

Reform in Unitarianism

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, Utah

February 21, 2010

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On Wednesday our church will mark its 119th anniversary as a beacon of liberal religious thought in the Salt Lake Valley. For 119 years we have been a congregation with no clear doctrine of what we are about or supposed to believe in. And so for the past 119 years (including last Monday night's orientation class), we've been hard-pressed to say (in clear language) just what Unitarianism is really all about. The high turn-over rate among Unitarians across the country may well be because of the frustration of being tongue-tied whenever asked: "What is a Unitarian?" Most of us would just as soon walk away than be stuck, like Forrest Church was in his memorable dinner party, trying to explain God, Jesus, and immortality in a liberal religious context. It's dinner parties like these, or conversations with friends and neighbors that are not particularly helpful in building up our membership.

And yet...when Samuel Atkins Eliot, minister of the Unitarian Church in Denver, came to Salt Lake City in December of 1890 and addressed about 300 Salt Lakers who were curious about liberal religion, 127 managed enough interest and commitment to form a congregation here in Salt Lake City, February 24, 1891, just two months after hearing Eliot's claim that reason and rational thought were not....were not hostile to religion but must (in fact) constitute the very essence of religion.

What gumption to begin a liberal church in Salt Lake City. Religion customarily plays a conservative role in society. It is the "conservator" of the traditions and norms thus holding society together by controlling the threads that ostensibly keep people from unraveling. Religion upholds the status quo by "conserving" or maintaining the customs of the day, thereby providing a certain peace and equanimity that permeates the population.

Imagine how ears must have perked up upon first hearing religion juxtaposed with liberal, and try to envision yourself being exposed to the radical concept that religion can offer liberating ideas to a society which (on the whole) prefers to remain in lock-step with its "normal habits and practices.

If you are a person of privilege in this country, namely white, heterosexual, of some means, and thus holding the power of decision-making, then there is little incentive to change the norms. As a result, a diverse population is excluded from the table of power and privilege.

This is as evident today as it was 119 years ago. The conservators of tradition still desire to keep marriage an exclusive arrangement for heterosexuals; Wall Street is to be conserved as an exclusive place of privilege denying Main Street any social benefits at all; The poor, mostly people of color and people disabled, see their lives spiral downwards without a safety net; and ideas such as global warming and

climate change, birth control, gun control, sex education, evolution, immigration, and healthcare are all seen as threats to reform the existing order. Liberals tend to tilt in favor of those who are absent from the table of power.

Liberal religion is tied to values that seek to liberate human beings from the margins of society. The vision and the goal of liberal thought is an inclusive society, not a society that offers exclusive privilege to some.

Last year the Unitarian Universalist association launched a new program called "Standing on the Side of Love." The premise is that love can only be understood as making justice available to everyone. Love is a liberating value that makes society more inclusive. This is how the Standing on the Side of Love initiative is described:

"Standing on the Side of Love is a public advocacy campaign sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association promoting respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Standing on the Side of Love will confront exclusion, oppression, and violence based on identity. Based in the aspiration to create beloved community, the campaign will pursue social change through advocacy, public witness, and speaking out in solidarity with those whose lives are publicly demeaned."

Standing on the Side of Love constitutes merely a new iteration of the fundamental precepts of a liberating....liberal religion. Historically, the Unitarians and the Universalists have always advocated vociferously for pluralism. At the very heart of our liberal expression of religion was reform: Reforming society...changing society so that it moves from exclusive to inclusive thereby fulfilling our vision of justice as the acceptance of all...all people.

By the time this church was established in 1891, Unitarianism had already established itself as a religion of reform...dedicated to reshaping the values and morals of our country. Supplying New England as early as the 1830's with innovative thought, action, and social reform characterized the Unitarian spirit. The American Unitarian Association was founded in 1825.

One of the first values that Unitarianism injected into society was the belief that people could and ultimately must "think for themselves." Henry Ware, Jr. called education "the business of life," a concept that still seems to elude Chris Buttars and many of our state legislators today's. Getting at the heart of education which fundamentally served the upper classes, Unitarians made waves by proclaiming the necessity of educating every person.

Horace Mann, the famous education reformer, and who converted to Unitarianism from orthodoxy by William Ellery Channing, served as secretary to the Massachusetts Board of education from 1837 to 1848 during which time he created the first statewide system of public schools, and established the first teacher's college in the country as early as 1839. Horace Mann rocked the boat of tradition by

restricting religious instruction in schools to a nonsectarian core of principles common to all.

An interesting by-note: The Calvinists at the time of Mann's reforms argued that to make schools "non-sectarian" was the equivalent of turning the schools Unitarian. How clearly the message sounded that liberating school children from specific religious tenets ---or having no religion at all in public schools - - was like a Unitarian conspiracy. (And maybe it was).

Aside from Horace Mann's school system, a host of other institutions for the promotion of learning flourished under Unitarian auspices: The library of Boston Athenaeum, the Boston Public Library, and the Lowell Institute founded in 1836 that offered free public lectures and evolved as the first institution to offer University extension classes in America. In the 1830's Harvard had 14 members of the faculty of which 6 were Unitarians. What was so remarkable was not the ratio of Unitarian faculty to other denominations, but that the Unitarians held enough sway at Harvard to preserve its academic freedom which became a hotly contested political issue. If "new thought" gets introduced at the university, and students exposed to science and humanism, then the traditions of society become suspect and shaky. This same disdain for intellectualism today (called "elitism" by today's rising tide of "conservators" of tradition), leads us to feeling the great despair and angst we all have. Who here today, absorbing the bravado of the right wing, doesn't have a pit in their stomachs?

Cultivating a freer climate for education marked one of this church's major contributions to Salt Lake City in the 1970's under the leadership of its minister, Ron Clarke. Originally called the Thoreau School, established together with members of this congregation like Sandy Aaron and Judy Smith, the Thoreau School evolved into the Open Classroom, providing Salt Lake kids today with a liberating approach to learning and education.

The liberal view of God insists that God defies definition, personal attributes, geographic location, and the ability to dispense punishments and rewards at whim. For example, the Haitian earthquake was not an act of God. If we strip God of supernatural powers, then the future – the world's future – becomes not an inevitable fulfillment of a manipulating Deity, but the future becomes the responsibility of human beings. We make or break the existence of a heaven on earth.

Therefore, reform – social change, availing justice to everyone because of the inherent worth and dignity of all people – making society more inclusive; fighting exclusivity...serves as THE MOST COMPELLING aspect and tenet of Unitarian liberal (liberating) religion.

Nineteenth century Unitarians stood on the side of love in trying to improve the conditions of all humankind: Prison reform, the founding of orphanages, the

abolition of dueling (although I sometimes think dueling would be preferable to carrying concealed weapons)...and then like now, Unitarians fought to reform capital punishment.

Because of the historic Unitarian emphasis on the dignity of all people, it logically follows that the two greatest crusaders on behalf of people disabled, were Samuel Gridley Howe, director of the New England Asylum for the Blind from 1829 – 1873; and Dorothea Dix, who in 1843 began a crusade for the establishment of asylums for the mentally ill. Their underlying religious value affirmed the belief that we were all God's children, we all deserved an opportunity to grow in wisdom and stature, and regardless of how so-called "disadvantaged" a person seemed, there was no reason to EXCLUDE that person from the general welfare and blessings of a rich society.

A year after the founding of the American Unitarian Association, 1826, Joseph Tuckerman became a Unitarian minister-at -large in the city of Boston where he undertook the calling to serve the urban poor. First with the backing of the American Unitarian Association followed by private donors, Tuckerman set up a farm school outside the city to work with juvenile delinquents, and a sewing school to help young girls in black communities get jobs. He visited troubled families in their homes to discuss their issues, making Tuckerman a pioneer in the field of social work. By 1834 nine Boston Unitarian churches formed the Benevolent Fraternity of churches for the support of the ministry –at – large to the poor. The organization still exists today as the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry.

Let me offer a definition of our faith which may leave us less tongue-tied when we are asked what we believe: Unitarianism is the application of moral concern to the world through reform. Historically, Unitarians spoke out against slavery because, in the words of Joseph Tuckerman, a person regardless of nationality, complexion, condition, or capacity, is an image of God.

A moral concern remains utterly worthless until it is applied. That's not Tuckerman; that's Goldsmith. That's the modern manifestation of Unitarianism in this church. We continue to build upon our liberal religious history...our propensity to liberate people excluded from the blessings of our nation's democracy. At the heart of our religious values lies reform...social change to make society more inclusive; pluralism must be honored if justice is to prevail. We stand on the side of love because love is unconditional.

In the name of reform and pluralism, in the name of applying our moral concern to society which has forsaken the powerless, we have stood with the ACLU to make the Main Street plaza accessible to EVERYBODY. Our Social Justice Council works tirelessly to furnish homes for immigrant families. Our congregation has signed the petition for the New Sanctuary Movement and we led a public witness last June for Standing on the Side of love for undocumented workers. Our Board of Trustees has endorsed Ethics Reform at the state legislature and we are actively seeking signatures to support not only that ethics reform gets onto the ballot but also for the

establishment of fair boundaries as Utah carves up its districts for a fourth U.S. representative. Our values reflect the old belief that everyone is entitled to a good education and so we are currently partnered with a Title 1 school on the west side.

Because we value the inclusion of all people in society being guaranteed equal access and privilege to basic human rights, we raised \$25,000 for the Utah Pride Center and their work with young people, many of whom are homeless because of intolerant families. Our work with Equality Utah as a religious ally in their struggle for inclusion of the LGBTQ community as equal beneficiaries of a democratic society has gained us the trust and love of their organization.

I want to conclude with a Jewish metaphor, not only because it simplifies everything I've been trying to say today, but because I still believe that this is what ALL religion ought to be about: Everywhere we are is Egypt, and there is a Promised Land, but the way to get there is always through the wilderness.

In 1891 this truly tiny and humble church began to wind its way through the wilderness along the Wasatch Front. For 119 years our contributions to the reform of society here have been immeasurable. The "conservators" of tradition here have mostly resisted any change at all. But for the past 119 years we have applied our moral concern to the world through reform: We hold sacred that people regardless of their nationality, complexion, condition, and capacity, are an image of God. And thus the only way to the Promised Land is through social change...reform. And if we didn't believe that the promised land existed, we'd give up. Who needs to struggle in the wilderness? But the promised land of freedom for all, privileges shared equitably around the table, fuel our faith and offer us tremendous affirmation that we need to continue the reforms begun by our forebears when they first heard the words that religion lies not in the realm of conservators, but must function to liberate all people because of our shared humanity.

So happy anniversary to us, First Unitarian Church of Salt lake City. We believe in the Promised Land, and our religious zeal is manifest by our continued efforts of making our way through the wilderness.