

Tag: You're It!

Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel, Intern Minister
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
31 March, 2013

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'm a big fan of Easter eggs... I don't really eat them, but I enjoy hunting for them. In fact, I enjoy hunting for Easter eggs so much, that I do it year-round, looking for little gems that are hidden in unexpected places.

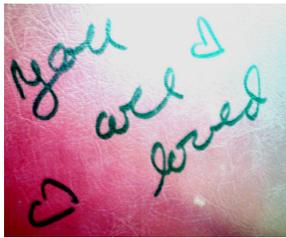
Now, I should probably clarify that these Easter eggs I'm talking about are usually not actually shaped like eggs, but it's the hunt for them that really excites me, and their different shapes are, in fact, part of the fun. It is those things that capture my attention because they bring back a message that is a bit different from the one we're used to seeing or hearing.

Among my favourite shape of Easter eggs are graffiti tags. In the graffiti world, tags are usually illegible scribbles that mark someone's stake in some place, like a signature on a wall, saying "I was here" or warning others that they've wandered into the wrong territory.



But once in a while I see a different kind of tag, one with an assertive message about the reader—and in my mind, one that also says something assertive about the writer. When I see these tags, I collect them like Easter eggs in a photographic basket that brings a ray of sunshine to my many albums.

On the side of an Ottawa bus, I see a sticker, with a scribble: "You are beautiful", it says. It makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside, and I carry with me the hope that the next readers will feel the same, maybe encouraged to see a message that challenges other less-assertive messages that others may have said about them at other times in their lives.



On the back of a Massachusetts interurban train: “You are loved”. It doesn’t say by who, but then I remember the people in my life who share that sentiment toward me. Warm and fuzzy strikes again.

A garbage can in Kingston, Ontario, exclaims to me: “Peace!” Such a nice town, Kingston; the garbage cans are so polite.



A sign at the St. Clair streetcar station solemnly warns against feeding the pigeons. In black marker, it also says “Someone loves you!” It’s nice to know that it isn’t just Massachusetts that feels that way.

A stop sign in Montreal used to say, in a forbidding tone: “ARRÊT”, but two letters have mysteriously disappeared, and now it proudly proclaims: “A R T”



Walking down St. Clair Avenue one night, an ice box tells me, “Adore”. I like that suggestion, and make a note to do some of that on Sunday. I think it’s in my contract.



Of course, I cannot condone such acts of vandalism... but who am I to cast the first stone? And ...well, I rather admire their... special flavour, challenging the norms of other graffiti, and other messages we might be used to hearing.

Maybe that’s one of the reasons that the tale of the woman caught in adultery speaks to me [John 8:2-11], seeing in that story a Jesus who re-asserts the dignity of his sister on Earth; who challenges the spell of the establishment; and who has some fun with characters that wish to stick to that tradition so zealously, that they have forgotten the roots of a law whose core is *love your neighbour*. There is something comforting about a prophetic voice—some even said that of a king—that looked to turn the law on its head by reprising its basic value.

In fact, I’m a sucker for those stories of impish folks who take self-assertive jabs at the accepted, conventional wisdom, and who remind their fellow companions of wisdom they may have forgotten.

One of my favourite stories is that of *another* Jesus—though his name is actually an anglicized form of the Hebrew name: Joshua. It is a man originally named Joshua Abraham Norton, and though he carried the name of two prophets, he is better known for his last name: Norton; history remembers him as Norton I, Emperor of the United States, and Protector of Mexico.

Norton was a businessman who had come to the US in the mid-19th century with relative wealth and a happening business, settling in San Francisco. But after a disastrous investment, he lost his wealth, and some say, his mind. He disappeared for a couple of years in what seemed like an end to his old life.

That absence turned out to be a self-imposed exile, from which he came back transfigured into Norton I, with the Imperial style for which he became known, making grand visionary proclamations, prophesying against injustices he noticed, aspiring for a cleaner, friendlier city and country, and among other things, calling for a bridge or tunnel connecting the cities of San Francisco and Oakland across the San Francisco Bay... a Bay Bridge, if you will. A bridge that in fact got built, decades after his death; The Bay Bridge that he had envisioned now connects San Francisco and Oakland—it was almost named after him.

During his humble reign, his fellow San Franciscans played along. They found in him a person who embodied their state of mind, their hopes for improving society, their displeasures at the status quo, and seeing someone who expanded their vision.

They came to respect his self-proclaimed status, honouring his home-made money as a local currency, and not daring to open a play or concert without the imperial guest of honour.

As the story goes, he made use of this imperial clout to protect a fellow subject, a Chinese fellow under threat of an angry mob who had resentment against the Chinese population of San Francisco. Emperor Norton would not accept that, he stood between the assailants and the assailed; kneeling down, he began to recite the Lord's Prayer repeatedly, until anyone who had meant harm, dispersed, one by one.

When the Emperor finally collapsed in office, as he was making his way to a lecture, the city mobilized to attempt rescuing him. He died before making it to medical attention. The City made the appropriate arrangements, a state funeral for his majesty. 1 in 10 San Franciscans

came to pay their respects: 30,000 people. The newspaper proclaimed, “Le roi est mort!”

He was an unlikely monarch, without known royal lineage, living in poverty in the midst of a great republic. Yet this topsy-turvy emperor rivals any other that I know.

Whenever I wonder if his self-proclaimed majesty might undermine his legitimacy, I think about the kind of country that would have a symbolic monarchy, whose function is mainly on lending their likeness to the face of money and making ceremonial appearances... if ever there were a legitimate monarch, Norton I is in my books.

If you look hard enough, you start finding contrarian monarchs here and there; they’re sort of a thing. And in my view, the latest of these seems to have emerged this very month in Rome. I should clarify: for professional religion nerds like me, watching a conclave is kind of like a Super Bowl event, and this year’s was especially exciting for a number of reasons.

When Roman Catholic Pope Benedict XVI resigned last month, he assured us there’d be a new pope in time for Easter... the prophecy has been fulfilled; there’s a new pope in town at the Vatican City, and in only a couple of weeks, he’s made a name for himself as a different brand of pontiff, shifting focus from what he feels has become too much of a self-absorbed church and who is looking to bridge out to the less fortunate around the world, regardless of their faith identity. Francis has plainly spoken about expanding community with other Christian denominations, as well as their Jewish and Muslim kindred, *and* with all who do not identify with any faith tradition.

Many have characterized Francis’ forming papacy as one that is breaking from tradition, but I will suggest that he is in fact resurrecting older traditions that have sometimes been underplayed in the Catholic and Christian public image.

Drawing inspiration from the Gospel of John, he has taken his fellow priests to task, likening them to the Pharisees in the story of the woman facing condemnation; Francis has admonished his own colleagues that have refused to baptize children born out of wedlock, bemoaning a strict adherence to established practice that risks losing sight of its core principle: *love your neighbour*.

For an elected monarch, Francis has gone out of his way to stay humble, both in symbol and in practice, opting for simplicity in his lodging and preferring shared transportation over the luxurious limo available to him, as well as by toning down the expectations on how ornate his papal garb will be.

This past Maundy Thursday, he took a page from another story in the Gospel of John, by following the tradition of washing the feet of twelve other people, but breaking from the latest fashion of choosing other cardinals, and opting instead to offer that service to those who truly lack in privilege, washing the feet of twelve inmates from Italian prisons. Some of these participants were also immigrants to Europe, some of them were women, some of them were Muslim—all of them represented unprecedented moves for a pope, yet were so much closer to the old story of an unconventional king who reverses the order of privilege in the world.

Yes, Francis faces criticism for some of his views on a number of social matters, views that do not always resonate with many of our own stances; we are after all, in a different tradition, and some of his opinions run contrary to how we practice the values of inclusion and affirmation that we hold dear as Unitarian Universalists.

Still, I find the latest happenings a refreshing challenge to us as well, challenging what sometimes feels like a fundamentalist conviction that we are the only ones who hold the keys to mind-opening change.

In the midst of these discrepancies, I respect Francis' style: his commitment to renewing faith by challenging the currents of his tradition—and by challenging the preconceptions we might have about it—calls us to truly live up to our own values and principles, by questioning where we might reassert the old wisdom that has guided us.

And I think his approach is catching on among his followers, just this past week, the McQuaid Jesuit High School made a decision to openly welcome a male couple to its Junior Ball. The school's president, Father Edward Salmon, drew inspiration from Francis I's words—the same that were spoken in this morning's Call to Worship, quote: "to protect every man and every woman; to look upon them with tenderness and love, is to open up a horizon of hope, it is to let a ray of light break through heavy clouds."

And no, McQuaid Jesuit high school won't be celebrating equal marriage any time soon, nor will they expect sexual involvement from *any* of the couples at the dance, but invoking Francis' words, Father

Salmon proclaimed: "...in the hope that I and all of us at McQuaid Jesuit will let a ray of light break through the darkness and the heavy clouds that have surrounded us, I have made the decision that, if our two brothers who have asked to attend the Junior Ball together wish to do so, they will be welcomed."

Asserting human dignity makes its appearance again, like an Easter egg where we sometimes forget that we can find it... score another one for warm and fuzzy. Because, my friends, I feel revived when reminded that other traditions, in their own way, are also standing on the side of love, taking a hint from brave souls who take a self-assured stance against the weight of cumbersome expectations that obscure the older truth that each one of us can too stand for love, for peace, and for fun.

That each of us has the power to look closely at others, so that their inherent dignity and beauty may be revealed. And that we may receive that same gift from those in our lives.

That each of us may resurrect all good cause for celebrating each other.

That you are it, the bearers of good news, and that so may you be.

Alleluia!

Amen