

**Sermon: “Liberal Religion & Religious Liberalism”**  
**Rev. Martha Hodges          June 14, 2009**

It’s traditional in our churches for the minister to offer as an item in the annual action or service auction “a sermon on the topic of your choice.” This causes a bit of invigorating anxiety on my part. What if the chosen topic is one I know absolutely nothing about and I have no idea where to go to learn about it? But, let’s be honest... A greater fear is that no one will bid on it, or the winning bid will be three dollars. To save me both embarrassments, Stephan kindly bid on and won this offering, selecting as his topic, liberal religion. Specifically, he asked something like this: How is it that our liberal movement has stayed so liberal when other liberal movements throughout history, once they achieve a level of success and security, characteristically revert to orthodoxy? This is a topic I can work with. Thank you, Stephan.

Before I try to answer the question, though, I need to pin down what we mean when we talk about liberal religion, or a “free faith.” It’s a term we throw around a good deal but don’t often attempt to define or explain. In Unitarian Universalist-speak, it’s what we call our “living tradition” and this gives us a clue.

The primary criterion for a liberal faith is that it is capable of change. In fact, it demands change if it is to remain alive, for its very nature is to adapt to the challenges and needs of its historic and cultural environment. That’s at the macro level.

At the micro, or individual level, it is a faith that responds to new experience, new knowledge and understanding. In religious language, we speak of new light breaking in, or of revelation not being sealed. As our fellow-liberal religionists, the United Church of Christ, likes to say, “God is still speaking.” With or without God, new truth is constantly emerging. Conclusions are forever being challenged by new understandings, new evidence. We can never rest on our certainties. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning calls us to be ready to amend or discard beliefs when they no longer fit with reality as we perceive it. Rather than try to bend reality to fit into our little categories of understanding, we are called to expand our categories or create new ones as we learn more of the world.

And we wouldn’t want it any other way. We wouldn’t want to cling to a belief that reason and experience show us is inadequate or incorrect. This is a fearless approach to change. That doesn’t mean that we are exempt from the fear of throwing out outworn ideas; merely that we take comfort in the knowledge that integrity demands it. We have no choice. We can handle the truth...Most of the time. At least we’re willing to try... Most of the time.

This adaptability that is at the core of liberal religion brings with it certain corollaries. For one, it suggests that our beliefs are less important than the process by which we arrive at them. If our beliefs evolve over time, and if we embrace that, they become secondary to something else. That something else is covenant – another feature

of our free faith. We covenant together to support one another in this ongoing process, and it is this covenant that holds us together, rather than any uniformity of beliefs.

Which leads us to another key feature of liberal religion: celebration of diversity. Diversity of belief, and, by extension, of the life experiences that have led each of us to those beliefs.

And if truth is ever breaking in, if truth as revealed to us is never complete, we cannot rely on the authority of a religious leader, a scripture, or even the traditions of our forebears to dictate to us what we must believe. And if we reject dogma, if the value of our religion lies not in our creed, then it derives its value from the way we live out our faith, our principles and beliefs, in the world. A liberal religion demands participation in the community of the world beyond the congregation as we all stumble along in quest of a better world. A world transformed by loving and respectful acceptance, inclusivity, humility and fairness. Values that all follow from our basic embrace of ambiguity and uncertainty.

These are the key components of liberal religion as I understand it: Change, adaptability; acceptance of individual differences; an emphasis on the shared process of spiritual discovery; insistence on the authority of reason, experience and individual conscience; and a shared covenant – a faith in the value of community and the embrace of mutual responsibility.

Now, it may have occurred to you that what we mean by liberalism when we talk about religion is different from liberalism in the political sense. We make a mistake when we thoughtlessly speak about our political convictions as though liberal politics were a requirement of being a UU. For one thing, political conservatives can be, and many are, religiously liberal. For another, the alternative to liberal religiousness is not conservatism, but orthodoxy, the adherence to an established and unquestioned set of beliefs and practices. The belief that certain ideas are dangerous; that people should be protected from their doubts, their questions, their own thoughts.

Not long ago, I came upon a letter to the editor in the magazine, *The Christian Century*, a nondenominational publication of liberal Christian ideas and commentary. I don't remember what the article was about that prompted this letter – some interpretation of scripture, I think. The writer of the letter chastised the editors for publishing a harmful idea, a dangerous idea!

I was amazed. I'd never really encountered such a bizarre concept before in my sheltered life: that an idea could be dangerous and should therefore not be expressed. The writer didn't argue against the idea, whatever it was. He didn't refute it or challenge its validity. He rejected it on the basis that it would hurt the readers, endanger them in some way. Now, a dog can be dangerous. A weapon can be dangerous. A situation can be dangerous. A behavior can be dangerous. But an idea? Obviously, I was raised in a liberally religious family in which no idea was forbidden. Thoughts were just thoughts.

You turned them over in your mind, examined the evidence, considered the implications, and accepted it or rejected it. You couldn't be damaged by an idea.

Now we're getting closer to the distinction between liberalism in the political sense and religious liberalism. The difference has to do with power, doesn't it? When orthodoxy forbids certain questions, forbids doubts, forbids certain ideas, it's about power. In this case, the distinction between politics and religion becomes blurred. When religion is used to control people, to maintain the status quo, including the distribution of power (typically in the hands of wealthy men,) we see orthodoxy and conservatism merge.

And when liberal politicians gain power, they tend to work to retain that power. We've seen this throughout history. The revolutionaries become oppressors as they seek to protect that power. Power trumps ideals.

Now, liberal religion is the gadfly, the annoying critic of the status quo, the mosquito buzzing in the ear of the elephant. Doubters are never in power and never will be because power requires certainty, or at least the appearance of certainty. It's not for the lover of ambiguity, the introspective one or the chronic questioner.

Our religion will never be corrupted by success because its idea of success is greater tolerance, not greater conformity. A movement that has at its core an ethic of self-criticism will never succumb to orthodoxy. A religion dedicated to adaptation won't become too set in its ways. And a faith that has, from its origin, promoted the individual search for truth and relied on personal experience and reason for that search, cannot abandon that value and still remain itself. We are, by definition, a religion of nonconformists.

Our history bears this out. As we've seen in my sermon series on "Three Sermons that Changed Unitarianism", whenever we become too comfortable, someone or something comes along to challenge us. The Universalists challenged eternal damnation; Channing challenged original sin and the inerrancy of the Bible; Emerson challenged the authority of the ministry; Parker challenged Christianity's exclusive claim to truth. From liberal Christianity, to the Transcendentalists, to the introduction of world religions as valid sources of wisdom, to the Humanist Manifesto, with its affirmation of Humanist values, to the welcome of neo-pagans into our ranks, to the current re-emphasis on spiritual values and ritual – Again and again, we have seen this free faith adapt to a changing world and changing needs.

Does this mean we are immune to orthodoxy? Remember the reading from George Marshall in which he tells of Channing's worry about the neo-orthodoxy of his younger colleagues. I've observed that we UUs can, if we're not careful, become politically orthodox. I've never seen this here at UUC, but in other congregations, I've sometimes witnessed the intolerance of certain political opinions. This may take the form of extreme political correctness. I'm all in favor of sensitivity in our language, but what

I'm talking about is the stereotyping of the holders of certain ideas, especially ideas that are politically conservative.

Neither are we immune to a kind of smugness that is inconsistent with our values when it comes to other religions, especially evangelical Christianity. All in all, though, I've also observed a tendency to self-correct when we see ourselves approaching intolerance.

The greater danger to us may be the other side of that same liberal coin. Some people regard us as wishy-washy. We aren't shy about expressing opinions about most things, but when it comes to our most intimately held beliefs about God and what is of ultimate value to us, we tend to become strangely silent.

And we can become so afraid of alienating others that we don't always challenge each other's ideas when they would benefit from challenge; so afraid of intolerance that we don't always speak our minds.

And, finally, we can, if we're not careful, become so engrossed in matters of this world, the here and now, or, alternatively, so afraid of not including everyone, that we neglect our need for spiritual sustenance. We can become too heady when this happens, and run the risk of turning a church into a club.

These are dangers we're well aware of, at least in this congregation. And all that being said, we try hard to honor our liberal tradition. We do have religious beliefs, as well as political and social opinions. We do honor and celebrate the sacred, and we do so in terms that require each of us to do our own work in figuring out what that means to us. We come together each Sunday to stretch ourselves, spiritually as well as ethically and intellectually. We aren't content to stay the same. This is the great challenge of this liberal religion, and its great strength. It remains to be seen what direction we will take next.

How exhilarating to be of a faith in which this is a genuine question: Where will our free spirits lead us tomorrow? With guidance from the past, lessons learned from false starts and disappointments as well as success, and with faith in each other and in the power of community, we look forward to exciting times as a faith and as a congregation. Let the future come.