

“The Burden of Religious Freedom”

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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.

Reading - Author Unknown

We have set ourselves free; set ourselves free to discover what it really means to have a North; to strip off our Mountie uniforms; to wear toques only when our heads are cold in winter; to be polite because, gosh darn it, we like being polite.

We have set ourselves free: to disagree about the origins of Boxing Day; to be proud of a curling broom; to love Anne Murray and Celine Dion, or not.

We have set ourselves free: to have a donut shop on every corner, just in case; to believe a little socialization can be a very, very good thing; to be awestruck by the abundance of our natural resources and then to be gentle with them.

We have set ourselves free: to be immigrants among immigrants, Canadians among Canadians; to have the Queen on some of our stamps; to get a tear in our eyes when we think of stubbie beer bottles, and then to move on.

We have set ourselves free: to know who won the war of 1812; to get to know each other; to begin to build a just relationship with First Nations Peoples; to begin to heal the wounds inflicted on the Plains of Abraham.

We have set ourselves free: from worrying that nobody else knows who the Group of Seven were; to enjoy either vinegar or gravy and cheese curds on our fries; to learn how to pronounce “Newfoundland” and finally to find the time to go there

We have set ourselves free: to understand the significance of “the last spike,” the Trans-Canada highway, or even “.ca”

We have set ourselves free to be one honking huge landmass of unfathomable geologic age, filled with a great deal of wilderness, a few extremely diverse

people, some steel and glass, a tangle of highways, as well as muskeg, tundra, and mostly...mostly empty space

We have set ourselves free. What is it for us to do?

Sermon – “The Burden of Religious Freedom”

It’s probably time that I ditch the t-shirt.
It’s terribly stained and has a rip,
from a mountain hike many years ago.

But it’s my favourite.
And I sometimes wear it when I write sermons.

On the front is an image of Michael Servetus,
the martyr of the Reformation,
who was burned at the stake in 1553,
for pointing out what he considered to be errors in church doctrine pertaining
to the issue of whether there was, in fact, a Holy Trinity.

He said, no.
And, so, for his troubles he was executed in Geneva,
when John Calvin was at the height of his powers there.
He was burned, with his books used as fuel for the fire.

On the back of the t-shirt are words I love:
“Unitarian Universalism: celebrating 450 years of heresy.”

If you do the math, you’ll know that the t-shirt,
made by a friend of mine in seminary,
is now fifteen years old.

I’m not sure I’ll ever let go of the t-shirt,
though I do have an idea for a new one.

As Unitarians around the world mark, this month,
the 450th anniversary of what’s called the “Edict of Torda,”
it’s time for a new shirt—perhaps bearing the image
on the cover of your Order of Service on the front,
and on the back, the words:

“Unitarian Universalism: celebrating 450 years of religious freedom.”

(If anyone has the wherewithal to create t-shirts,
let’s talk after the service!

I mean, who wouldn’t want to wear one of these beauties?!)

The image on the front of your Orders of Service
may be familiar to some of you.

A copy hangs in our Board Room downstairs,
and there’s a copy in my office, as well.

It’s a painting well-known
amongst our Unitarian siblings in Transylvania,
most of whom have a copy proudly hanging in their homes.

It may come as a surprise to learn
there are Unitarians in Transylvania.

Aside from the lore and lure of Dracula,
Transylvania actually—arguably—
has the largest concentration of Unitarians in the world.

That’s because of what happened there 450 years ago.
That’s because of what is depicted in that image.

For a brief moment in time, four and a half centuries ago,
there was a Unitarian king, John Sigismund II—
the only Unitarian monarch in the history of the world.

And his small, remote kingdom,
which, for centuries, had been fought over
and shuffled between the dominant powers of the region,
was a pawn between the Hapsburgs of the Holy Roman Empire,
and the sultans of the Ottoman Empire.

Though a bit of a backwater, Transylvania had,
by the time King John came to power,
become a place of uneasy religious diversity.

In other words, there were tensions:

tensions between Roman Catholics and Protestants,
which further splintered into conflicts
between Lutherans and Calvinists.

There were even a few Unitarians in the mix,
but I get ahead of myself.

The story, this story, this foundational story in our tradition,
is usually told with a focus on the actions of King John,
who ushered in an era, brief though it was, of religious toleration.

The real story, though, begins with his mother, Queen Isabella,
who was born a princess in Poland.

As a bright and inquisitive young person in the royal court,
she was exposed to a variety of new ideas
that were finding their way to Poland.

As the persecutions that played out across Europe
during the Reformation heated up—
sometimes quite literally, as I mentioned with Michael Servetus—
those with the more heretical ideas often headed east to escape.

A few of those who fled were Unitarian,
or at least anti-Trinitarian, in their outlook.

And a few of them made their way
to the royal courts of Poland and Transylvania.

Because King John became the ruler of Transylvania
when he was just two weeks old, his mother served,
along with two others, as regent of the province.

She was deeply influenced by the thinking of the rebels of the Reformation,
the ones sometimes referred to
as being part of the “Radical Reformation.”

And as she ruled,
and as she looked after her son’s education,
she ensured John was exposed
to the full breadth of religious ideas

that were emerging at the time.

The evidence of history suggests
she instilled or at least cultivated in her son
a curiosity about the world around him,
and a capacity for openness to a diversity of ideas.

It was this openness that, during the course of his reign,
brought about a series of debates
among the proponents of various religious perspectives.

And from these debates came a decree,
at the Diet of Torda, 450 years ago,
that proclaimed, for the first time on a state level,
that people were free to choose their religion,
rather than having it chosen for them
by the spiritual inclinations of their rulers.

Now, freedom in this case still had some strings attached.
But people were free to choose their ministers,
which meant they had a choice in being
Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Unitarian.

The scene depicted in the image I've been telling you about
is one of the debates leading up to the decree.

Though it's hard to make out, given the darkness of the image,
the king is sitting on the throne to the left, listening to the debate.

The man with his outstretched arm at the centre of the action,
is Francis David, a Unitarian preacher,
who would become the first Unitarian bishop.

The image there isn't actually David.
No one knows what he actually looked like.

So the artist simply used as his model the pianist Franz Liszt,
the most famous man in Europe at the time.

We might imagine that the dramatic moment in the image
is the one when David won over the king,

when he convinced John Sigismund to become Unitarian.

Who knows, it may have been, as we often suggest,
that the king has “been a Unitarian without knowing it”...

After all, the king had tried the others,
starting out Catholic, moving later to Lutheranism,
and eventually becoming a Calvinist.

The king’s religious history is not dissimilar
to that which I’ve heard described by new members
when they’re preparing to join our congregation!

Listen to the words of the decree, this “Edict of Toleration”:

In every place the preachers shall preach
and explain the gospel
each according to his understanding of it,
and if the congregation like it, well [and good];
[and] if not, no one shall compel them
but they shall keep the preachers
whose doctrine they approve.

Therefore none of the Superintendents or others
shall annoy or abuse the preachers
on account of their religion,
according to the previous constitutions,
or allow any to be imprisoned or be punished
by removal from his post on account of his teaching,
for faith is the gift of God,
this comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

These words which seem so commonsensical to us today
were radical for their time.

They ushered in a brief but important era of toleration.

And they planted an enduring seed.
That seed would bring about, in time,
the flourishing of a Unitarian movement in Transylvania
that has endured now for centuries.

Even after the religious freedoms that inspired it were swiftly revoked.

Shortly after the Edict of Toleration was decreed, King John died, following a hunting accident, at the age of 31, without any children of his own.

(It's speculated that given he died a bachelor, that King John wasn't merely the first and only Unitarian king in history, but also the first and only gay Unitarian king in history. We'll likely never know...)

Sadly, though, it didn't take long for the Edict of Toleration to be overturned, as a new ruler, with different religious ideas and a very different agenda, came to the throne.

Now, from this epic story I've shared with you, I think that that's the most important point for us to take away: that freedom cannot be taken for granted.

That it ebbs and flows, and that the progress of freedom is never guaranteed.

It can be subverted by the unexpected twists and turns of history, and it can be diminished by ignorance and apathy.

If anything, freedom requires frequent tending—frequent nurturing, if it is to flower and flourish.

This is a crucial, critical lesson for our times. Perhaps more than we may even wish to recognize.

All around the globe are signs that the freedoms that come with liberal democracy, are being slowly eroded, and sometimes dramatically dismantled.

Alarms are sounding from many corners, but it's not yet clear whether humanity will hear or heed their call.

There are encouraging signs, to be sure.
But, as always, the story of the world is still being written.

The reading I shared earlier speaks beautifully
to the many gifts that come with living in this country.

It's no wonder that Canada so often ranks
amongst the world's top countries in which to live.

Relative to too much of the world,
we enjoy incredible freedoms
and the blessings that come with living
in an inclusive, tolerant society.

Yet, even here, we face struggles.
And even here there is much work to do.

This week, as we mark the anniversary of the horrific loss of life
in the gun attack in the Quebec City mosque last year,
we are reminded that angry rhetoric
about religious expression can have terrible consequences.

Intolerance, the enemy of freedom, takes many forms:
from racism and sexism
to transphobia and religious discrimination.

Sometimes it surfaces in the defacing of mosques and synagogues.

More routinely, it can be found
in the comments section of articles in our media,
and especially in articles about
immigrants or refugees or Indigenous Peoples.

I despair when I read such vitriol,
and wonder whether these sentiments are shared
by more people than I realize.

I generally don't think that to be true.
I believe the heart of this nation
bends towards understanding and acceptance,
towards compromise and accommodation,

towards reconciliation and peace.

But we must not seduce ourselves into thinking
that that bending is inevitable,
that the freedoms we enjoy today are invincible,
or that our tolerant and peaceable society is irreversible.

We, in this extraordinary city, in this remarkable country,
are engaged in a grand and noble experiment
to determine whether a people so diverse
can dwell together in harmony.

So far, by most measures, we are doing an admirable job.

Even as we have so much more work to do
to build up a city that truly takes care of the least among us,
that ensures the equality and rights of all people—
regardless of the colour of their skin or their country of origin,
regardless of whether they are gender fluid or wear a niqab,
regardless of whether they are unhoused or living in poverty.

But what gives me pause, what worries me,
is wondering how well we will manage
if and when times are tougher than they presently are.

Will Toronto be a place of tolerance and understanding,
of caring and compassion, if the economy
were to take a severe turn for the worse?
If essential resources were suddenly scarce?

I wonder because history has shown
how people can turn on one another when life is hard.

And I wonder because,
in this era of relative peace and prosperity,
I'm not sure that our civic experiment
has yet been fully put to the test.

I don't offer this worry to invite despair.
I'm not generally prone towards the apocalyptic.

I offer it because my deepest hope is
that if and when we are faced by trials that test our mettle,
I want the best of humanity
to be found dwelling at the heart of this city.

I want the best of who we are to shine through and sustain us.

And so I wonder whether we, as a city, as a country,
will have by the done the hard work—
the heart work, the soul work—
required to truly be that people.

Francis David, the Unitarian minister from the painting,
the one pointing up new possibility,
has had misattributed to him the quote
that “we need not think alike to love alike.”

While he likely never uttered these particular words,
the message he preached resonates with them.

And the sentiment of that short sentence
resonates with us still today.

“We need not think alike to love alike.”

That is a key conviction at the core of our faith.
It found expression in Transylvania 450 years ago.

It found expression in the founding charter
of our own congregation, 173 years ago,
which declared that there would be no creedal test
to join this congregation.

Each week, it finds expression in this sanctuary
and in our children’s classrooms.

It is made manifest in how we live out our faith,
here and beyond these walls, day in and day out.

It is made real when we agree to disagree, but do so in love.

It is made tangible when we show compassion
and curiosity towards those we don't understand,
and understanding towards those who challenge us to our core.

To love alike beyond a set of shared beliefs is no easy practice.

It requires a generosity of spirit,
a curiosity to engage,
an openness to learn,
a willingness to stumble,
a capacity to forgive,
and a commitment to begin again in love.
Every time.

Such is the hard work of our faith.
Such is our inheritance.
And such must be our legacy.

We who know the freedoms of this faith,
we who know the freedoms that come with life in this country,
have a moral obligation to pass on these freedoms,
and to labour for their spread—from heart to heart,
to the neighbour next door, and the stranger a world away.

In the words of the anthem
by the African-American group Sweet Honey in the Rock,
which the choir will soon sing,
“we who believe in freedom cannot rest.”
And so we can't.

As we celebrate our heritage of freedom,
let us labour on in its cause,
knowing that to love alike despite our differences
is the key to healing our world.

So may it be.

Benediction

We need not think alike to love alike.

Let us make these words real today,
beginning again, here and now.

And by the example of our own living,
let us take that message of hope out into the world,
that we might bring about
more love, more justice, and more peace,
at every turn.

Amen.