

The Examined Life

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

September 12, 2010

The Examined Life
September 12, 2010

A few people have told me in the past few weeks that they were looking more forward to church starting up again than ever before. I asked why, expecting to hear something along the lines of how David Owens and I were just getting better with age. And this would be the year they felt we would finally blossom. But no! They were looking forward to church because they couldn't remember a time when the world looked more grim.

Of course I understood what they were saying...I think we all do. This church community, despite all its demands on our precious time and money, with the boiler predictably failing each winter, and people complaining of insufficient space in the chapel...with all the given foibles of any institution that is governed by the inconvenient method called democracy, our humble church still represents a blessed antidote to the real lunacy outside these doors where compassion is low, rigid beliefs are high, self-indulgence rampant, and the infusion of irrational fear climbing over the top. There's a certain madness out there, not only in one isolated instance of a preacher from Gainesville, FL, but a general contempt for those unlike ourselves, fueled with a sense of utter certainty in one's own self-righteousness.

It does feel good being back in this community as intolerance spins out of control and the New Testament gospels have been edited to include tax cuts for the rich, and the sermon on the mount regards the deregulation of industry as natural as the lilies in the field.

We come here partly for the island of sanity it provides, and partly for the love fest that flows as progressive thinkers, the doers and shakers of this society, meet under the same roof and explode with joy and dismay. But if you ask any of the happy souls who gather in this Unitarian Church just what Unitarianism means...they'd prefer signing up or coffee hour for the year.

William Faulkner, when asked by an interviewer: "Some people say that they can't understand your writing even after they have read it two or three times. What approach would you suggest for such people? And Faulkner replied: "Tell them to read it four times."

I think we would agree that the essence of Unitarianism is a little like that: Hard to grasp even after you've heard it expressed two or three times. I'm not really going to attempt to define Unitarianism for a fourth time today...or fortieth, but I want to make some connections...tie some threads between our present-day liberal religious orientation to the ancient classic observation of Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living.

Almost all of us with very few exceptions are here not because this is the faith you inherited, but because you have consciously chosen to be here. That is, after some examination of your inherited faith with its dogmas stipulating a fundamental way of doing and perceiving religion, you may have rebelled (which is what examining one's routine life entails)...you have rebelled in seeking a church community that has no "party line." No party line, other than the commitment that every member must seek and work out their own religious conclusions. So religion within this community smacks more of a "process" than a certain acquiescence to fixed doctrines.

I love how Forrest Church (whom many were privileged to get to know during his several visits here through the years)...I love it when he says the "distinction between Unitarian Universalism and the major scripture-driven Western religions is that we tend to view the world as a school rather than as a corrections facility. Rather than punishing us as sinners by incarcerating us here, sentencing us to life, and then at death offering release only to those who have followed a strict set of guidelines for rehabilitation, our faith celebrates the creation not only as a beloved home, but also as a sacred text from which we draw wisdom. Earth-centered traditions are therefore a natural source for Unitarian Universalism. We may claim no inside knowledge of the creator, but we are quick to affirm, learn from, and protect the creation."

It leaves little wonder why our church is so passionately committed to a sustainable planet, and why we think there is more evidence that the wilderness need be preserved than God lobbying for ATV's to carve up the sacred creation for individual pleasure-seekers. But then again, we don't really pretend to have any inside claim on what the Almighty is thinking.

An examined life, which entails many hard deliberations about one's faith and to what one feels truly committed, must question the premise that knowledge of God is even possible, and also that God happens to endorse one's own biases. As Ann Rice examined her faith, she of great vampire novels fame although vampires are not her religion, she said that her examination led her to feel like an outsider of her traditional Christian faith. She wrote:

- In the name of Christ I refuse to be anti-gay.
- In the name of Christ I refuse to be anti-feminist.
- In the name of Christ I refuse to be anti birth control.
- In the name of Christ I refuse to be anti-Democrat.
- In the name of Christ I refuse to be anti-secular humanist.
- And in the name of Christ I refuse to be anti-science.

Her awakening, after examining her faith closely, led her to conclude that it was too steeped in supporting only a select and narrow point of view. A spiritual home must prove inclusive if it even hopes to touch the essence of what is holy.

We are here in this church because we cannot accept the party line that proclaims that God has declared his favorite people, favorite political party, and favorite explanation for the origins of the universe. And if you really subscribe to the moral teachings of Jesus, then discriminating against gays and others is an...abomination.

One of the books I tackled this summer was "Faith Interrupted: A Spiritual Journey," by Eric Lax. Although I am always interested in spiritual journeys, I picked up this book because Lax is one of the more acclaimed biographers of Woody Allen, and I wanted to gain some spiritual insight into the man who wrote about my favorite neurotic Jewish comic film writer and existentialist.

Lax is the son of an Episcopalian minister, which helped me empathize with my own children. I think they turned out all right, as did Eric Lax, but I hope their spiritual journey entailed less emotional turbulence than that of a man whose faith just dissolved in front of him...or as he began to finally examine his life.

His examination is somewhat predictable in that I have heard it endless times from virtually everyone who has shared his or her story with me. His faith began to fray...his previously unquestioned beliefs started to unravel in a college Western Civics class. (I wouldn't be surprised if the Tea Party platform included banning western civ classes from college because they were as un-American as the United Nations).

Lax examined each part of the Nicene Creed and realized, internally, he really did not believe in a Jesus who had ascended to heaven and was seated at the right hand of the Father. He examined his faith and discovered that such core teachings like the doctrine of the Incarnation was no longer plausible. But all was not for naught. He managed to tell his Episcopal rector-dad that the story – the Christian story shaped his moral and political sensibilities. He embraced pacifism and joined the Peace Corp in lieu of going to Vietnam. Jesus was an example of nonviolence. He knew the passage in John 15:13...A man can have no greater love than to lay down his own life for his friends. And with that he explained his Vietnam position to his father in that he was willing to die for his friends but not to kill for them.

Probably the key component of the whole book, to spare you having to rifle through it yourselves, was his poignant observation that the ethics of Jesus is not exactly faith. He writes: "Even though I still find His example worth following...that is a far step removed from where I started." He started with faith as merely a form of rote catechism. Now he says: "God is so very hard to find."

What brings us to this house of worship, that which ties us so incontrovertibly to one another, is that despite our various religious journeys and temporary conclusions, we have all (at some point) taken the advice seriously that it is incumbent upon us to examine our lives, our beliefs, our faith. We may have arrived at different spiritual places, and some would even frown at the word "spiritual," but we share the largely unique exercise of questioning previously held beliefs.

Basically our premise is that the grandeur of the universe and thus the exercise of faith and the religious journey in general cannot be viewed merely through one lens. And so much of the current world is all about clinging to a perspective gleaned from one lens only. In politics, the new effort of gaining a wider appreciation of what one lens has to offer is called "post-partisan." Not just one lens one point of view, one ideology. It hasn't gotten us very far.

In religion it's a call to be non-dogmatic, like Unitarian Universalism. Not just one belief, one truth, one way. That hasn't gotten us too far either.

The examined life takes more courage than we are apt to believe. Like Ann Rice, she suddenly found herself outside her faith. Like Eric Lax, he was considered an apostate. If you want to live safely, leave your life unexamined. If you want to live with the angst of uncertainty, by all means examine your life and join us. As a church we are all about the exploration and not the conclusion. I think that's a rather unique premise for a church. That's why I'm here. I think that's why you're here. I think that's why we're glad to be back for another exciting church year.

Closing Words...

683 Theodore Parker