

When Our Faith Matters sermon and Reading September 25, 2011

READING *Religion Beyond Belief*

Rev Peter Morales

"I want to make a (more) radical point. The point is that religious belief is actually the enemy of religion. Every major religious tradition seeks to impart a sense of wonder, mystery, awe and humility. Belief systems stop this cold. Belief systems start where our thinking stops.

Once we think we have explained it all, once we think we have all the answers, our minds close and we become arrogant, belligerent and defensive.

Just look at what happens when a belief system takes hold. What follows can be truly horrible. First, we categorize everyone who does not agree with us as either ignorant or evil. If we have the truth and are certain we have it, then our task in life becomes spreading this truth.

Our task also becomes defending the truth from all of those who disagree.

Believers have enemies everywhere. The world becomes a battleground. This is the world of Muslim fundamentalists blowing up innocent people and of Christian fundamentalists trying to criminalize gays and lesbians. This is the world of John Calvin burning Michael Servetus alive because Servetus did not agree with the doctrine of the Trinity. This is the world of the Spanish Inquisition. Once a religion becomes an all-encompassing belief system, murder will surely follow.

Believers are dangerous. They always have been."

When Our Faith Matters

In the 2010 October edition of the Quest, a publication of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, the Rev. Meg Riley, The CLF senior minister, told a story of her experience growing up as a UU in Charleston, West VA. She was very aware of the fact that her fate in the afterlife was irrevocably doomed to hell as pronounced by her Baptist neighbors!

However, Meg's Sunday school experience was most eclectic, ranging from studying the critters of the natural world to philosophizing about the multiple theories on origins of the universe. Also, among the religious communities, there was also a group with a very different approach to expressing their theology. They were snake handlers who spoke in tongues and who passed around copperheads and rattlesnakes among the congregants. It was a test of faith a belief that they would not be bitten if their faith was strong. Of course it was bound to happen. In the 1960's a girl was bitten and died. The outcome was a law 'proposed to the West Virginia Legislature forbidding the presence of reptiles in churches.'

There were only two groups that were upset by that proposition, the Snake handlers and the UU's. The UU's, aware of the proposed law, consulted with a congregant who was also a state legislator who agreed to assist them with the dynamics of making their voices effectively heard to their state politicians. Altho the congregation was small, they called, wrote and attended legislative sessions. While the UU's were battling it out with the legislature, the snake handlers were praying, not to worry about the outcome, the angels would come and deliver them. Ultimately the legislation did not pass and the UU's became, in fact, those angels.

I must say we are rarely thought of as angels, and there are many who would balk at defending a religious group that depends upon the passivity or viciousness of venomous snakes as a true test of faith. Once could also argue that any religious group which places their congregation in harms way should be outlawed.

However what that UU church saw, went beyond the restrictions of a belief that would banish such practices. Yes, snake handling was an unorthodox tradition that cemented that community together; who for decades had practiced an unusual and deadly form of faith testing, with a congregation of adherents who knew the risks to themselves and believed in the results. It was not expected of outsiders to participate, nor was it inflicted upon all people as the only means of salvation. In the eyes of the UU congregation

the snake handlers had a constitutional right to practice their faith, as bizarre and as distasteful as it may seem to the mainline religious community. Be we the angels of deliverance or the chronic gatekeepers of religious freedoms our faith matters and has from the beginnings of Christianity. It mattered when the heretic Arius in 325 BCE, first questioned the validity and meaning of the Trinity, and when the Unitarian King James Sigismund of Transylvania in 1568 issued the first edict of religious toleration. It mattered when Galileo pointed a telescope at the moon and planets and declared that the earth was not the center of the universe. The Unitarians took a good look at that and said, yup, “he’s right, God did not necessarily make us his supreme celestial creation!” The fledgling Universalists were brewing their own form of salvation that proposed all could be saved by their deeds and actions and declared that Calvin was wrong to declare that we had no control over our own destiny. In the 17th century we were the social reformers, educators and scientists who wallowed in the majesty of all creation, always hunting for the why and how the universe worked, and seeking their own inward reflections of our relationship to creation. We went to bat for the underdogs, the poor and the oppressed, the chastised and the persecuted. We questioned authority and at times went to jail for our efforts.

Our faith mattered when there was work to do and a reason for our existence.

Today we are not so sure. Today we are perplexed by our purpose and at times we feel the need to define ourselves much more succinctly as Christians or Humanists, Breatharians or Wiccans, complete with a concise set of beliefs that venture well beyond the generalizations of the UU principles to a more specific statement. We are not alone in our ambivalence.

In a newsletter sent out by the progressive Baptist Church in Beverly, MA, their minister wrote, “ Being a church in America today means living into an untold number of challenges. There is the challenge of being

counter-cultural, in a world where there are increasing numbers of things to do on a Sunday morning, being a church is saying that it remains worthy, even critical to come together for study and worship on a Sunday morning.” The article continues on examining the problems with work schedules and family time in a society where there is no longer any such thing as a Monday through Friday work week. Then a reminder of their statement of purpose...”being a church means taking seriously the call and commission to follow Jesus...”

For us, ‘from whence commeth our strength?’ To whom or to what do we owe our allegiance? Jesus, God, the Goddess or pine cones?

I know that this is a bag of worms, as our denomination has declared that it is up to each congregation to formulate their own mission and purpose within the wide parameters of our 7 principles. It is a daunting task, but one which is critical to giving this gathering and this service real meaning.

Let me start with our hymnal, that is the first clue. Within it are multiple references to the wisdom of other religious traditions, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Native American, Wiccan, Christian, humanist to name a few. There is no other hymnal like it outside of UU circles. It tells us that we do indeed draw from many sources. We quote them, recite them and at times post them.

Our strength commeth from the wisdom of many traditions and prophets, who have moved us and inspired us through our worship and in our own personal growth. Some of these faith communities we quote, do not profess a god or gods to praise, others do. We treasure them for the wisdom they impart, not just from one single source, but from many.

I see our our faith as similar to selecting a great pair of shoes. We search for just the right size and width, composition and (sole, no pun intended) that are made to fit our needs. If one size would fit all it would be easy. But it's not the case. We would look pretty silly if we were all clomping around

in size 5 1/2 4 inch shark skin stilettos or size 12 steel toed, high top vibran sole work boots!

That's the way I see our faith working, by honoring our individual sizes, looking for a fit that can't be found in places where the one size fits all is the only choice.

To whom or to what do we owe allegiance? Now that we have arrived here and determined that we are seekers and open to the vast wisdom of the ages, both ancient and modern, we cannot stop there if we simply believe that we owe allegiance to only ourselves. If our individual points of view, are all we are about, then we will get stuck in a mire of static introversion that only seeks to serve the needs of the individual. It is critical that we examine the larger picture, that we as a congregation find a mechanism to present our diverse viewpoints in a united fashion. For the congregation in West Virginia, the protection of religious freedom was their unifying force. It did not fragment the congregation, it united them. We owe our allegiance to the very depths of the components our faith; that of using all the resources of love and compassion, for strength and inspiration that we have acquired, to shove it out beyond our doors into a larger community. It means taking risks, it means making a commitment that we are worth something so important, that it must be shared with one another and with the community at large. Answering the question, of our allegiance to what or whom is a critical piece of longevity and survival.

It is the living visible means that proves to us and the outside world that our faith matters.

Our faith matters when it is used. Not just talked about, or argued about, or gripped about, or wielded as an ultimate truth against one another. It matters when those in need can look into our eyes and see the the results of our understanding and compassion.

It matters when our individual beliefs, or our need to be right, does not get in the way of listening and hearing an opposing point of view.

I love the statement that we are not really a church, just a social club of elite members, who like to discuss, and discuss some more, or that we are much too intellectual for many and think we have all the answers with nothing to show for it.

Well I disagree. We have opportunity to embrace all of the centuries of wisdom, both religious and secular- to create a place for ourselves in the universe that has meaning. The individual is important. But how we gather that spirit and move together in one solid direction that allows for the very best of our thinking to come out, makes us worthy of our beliefs and takes them well beyond them to a functional reality.

We can choose our course of direction and pledge our allegiance with or without “under God.” It is not the finality of belief that matters, it is the action it fosters. We can stand up for the rights of others and for our own. Our beliefs may not be the same individual to individual but there is room for them. Our unity, however, must evolve out from under that of rugged individualism to a unifying congregational significance. It can only do that by how we choose to define and express that unity and purpose as a whole congregation. It is hard work that every congregation must do, to venture out of the repetitive cycle that occurs when we are stuck and, cannot see beyond our own personal quests. Our faith has meaning when we are anxious and excited to do the work to uncover the treasures that sometimes lie dormant; due to change, trauma or fear of criticism.

In the meantime our faith has meaning not only because it is formally 500 years old, and been the catalyst for great social change and advancements in curbing injustice, but it exists with a thousand ways to fall in love with life and all the possibilities it offers for us to ponder and more importantly to actively respond to its demands.

It has meaning because our beliefs as individual as they may be, don’t get in the way of inclusion. They are living, breathing examples of our diversity and compassion.

I would like to close with the conclusion to UUA president Peter Morales

article, “Beyond Belief.” :

“What these millions are seeking is a religion beyond belief. We can be that religion. We can feed the starving multitudes.

This is our challenge in each and every congregation in our Association. Just as we are relational creatures who need one another to become our true selves, so too do our congregations need one another to become a powerful force for compassion and justice. There is so much more we could be doing.

This is our spiritual and religious challenge: we must know what we love, and then we must let that love guide us. This, my friends, is true religion. It is not really religion without belief. It is religion beyond belief. It is a religion to be lived and experienced. This is the religion our world so desperately needs. This, I am convinced, is what we are called to' be”

So Be It

Amen