

“Teaching Each Other to Be Human”
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
A sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon
on 7 August 2016

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.

These are scary times. We need only glance across the border at what’s happening in the American presidential election. Or look at the rise of right-wing groups in Europe post-Brexit. Or in the wake of Nice, notice the increase in headlines like this one from the BBC headline from a few days ago: “French turn to Le Pen and Front National after terror attacks.” Then there’s the political instability in Turkey following the coup attempt and ongoing issues related to the Syrian refugee crisis. Not to mention the effects of global warming, which we’re arguably experiencing here in Ontario in the form of a prolonged drought. As religious liberals, we are called to respond to the concerns of the world, or at the very least to be alerted to and aware of them.

I don’t know how many of you saw the *New York Times* video circulating this past week called “Unfiltered Voices from Donald Trump’s Crowds.”¹ It’s just three minutes long but is highly disturbing. I would describe the clips from different Trump events over the past year as reminiscent of the fascist rallies that took place across Europe in the 1930s. In the video we see his supporters acting out and heckling loudly. They make racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and anti-immigrant remarks and repeatedly display hateful and rage-filled behaviour. There are cut away shots of Trump encouraging them. Without a doubt it’s frightening.

The other day a Trump rally took place in Portland, Maine at which the candidate appeared. One of my clergy colleagues attended and made sure to wear her clerical collar so that she was visible. Protesters standing near her carried signs saying things like “Love Trumps Hate.” She said she went for three main reasons: to support the protesters; to be a witness and presence; and to try to listen and watch rather than condemn the Trump supporters, which may have been very tempting. As she says in one of her FB posts, “That’s why

¹ See the link: <http://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000004533191/unfiltered-voices-from-donald-trumps-crowds.html>.

I went inside the rally: to be able to see all of this instead of mock the guy; to try to understand instead of dismissing or vilifying Trump voters as ‘crazy.’ If we sit back and throw around insults, aren't we doing the very thing we criticize in them?”

Some of the anti-Trump protestors simply stood silently holding pocket-size copies of the US Constitution. This was a direct reference to the speech given at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia last week by Khizr Khan, a Muslim American lawyer whose son was a soldier who died fighting in Iraq. During his speech Khan openly addressed Trump, asking if he was familiar with the Constitution, which insists on freedom of religion and liberty and justice for all. Trump spent the next several days attacking Khan in the media, much to the embarrassment of the Republican Party. At the Portland rally a number of protestors were escorted out to chants from Trump supporters of “traitor!” and “USA.” Altogether there were five separate interruptions (approximately every eight minutes) by protestors. Merely showing up to such a rally of agitated people took courage. Engaging in disruptive tactics seems very brave or risky indeed.

I don't know what role, if any, liberal religion had at the rally, but my colleague's showing up as a silent, peaceful witness seems like a good example of what more Unitarian Universalists could do in these instances. They wouldn't have to make a big show of themselves or attempt to agitate Trump supporters, which could end up being dangerous. Just standing by and observing (and perhaps being willing to post live updates and photos on social media) could make a difference.

The young Unitarian theologian and minister James Luther Adams spent a year in Germany in the mid-1930s and witnessed Nazi rallies that must have resembled some of today's Trump events. He was over there studying with some of the famous German theologians of the time, including Karl Barth. Adams observed firsthand how the prominent tradition of German liberal theology failed to anticipate Hitler's rise to power. Nor did its liberal German theologians seem to find effective ways of resisting the Nazis. As a result, Adams was drawn instead to the German “confessing church” movement that provided more concerted opposition to the Fascists and he befriended some of its leaders.

Evidently Adams' extra year in Germany was decisive and changed him forever. Here's an account he gave:

It is extremely difficult to pass over a description of the maelstrom of this whole experience in Germany, an experience that brought fearful encounter with the police and even a frightening encounter two years later with the Gestapo. The ostensible charge made by the Gestapo was that I was violating the law by walking on the street with a deposed Jewish teacher and by visiting a synagogue. The word **existential** came alive in those hours of bludgeoned questioning and of high palpitation. It is difficult, I say, to suppress giving an account of incidents in connection with the Nazis, the anti-Nazis, and the hidden underlings. It is even more difficult to determine how to compress into brief statement what all this did for the evolution of my "social concern"...

Let me repeat reticence so far as to say that the experience of Nazism induced a kind of conversion.²

Adams returned to the US to begin teaching at Meadville Theological School in Chicago and immediately began preaching and writing on conversion, which became one of his central ideas. He was convinced that liberalism could not just sit idly by in the face of evil. He himself became much more involved in social justice organizing and activism over and above his academic work. In particular, he sunk his energy into voluntary organizations. The liberal church became a model for him for linking the various elements of a meaningful life, as it served as a bridge between the privacy of the individual and large social-political structures, influencing both.

Adams argued that liberalism can't remain so open, uncritical, and optimistic that it fails to account for the tragic dimension of human nature. He developed a new understanding of religious institutions and became convinced that the goal of religious life and community is radical change.³ They involve conversion and commitment.

For Adams doing theology meant interpreting the major symbols of a religious tradition in light of the present situation. One of his well-known teaching methods was to use stories and parables. As a kind of roadmap for liberal religion, he turns to the survival story of David and Goliath from the Hebrew Bible (1 Samuel 17). Using his sling, the young David, who would become the future king of Israel, had five smooth stones as ammunition

² From James Luther Adams, "The Evolution of My Social Concern."

³ Paraphrased from Chris Walton, "James Luther Adams' examined faith," *UU World* (January 2005): <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/james-luther-adamss-examined-faith>.

against Goliath. He killed the giant with just one of them. Adams traces what he calls the “five smooth stones” of liberalism.⁴

The first of these is that we are part of a living tradition in which revelation is continuous. Everything can be subjected to criticism, including liberalism itself. Adams sees humans as dependent on both history and nature. They experience both dependency and also the freedom that comes from the agency of being meaning-makers. Adams believes that meaning is discernible all around us.

As a Christian Unitarian, he sees God as active or in the process of becoming in both nature and history. He’s perfectly aware of theological diversity and reminds us that “God” is a fluid and debatable term. For him, “God (or that in which we may have faith) is the inescapable, commanding reality that sustains and transforms all meaningful existence.”⁵ Adams believes that this reality is a given we have to work with and not something we invent. It’s a reality that under certain conditions creates human good in human community. He perceives it as a transforming reality that keeps breaking through and creating new forms and thus new meaning.

The second stone reminds us that we freely choose to enter into relationship and community with one another. Our gathering doesn’t involve coercion; however, liberals accept some rules for being together. Liberals believe in the method of free inquiry as the necessary condition for fully apprehending either truth or justice and promote open discourse.

The third stone reminds us that we have a moral obligation to work toward establishing a just and loving community. Ours is a prophetic tradition steeped in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and Jesus’ redemptive claim that the kingdom of God is at hand. In Adams’ vision the reign of God is a reign of love that constantly transforms life and possibilities for community-seeking justice.⁶ The community of love and justice is always informed by nature and history and never divorced from them. For him, theology is *always embodied* and never just about the spirit.

The fourth stone reminds us that good things happen as a result of human effort. Adams was a big proponent of membership in voluntary

⁴ See the essay, “Guiding Principles for a Free Faith,” in James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously*, ed. by Max L. Stackhouse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976) 12-21.

⁵ *Ibid*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid*, 14-15.

organizations. He believed that an insular or private faith is ineffectual. Liberal church members should be inspired by their faith to contribute to influencing the institutions of common life and thus to shape history. This requires an understanding of how power operates in a system to effect either justice or injustice.

Finally, the fifth stone reminds us that the divine and human capacities for achieving meaningful change are cause for optimism. This optimism may not apply to the current time. Adams advises us to remain realists and to admit to the ambiguous nature of human existence. We are capable of destruction and sin and must keep renewing our connection to moral and spiritual values and practicing humility. While the tragic nature of the human condition can't be denied, Adams says true liberal religion abides by what he calls a "dynamic hope."⁷ This optative mood is an inherent part of our Judeo-Christian tradition, and we would be foolish to forget it.

Are these five smooth stones of liberalism powerful enough to slay the proverbial giant Goliaths we face today? They're certainly great tools for our prophetic religious work. Our work has to be prophetic, and that's also where hope comes in. Our hope becomes what Rev. Meg Riley calls "hope as a spiritually disciplined response to the whole, a commitment to action."⁸

According to Adams, church is where we learn to be human in community. Authentic faith has to be based in commitment. He traces this back to the Gospels, which emphasize change of heart. In fact, he claims that religious liberalism's neglect of commitment has been its biggest mistake. He even goes so far as to accuse liberals of being "an uncommitted and therefore a self-frustrating people."⁹ How many of you would describe yourselves as uncommitted??

Commitment involves the prophetic and an inner conversion. To paraphrase Adams it's about a kind of "love that won't let us go." *What are you most committed to? What would or do you give your life to? What do you most value?*

Let's take a few minutes to feel commitment in our bodies. Please find a comfortable seat, sitting up nice and tall. I invite you to close your eyes. Take

⁷ Ibid, 20.

⁸ Meg Riley, "Prophetic Congregations in the Twenty-First Century" in *A People So Bold*, ed. John Gibb Millspaugh (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2010) 2.

⁹ James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously*, ed. by Max L. Stackhouse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976) 56.

three deep breaths, inhaling through the nose and exhaling out your mouth. Now bring one hand to your belly and the other to your heart. Take some breaths into your core, the solar plexus, that fiery place of commitment. Feel the connection to your heart too. Let's return to my earlier questions: *What are you most committed to? What would or do you give your life to? What do you most value? What arises here for you? How does it feel? How authentic is your faith in James Luther Adams' terms?* Gently open your eyes and come back into the space.

A transforming liberal faith calls for us to be transformed in heart and mind over and over again. One adjective Adams frequently uses is "dynamic." Our Unitarian Universalist faith is dynamic. No wonder we call it "living." There's nothing static about it.

For Adams mere spirituality or piety isn't enough. That could lead to too much individualism. One's commitment has to be linked to social concern as well, to the transformative power of spirit and to the work of love and justice in community. It can't remain inward looking. This he dismisses as "sham spirituality"¹⁰ and considers the enemy of religion.

One of Adams' favourite statements was that "An unexamined faith is not worth having." Our faith has to be self-critical in order to be vital and authentic. Self-criticism in Adams' view has to be relentless.

That brings me to Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd's brilliant sermon "In All Thy Getting, Get Understanding" from the closing worship at this year's General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio¹¹. Her words contained the kind of prophetic theology that James Luther Adams was so passionate about. You can hear it in her insistence that, "The world does not need another place where like-minded liberals hang out and fight about who is in charge." She called on her audience to dispense with the old insular "fake fights" of congregational life in order to engage more with the world and focus on "real struggles and real battles" against forms of injustice in our communities. In real relationship change might happen, through encounter with one another, the world, and the holy. Her focus was on Black Lives Matter.

In the tradition of the great social ethicist James Luther Adams, let ours be a dynamic, authentic faith of engagement in social justice issues. Constantly moved by a transforming spirit, let us be truly committed to love and justice

¹⁰ Ibid, 18.

¹¹ Please follow the link here: <http://www.uua.org/ga/off-site/2016/worship/sunday>.

and feel that deep in our hearts and right down to our feet. Let us be willing to teach each other to be human religiously in this sacred space we call church. Together let's hold our five smooth stones of liberalism closely and keep choosing hope. The cost of not doing so is too great.

Blessed Be and Amen.