turning to matters more theological, I'd like to talk a bit about Ralph Waldo Emerson. I don't know about you, but for me, prior to entering divinity school, Emerson was always one of those people who I know of but did not know a lot about. He is, however, critically important in shaping our understanding and practice of Unitarianism today.

To start us off, I'd like to read to you the opening paragraphs of Emerson's Divinity School Address, delivered to the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School in July of 1838: (try not to be too distracted by the abundance of gender specific language)

"In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm of Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily...

But when the mind opens and reveals the laws which traverse the universe and make things what they are, then shrinks the great world into a mere illustration of

the mind. "What am I?" and "What is?" asks the human spirit with a curiosity new-kindled, but never quenched.

A more secret, sweet and overpowering beauty appears to us when our hearts and minds open to the sentiment of virtue. Then we learn that our being is without bound; that, to the good, to the perfect, we are born, low as we now lie in evil and weakness.

Let us, then, learn the revelation of all nature and all thought: namely, that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own mind... [and that] the simplest person who in his integrity worships God becomes God."

Keeping in mind that Unitarianism of mid-nineteenth century Boston (as I imagine it was here in Toronto as well) was much more Christian in its presentation, what Emerson does not say here is almost as interesting as what he does say. The absence of a scriptural passage or language specifically invoking Jesus Christ would have spoken volumes to his audience of students, parents, ministers and theologians. "The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm of Gilead, and the new hay." With these words, Emerson, a former Unitarian minister who has at this time begun to assume a larger, more public position as a nationally recognized lecturer, has taken a deliberate shot across the bow of those who are expecting a typical graduation speech and a more overtly Christian message.

Nature, in these opening words, is Emerson's scripture and the revelations to be discovered are not found in the bible but in the integrity of our own mind. When we read in our purposes and principles the statement about a free search for truth and meaning, it's Emerson we have to thank for this.

This expression of a natural and personal theology – an expression that we hold to be among the defining characteristics of our faith today, was a radical departure from the teaching of the day. Emerson continued in his opening to claim, "Our being is without bound, to the good, to the perfect, we are born, low as we now lie in evil and weakness. Let us learn, then, that the Highest dwells within us and that the simplest person who in his integrity worships God becomes God."

BLASPHEMY!

To the perfect, we are born – Baptism – original sin – corner stones of Christianity and the reason for Jesus' death and resurrection? Gone! Let us learn, that the Highest dwells within us... The authority of the bible, the authority of the church, the authority of the minister? Gone! For the Unitarian professors

and theologians at the divinity school, this was too much. Although at this time, Emerson was well on his way to becoming an incredibly successful lecturer and essayist, thirty years would pass before he was welcomed back to speak at Harvard.

But this was the truth as Emerson had come to understand it and honoring the truth as you understand it is one of the underlying themes found within all of Emerson's writings and it is the foundational sentiment in his one of his most famous essays titled *Self-Reliance*. It is from this essay that we get several familiar quotations. For example, "Whosoever would be a man, must be a nonconformist" and "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

That last one struck me as particularly poignant. We joked earlier about my being culturally sensitive to the differences between an American congregation and a Canadian one because at some very human level, we use these constructs to define and redefine who we are – Tim Hortons rather than Dunkin Donuts, or Hockey Night in Canada rather than Monday Night Football. But they are artificial constructs and deep down inside, you and I know that these societal constructs are an illusion. Our loyalty to these constructs, for Emerson, has the real potential not to aid us in defining who we are but of actually destroying who we are and who we can become.

Emerson writes, "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs." Emerson argues, "What I must do is all that concerns me...The objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you is that it scatters your force. It looses your time and blurs the impression of your character. If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible-society, vote with a great party either for the government or against it, spread your table like base housekeepers – under all these screens I have difficulty to detect the precise person you really are: and of course, so much force is withdrawn from your proper life. But do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself."

How do these words sound to us? At times I imagine myself sitting among the congregation and hearing what I'm saying. For every part of me that is stirred by these words, there's a competing part of me that's down there with you looking up at me right now and asking, is this guy serious? Taken to the extreme, I might say to myself, so if I get a cruller and a coffee and all of the sudden I'm an invisible part of humanity? Or perhaps, is this guy serious? I got three kids or a

boss, or a mortgage payment and now I need to go tilting at windmills like some modern day Don Quixote for my life to have meaning?

Emerson actually is calling on us to tilt at windmills if that is the truth of who we are. Ultimately, Emerson is calling on us to lead lives of integrity. Lives that are in line not just with who we are, but in line with that sense of the divine that lives within each and every one of us. Emerson maintains that, "The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God."

A fundamental premise of Emerson's thought is the belief that each one of us can and, indeed, must discover divine truth for ourselves. According to his doctrine of "self-reliance," one cannot discover religious truth by means of tradition, ritual, books, or priests. He asserts that one should "dare" to live according to the "infinite law" within and "dare to love God without mediator or veil." If we seek justice and purity, then "the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that (person)." Action and attitude, then, have more to do with acquiring the "religious sentiment" than does conformity to tradition or arbitrary doctrine. Moreover, religion must provide answers to ultimate, eternal questions like; "What am I? and What is?"

When we get right down to it, I ask you, what other questions are there? What am I, What is my purpose? The journey we take to answering those questions is not an easy one.

If toady, you are not finding answers to those questions, find another way to answer them. Do this by following the example of great men and women who you admire and who have gone before you.

The humanist in me can not help but think of Joseph Campbell, in his book The Power of Myth who intersects wonderfully with Emerson when he writes:

"(W)e have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world."

We have choices. We alone have the power to choose how we live our lives. Emerson and countless other have gone before us making the choices that would allow them to come to the center of their own existence and find that divine spark lit within. If we conform, when we conform, we are making that conscious

decision to reject the divine presence existing within ourselves and take not the hero's journey but the journey of an existence that none of us, when we are truly honest with ourselves, wish to have.

Henry David Thoreau, a protégé of Emerson, would write in his book Walden of this when he commented that "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Are we leading lives of quiet desperation? The fact that we are choosing to be here – in this house of worship – a house of worship not to a supernatural god or external deity – but a house of worship where we recognize the god that dwells within each and every one of us – that you are here, today, in this house tells me that you desire to live lives of mystery and wonder, lives that speak to the truth of who we are and lives that honor the divine within each and every one of us. Being able to acknowledge this, putting language to those ideas that reside within us, this is Emerson's gift – this is our faith!

Amen and blessed be.

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