

Beyond Belief

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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“On an altar of prejudice we crucify our own,
yet the blood of all children is the colour of God.” – Don Williams, Jr.

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation

From the Siddur, or prayer book, of Shir Chadash:

May the door of this home be wide enough
to receive all who hunger for love
all who are lonely for friendship.

May it welcome all who have cares to unburden,
thanks to express, hopes to nurture.

May the door of this house be narrow enough
to shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity.

May its threshold be no stumbling block
to young or strained feet.

May it be too high to admit complacency,
selfishness or harshness.

May this home be for all who enter,
the doorway to richness and a more meaningful life.

From “Saved By Love,” by Michael Tino, in *Coming Out In Faith*

The very first time I attended a Unitarian Universalist congregation for worship, I was greeted by the sight of a congregation at least 75% of whom were wearing pink triangles on their nametags. I didn't know what to make of this. I thought I'd died and gone to some sort of queer heaven.

I remember vividly the experience of looking around me and seeing all of the triangles.

I wouldn't have guessed he was family, I thought to myself, or her. That man and woman sitting together holding hands— I guess they could be bisexual.

And that older couple with the same last name— maybe they came out to each other later in life and stayed married for reasons beyond sexual attraction. Good for them. Good for all of them.

How foolish, how prejudiced, how hypocritical of me for presuming [any of these] people to be straight [in the first place].

After all, they had their pink triangles on, proudly proclaiming their queer identity.

And who was I to argue with people's self-identification? So I made myself right at home amidst the pink-triangle bedecked crowd.

I sat there in wonder through the service as the (woman) minister (also wearing a pink triangle) preached about the feminine face of the divine.

At the time, I was a 21-year-old gay New Yorker new to the South. Moreover, I was a third-generation lapsed Catholic who had long ago given up the notion that there would ever be a religious community that accepted my distinctly unorthodox theology (much less my sexuality).

It wasn't until coffee hour that someone explained to me that several months before,

the congregation, as part of its journey to becoming a Welcoming Congregation, had participated in a Sunday worship service in which people were challenged to wear a pink triangle whatever their sexual orientation.

They were informed about the origin of the symbol to mark gay men in Nazi Germany, and told the story of the King of Denmark, who, in that same era, wore a yellow Star of David even though he wasn't Jewish.

At first, I was disappointed.
After all, I'd thought I had landed in a queer parallel universe.

But the more I thought about it, the more I was amazed by this group of people who were willing to be perceived as gay, lesbian and bisexual in order to send the message that those of us who actually were queer were welcome.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I had experienced radical hospitality at its finest, and that was something even more awesome than a church full of queer folks.

While I had (and continue to have) many amazing heterosexual friends who step up as allies to LGBT folks again and again, I had never before encountered an institution that made such a statement.

I had not even encountered too many straight people who were willing to wear a pink triangle without a modifier like "straight but not narrow."

Yet, there I was, faced with an entire congregation of people whose simple act of affixing a pink triangle sticker to their nametag changed the course of my life.

This wasn't the first time Unitarian Universalists had changed my life—but it was the first time I knew it.

Sermon: “Beyond Belief”

Do you know the story?

The one mentioned earlier in the reading?

The one about Danish King Christian during World War II, boldly wearing a yellow arm-band with a Star of David, a sign of solidarity when the Jews of his country were ordered by the Nazis to so identify themselves in public?

If you know the story, you may also know that it is a legend.

King Christian didn’t actually don an arm-band, and for that matter, the Nazis never went so far in Denmark as to require that Jews wear them either.

But, the truth is that the Danish people, led by their king, did actively resist cooperating with the Nazis during the war, leaving the occupying authorities confounded at every turn.

Though the story of the arm-band isn’t technically true, it speaks to the powerful truth at the heart of the Danish Resistance.

In his lecture this afternoon on this movement, Dr. Wagner will surely shed more light on this, so I hope you’ll plan to attend.

But, what I want you to know for now is that that story inspired an entire Montana community to take action in 1993.¹

For months, the Ku Klux Klan had been sewing seeds of hate in the city of Billings.

Racist fliers were plastered onto car windshields during a celebration of Martin Luther King’s birthday.

Tombstones in the Jewish cemetery were vandalized and upturned.

¹ *Faith and choice in the works of Joss Whedon*, by K. Dale Koontz, p. 93.

The home of native woman Dawn Fast Horses was covered with spray-painted swastikas and graffiti.

The community, duly horrified, turned out for candlelight vigils. Thirty people showed up with cans of paint to cover over the hate.

But, things in Billings only continued to escalate.

In December, not long after six-year-old Isaac Schnitzer helped his parents put up a paper menorah in his bedroom window for Hanukkah, a chunk of cinder block shattered their celebrations and his window.

Though, Issac wasn't physically hurt, his parents felt the terrible sting of having to explain that there were people in the surrounding community who hated them because of who they are.

Rather than quietly ignoring or minimizing what had happened, Issac's parents asked *The Billings Gazette* to run the news of the attack on its front page.

The paper did not only that, but included a large image of a menorah, as well—and in an editorial telling the legend of King Christian and the arm-bands, the editors urged the people of Billings to cut out and put up this ancient Jewish symbol in their own windows as a sign of support for the groups being targeted with intolerance.

Overnight, menorahs sprang up everywhere. In short order, there were more than 10,000 paper menorahs in the windows of homes and businesses throughout the city.

Suddenly, this quiet and relatively homogenous city on the high plains had what seemed a very large Jewish population.

While a powerful message had been sent to the Klan, putting up the menorahs involved some very real measure of risk, as acts of vandalism and harassment continued on for some time.

Still, the people of Billings had taken action. They had chosen to take a stand on the side of love,

and, eventually, they learned that love wins.

Along the way, they also discovered the strength of standing in solidarity.

What they thought was a simple show of support for the victims of violence turned into a larger lesson about the transformative power of a community coming together.

Sadly, this is a lesson our world seems to need to learn over and over again.

It is a lesson we try to learn regularly in this religious community—this marvelous little laboratory of the human spirit—where the goal of not mere tolerance but deeper understanding is at the core of our spiritual practices.

As I am fond of saying, we are each other's spiritual work.

Our differences—and our efforts to transcend them—are the stuff from which genuine spiritual growth springs.

Now, to be sure, it's not the easiest of paths.
And, it's certainly not the easiest of paths to walk together.
But walk we do, even when we stumble.
Even when we fall.

Indeed, the question I am most commonly asked by clergy from other religious traditions is just how I manage to hold a congregation like this together.

As if...! As if I could somehow manage to keep this congregation together all by myself!

I am quick to point out to these curious interfaith colleagues that things don't quite work like that around here—that the congregation pretty much holds itself together, and that my central task is not enforcing doctrine, but rather calling people to live committed and courageous lives of integrity.

More often than not, other clergy have a very hard time comprehending a faith without a set of specific beliefs.

And, so, their next question is almost always:
“How on earth do you preach to a room full of atheists and agnostics,
Buddhists and Christians, Jews and Pagans?”

“Very carefully,” I say.

And, then I share the truth that it’s not as hard as it might seem.

I explain that ours is a covenantal faith, not a creedal religion.

That we find sharing a set of common values
far more important than holding some set of shared beliefs.

And that we, as Unitarians, are ultimately united in a covenant
that speaks to how we aspire to be in this world:
that we seek to be led in all things by love,
ever-questing after truth beyond our grasp,
and giving generously of ourselves to the service of life itself—
all in the fragile but blessed hope
that all the world might one day dwell in peace.

Now, let me say that to ask what holds us together is a fair question.
I know it is one that some of us ask ourselves
around here from time to time.

But putting undue focus on the question of belief
is to risk missing the point of this religion:
that what we do with our beliefs
is far more important than the beliefs themselves.

Religious scholar Karen Armstrong,
in her TED Talk on the “Charter for Compassion,”
speaks to her own evolving understanding about the concept of belief.

I found some astonishing things[, she says,]
in the course of my study that had never occurred to me.

Frankly, in the days when I thought I’d had it with religion,
I just found the whole thing absolutely incredible.

These doctrines seemed unproven, abstract, and, to my astonishment, when I began seriously studying other traditions, I began to realize that belief, which we make such a fuss about today, is only a very recent religious enthusiasm.

It surfaced only in the West, in about the 17th century. The word “belief” itself originally meant to love, to prize, to hold dear. In the 17th century it narrowed its focus... to mean an intellectual assent to a set of propositions—a credo.

“I believe” did not mean “I accept certain creedal articles of faith.” It meant, “I commit myself. I engage myself.”

So, if religion is not about believing things, [she asks,] what is it about?

What I’ve found[, she reports,] is that, across the board, religion is about behaving differently.

Instead of deciding whether or not you believe in God, first you do something, you behave in a committed way, and then you begin to understand the truths of religion.

Religious doctrines are meant to be summons to action: you only understand them when you put them into practice.

Practise what you preach, as the old saying goes.

That’s essentially what our own William Ellery Channing once advised a newly-minted minister in the 19th century when he said: “may your life preach more *loudly than* your lips.”

Or as Bill Gardiner so clearly puts it:

“We all have two religions: the religion we talk about and the religion we live.”

“Our task [is] to make the difference between the two as small as possible.”

And so we must ask ourselves: does the practice of our religion—my religion and your religion—make us kinder and more compassionate?

Does it build the common good on this planet
and make our own days glad?

Does it ennoble our lives and transform this world with love?

I sincerely hope you find the answer to be yes.
Or at least 'yes' on most days.

And, on those *other* days, if you're anything like me,
well, you might rightly feel that you have your work cut out for you. . .

You may well find yourself wondering whether the practice of your faith
isn't perhaps something you may well need more practice at.

Practice makes perfect, after all.

Fortunately, each day offers to us another chance to bring
our beliefs and our behaviours into closer alignment—
to live out a life of increasing integrity
as we strive to make our words and our deeds one and the same.

That's what I see happening when non-Jewish people in Montana
put up menorahs in their windows,
and when straight people here
put rainbows and pink triangles on their name tags.

I see it upstairs each week in coffee hour
and downstairs at the monthly meetings of Amnesty International
where letters are written demanding justice.

I see it in the passion of the protestors in St. James Park
and in the commitment of our volunteers
at the Regent Park School of Music.

I see it when we seek to walk more gently upon this earth,
and when we teach our children about their bodies and human sexuality.

I see it in countless ways as we struggle and strive to build beloved community
on this sacred bit of soil.

All of this and more speaks louder than any sermon I could ever give.
All of this tells the story of our faith, reveals our true beliefs,
and holds this congregation together.

This congregation was founded in 1845 on the principle of
free exercise of private judgment in all matters of belief.

It was a dramatic idea then, and it's a dramatic idea today.

One hundred and sixty-six years later,
that principle stands at the heart of this congregation.

What holds us together all of these years later
is not so much a set of beliefs
but the shared dreams we have for ourselves and our world—
a vision of lives lived with compassion, commitment, and courage.

And, yet, maybe we hold more shared beliefs than we imagine.
As Karen Armstrong explained, belief has not always meant
some propositional statement to which one assents.

The earlier meaning of belief was “what I give my heart to;”
it pointed to what we most deeply cherish, to what we most dearly love.

So, I ask, what do you believe?
To what and to whom do you give your heart?
What do you cherish and love with all of your being?

May what we believe—what we love above all else—
serve always to bring us together rather than divide;
may our beliefs cause us to see that what we cherish is much the same.

May we believe in each other
and in this great meeting house, which holds us all in its embrace.

Amen.