

# “Things Commonly Believed Among Us”

The Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
4 November 2012

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.

I don't know about you,  
but I'm so ready for the American election to be over.

The only thing that gives me pause and makes me want to be more patient  
is an observation made this week by the comedian Bill Maher.

He said that Mitt Romney has moved so far toward the political centre  
since winning the Republican primaries that by this Tuesday,  
he'll be a “staunchly pro-gay Unitarian,” who confronts big business,  
revels in human diversity, and rejects having a bunch of male politicians  
telling women what they can and can't do  
with their own reproductive systems.

As tired as I am of American politics,  
I have to say that I'm willing to hang on for a couple more days  
to see Romney become a Unitarian!

What a dramatic conversion that would be.

Just think of the press coverage that would come our way.

Journalists and photographers lined up outside our doors.  
Reporters asking each of us as we leave this building on a Sunday,  
“just what is it that you all believe?”

When they suss out the elevated heartbeat  
and sense of panic many of us might feel at the question,  
they'd probably repeat it once more: “what is it that you all believe?”

And, out there, standing on the curb of St. Clair, what would you say?

How would you respond?

The problem is that it's a trick question, at least for a bunch of Unitarians.

The easier, more comfortable question is "what do *you* believe?"

Though it might take some of us a few minutes to get into the swing of things, any reporter who dared ask the question of what each of us believes might find it hard to turn many of us off once we got started.

We are, of course, a people of many vigorously held opinions.

The joke is funny but not untrue that wherever two or three of us are gathered, there is sure to be at least eight opinions—sometimes, all coming from the same person!

The question any reporter would ask, though, would be phrased in the plural not the singular—not what do "you" believe, but what do "you," what do "you all," what do "you as Unitarians" believe?

And what would be your response?

What would you say?

How would you begin to speak for Unitarians as a whole?

The advice most seasoned leaders and ministers would give is to not take the bait—to explain that, as Unitarians, we are bound together not by a set of shared beliefs, but by a set of common values—that we are not a creedal religion, but a covenantal tradition.

It will likely be at this point that the reporter will either walk away in exasperation thinking you're confused, misguided, or both, or she will take a deep breath and try the question again.

It's not an easy thing to answer.

When the question has been put to me, I explain it isn't actually possible to speak for all Unitarians,

especially on every topic.

We often have very divergent views about God, about the afterlife, about evil or prayer or ritual.

(In our congregation, we don't even agree about the place of applause in worship!)

Given our diversity, it makes it perilous and perhaps unwise to even venture a response.

The problem with that, though, is more often that not, the message we have sent out inadvertently is that Unitarianism is the religion where you can believe whatever you want.

While the idea is exciting to some, it's bewildering to many more.

I think that's the reason we're so frequently the butt of jokes on television.

While we represent only a tiny sliver of the population of North America, our reputation for radical openmindedness is well enough known that just naming us guarantees a laugh for every punchline—just like that one about Romney becoming Unitarian.

Maybe you caught the comedian Stephen Colbert at it this week, poking fun at us, too.

In a segment about how Billy Graham recently reversed his pronouncement that Mormonism is a cult, Colbert put up the list of other religions the fundamentalist preacher considers to be cults.

There we were, listed with Mormons and Scientologists and so forth.

Apparently we made the list, Colbert joked, because our “rules are so loose that [our] three sacred texts are the Old Testament, the New Testament, and *Free To Be You and Me*.”

Joking aside, it always amazes me to hear people speak of us as a cult.

By the most derogatory definition of the word, we don't in any way qualify.

We, of course, lack the rigid ideology, the communal living, and authoritarian leaders that makes any cult effective.

We're, frankly, far too complicated to ever be a cult.

When a reporter asks members of a cult what they believe, you can bet there's a clear-cut answer.

We're much harder to pin down.

There's an answer, though, we've long given when asked to spell out where we stand—and that is to explain that ours is a faith that doesn't stand, but moves.

It might be easy to think of this as a relatively recent development in our history, but the centuries' long story of this faith, has been an epic of evolution and constant change.

Where most other faiths are built around some immutable claim for all time, our approach has been to poke and prod at every belief, to test every claim in the light of reason, and with each generation assess anew what endures as true and worthy of our commitment and devotion.

The motto *Semper Reformanda*—always being reformed—has been with us from our beginnings in the radical wing of the Reformation down to this present day.

It is for this reason that we say that “revelation is not sealed.”

For there are, for us, no holy books locked away with irrefutable answers.

Instead, we stand in a tradition—a living tradition—that has been a long and sometimes difficult dialogue about who we are and what we are becoming.

Generation after generation, our radicals have been replaced by our own reformers, always carrying forward our most sacred mission:

to keep “abreast of truth.”

As you might imagine, this tradition of ongoing reform has meant we’ve always lived in a fairly steady state of agitation—and, to be honest, mutual irritation.

One of the most significant battles to be waged in our history took place toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

During the 1800s, Unitarianism finally began to move beyond its original stronghold in New England.

By mid-century, there were some 60 congregations outside of Massachusetts, including ours, which dates to 1845.

But, to give you a sense of scale, there were more than 400 congregations in Massachusetts—with 65 of those were within 15 kilometres of Boston.

A satirical statement of faith from the time said that Unitarians believed in “the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighbourhood of Boston.”

You now know why—it’s where most of them lived.

A good number of the new congregations beyond Boston, though, took a theological turn that was a source of serious concern for the establishment Unitarians back in Beantown.

By the 1880s, many of these churches had formed an organisation known as the Western Unitarian Conference.

A few of its key leaders, with an eye toward expansion, argued for embracing different views and opening Unitarianism to people who didn’t believe in God or necessarily consider themselves to be Christian.

They believed this creedless faith of ours should be an ethical movement, and they felt that anyone who resisted their plan was a lover of creeds—which was just about the worst thing one Unitarian

could call another Unitarian back then.

The response was swift and heated.

Ministers in both this new conference and beyond expressed alarm at the new direction being proposed.

A war of words ensued, with ministers on all sides making their views known in what came to be called “The Issue in the West.”

One of the most outspoken, on the side of what was called the “Christian Basis” party, wrote:

Are we ready to declare those great faiths—  
in God, prayer, immortality, and the spiritual leadership of Jesus—  
which have always in the past been at the heart of Unitarianism,  
no longer essential to our movement?

Those words were written by none other than Jabez Sunderland, my predecessor who served this congregation from 1901-1906 and the person for whom this very room was named.

I figured it might surprise you to realise that just a decade after this great theological controversy was finally resolved, this congregation called as its new minister one of the leaders of the “Christian Basis” party rather than someone from the “Ethical Basis” side of the dispute.

By then, though, things had settled down significantly.

The reason was that a middle path had been found.

In 1887, a statement of shared beliefs was put forward for consideration by the Rev. William Channing Gannett.

It focussed on what was held in common, rather than what kept people apart.

After seven years of debate and word-smithing, his statement, titled, “Things Commonly Believed Among Us” was finally adopted, reducing tensions and putting an end to decades of theological hostility.

This moment marked a turning point for our tradition,  
as we would never again be considered exclusively Christian.

From that point on, we opened ourselves  
to the wider wisdom of the world's religions.

We opened ourselves to the insights of science and literature.

We demanded of ourselves intellectual integrity  
and recognised individual conscience as our ultimate source of authority.

Today, 118 years since its adoption,  
many of the things commonly believed among our religious ancestors  
are surprisingly still commonly believed among us.

Some, of course, are not.

Before I share this series of statements with you,  
I feel I should confess that I've cleaned up the sexist language of the time  
as not to distract from the theological concepts,  
which I've otherwise left untouched.

Listen now to these words and give thought  
to whether and how they remain true for us today.

We believe that to love the Good and to live the Good  
is the supreme thing in religion;

We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities  
in matters of religious belief;

We honour the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old and new;

We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught [us] truth  
and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion;

We believe in the growing nobility of [humanity];

We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful, beneficent, [and]  
unchanging...

We believe that good and evil invariably carry their own recompense,  
no good thing being failure and no evil thing success;  
that heaven and hell are states of being;  
that no evil can befall the good [person] in either life or death;  
that all things work together for the victory of the Good;

We believe that we ought to join hands and work  
to make the good things better and the worst good,  
counting nothing good for self that is not good for all;

We believe that this self-forgetting, loyal life  
awakes in [us] the sense of union here and now with things eternal  
—the sense of deathlessness; and this sense is to us  
an earnest of the life to come;

We worship One-in All—  
that life whence suns and stars derive their orbits  
and the soul of [woman and] man its Ought,  
that Light which lighteth every [person] that cometh into the world,  
giving us power to become the [children] of God,  
that Love with which ours souls commune.

What surprises me is how well these words actually hold up  
after some six generations.

They're a bit too poetic for our times, and probably overly optimistic.

Yet to read them is to be reminded  
that we stand in a tradition—a living tradition of change—  
with people who have grappled to know for themselves  
what is true and worthy of our highest aspiration.

Such a democratic and ever-evolving religion is not for everyone.

And, though I do have high hopes for Tuesday,  
I seriously doubt Mitt Romney  
will decide this faith is for him over the next two days.

Maybe that's for the best, even though it means it's now highly unlikely  
reporters will be stationed outside the doors  
to ask you just what it is that we, as Unitarians, believe.

Perhaps that will give us all some time  
to devote deeper thought  
to the answer that we would give.

Now, if you were hoping that I would be revealing  
some magic talking points here at the end,  
I'm sorry to disappoint you, but this isn't that kind of sermon,  
and, well, I'm not that kind of minister.

What I will share with you is a clue—  
a glimpse of that which endures amid all the change.

In his poem, "The Way It Is," William Stafford writes:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.

As we travel this path toward truth,  
may our grip on that thread be always firm.

As we seek that which endures,  
may we hold fast to this tradition that ennobles our lives,  
gives courage to our days, and moves forward  
the great unfolding dance  
at the heart of life  
on this good green earth.

Friends, this is the hardest religion we will ever love.  
Let us, then, cherish it, even as it changes.  
And let us cherish it all the more  
*because* it changes, and changes even still. Amen.