

HERETICS, REBELS... AND FOOLS?
BRING A FRIEND SUNDAY
UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
REV. JULIE STONEBERG
NOVEMBER 16, 2014

OPENING WORDS *Faith is a Forest (adapted) ~ Shelley Jackson Denham*

Faith is a forest in which doubts play and hide. Here may we welcome the experience of walking with our doubts in an interplay of shadow and light.

We enter that forest, and listen for the still small voice deep inside. Here may we welcome these quiet moments of reflection, trusting what wisdom we find.

Here, walking in that forest together, we interweave threads of doubt and belief, wonder and inquiry, that we may lace our lives with compassion, strengthen our commitment, and find the courage to bear witness to matters of worth.

Here, we gather collective guidance, that we might go out into each tender day, allowing our beliefs, and our doubts, to speak through us in all we do and say.

Come, let us be here, together.

STORY FOR ALL *The Artist Who Painted a Blue Horse ~Eric Carle*

(Eric Carle grew up in Germany at a time when modern or expressionist art was forbidden. He tells of an art teacher who secretly showed him forbidden art, particularly Blue Horse 1 by Franz Marc. This led him to see that he could paint such things as blue horses.)

READING *from Heretic's Faith* ~ Fredric John Muir

The word heresy comes from the Greek, *haíresis*, which means choice. As a heretic, you choose. There are all kinds of heresies, but being a religious heretic has always meant not going along with the official religious doctrines and creeds. Unitarian Universalism's particular heresy is that we are religious liberals. Being a liberal [small l] is currently not popular. The word alone, strikes fear or animosity in the hearts of many.

But like heretic, 'liberal' has a special meaning for Unitarian Universalists. Its root means to be generous and open. As religious liberals we seek deeper and wider understanding, greater tolerance, broader definitions, more inclusive language. We want to stretch our minds and souls, pushing the limits of thought and spirit, redefining the boundaries of tradition and orthodoxy.

And so as religious liberals we have committed heresy, and appear out of the mainstream, standing on the fringe.

MESSAGE

Heretics, Rebels, and Fools?

A visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church sat through the sermon with growing incredulity at the heretical ideas being spouted. After the sermon a UU asked the visitor, "So how did you like it?" "I can't believe half the things that minister said!" sputtered the visitor in outrage.

"Oh, good – then you'll fit right in!"

Those of you visiting today may feel strangely comforted by this joke. And, let me assure you that it is really no laughing matter within this faith tradition. We give our ministers 'freedom of the pulpit', which is to say that we/I have a free reign in deciding what to say on any given Sunday. At the same time, you don't have to like it, or agree with it.

One of the first attempts at religious toleration was influenced by the unitarian court preacher, Francis David. The Edict of Torda, issued in 1568 by King Sigismund of Transylvania, read, in part: "... 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; if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve."¹ Critiquing and questioning what any minister says, particularly because of the potentially powerful influence of the pulpit, is in our very UU DNA.

Actually, critiquing, questioning EVERYTHING is in our UU DNA, DNA that is expressed in the purpose statement of this congregation, which beckons us to 'embrace life with inquiry.' We are rebels who want to choose our faith. We are heretics who believe that we can appeal to our own reason in matters of belief. We are foolish enough to be heretics even when it threatens the status quo.

For example, another important time in our history was the "Boston Heresy" when Unitarians and Calvinists fought for control of the mainstream congregations (this was the early 19th century.) The leader of the orthodoxy, Lyman Beecher is quoted as saying that he anticipated the day when "victory will be achieved and Unitarianism cease to darken and pollute the land." There was even a Methodist hymn written by Charles Wesley at that time that included the lines: "Send down thy wrath, thou triune God, the Unitarian Fiend expel, and chase his doctrines back to Hell."²

So you see, for us, heresy is a matter of our UU identity. For some of us, heresy is a matter of pride. And, it's a matter of courage.

Courage is our theme for the month of November; there are theme packets available in the brochure rack in the foyer if you're interested in reading more. I chose to speak about being heretics because it takes courage to choose to think or behave differently from the culture around you. It takes courage to lift your voice to question something

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edict_of_Torda

² http://www.uuff.org/old/fs_boston_heresy.shtml

that everyone around you seems to believe. It takes courage to choose a different, less traveled path.

As humans, we balance our need to belong with our need to be unique individuals. We see-saw between wanting to be like those around us, and wanting to be authentic to our true selves. We create categories that define our groups...who fits in and who doesn't, who is at the center and who is at the periphery, and even if we see ourselves on the margins, we continue to want to group with those who are 'like us' so that we're not alone way out there on the outside...a feeling alluded to in our reading this morning. We like being outsiders, but we don't want to be there alone.

There's a joke about accurately captures this inside/outside dilemma, and a short cartoon tells it much better than I. You won't be able to see the screen; it begins with a man climbing the barrier on a bridge, about to jump, and being stopped by a woman passerby. Here goes. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0zIv2I37UU>

We want to belong, and yet we choose very specific identities that serve to divide us. Belonging, connecting, can be what saves us...yet, if we cannot connect from a place of authenticity, life can feel hollow and meaningless, and those around us can seem threatening and intolerant.

This I believe to be the particular challenge for Unitarian Universalists: to create a community of belonging in which we can be our unique and diverse selves. I'm not sure this goal, this path toward a beloved community, could be described as heretical, but it is indeed counter-cultural, for such a community swims upstream against age-old patterns of human behaviour. To create a community across difference goes against our innate human tribal tendencies, tendencies that would have us be with people who look like us, act like us, and think like us...tribes within which we can create common expectations of behaviour and belief. Tribes create and maintain orthodoxy.

Orthodoxy is 'right thinking'...the right way of doing things...the way we've been raised...what we've been taught. Orthodoxy is not inherently wrong...just as tradition is not necessarily bad...but it does tend to be unmoving and rigid. Heresies are like evolutionary mutations from the 'right way'...mutations that introduce new ideas, new ways of being. The picture on the cover of the order of service lists some famous heretics...people who have become heroes because of their heresy...Joan of Arc, Jesus of Nazareth, Ivone Gebara, Meister Eckhardt. We could add many Unitarian Universalists social reformers to this list ... Susan B. Anthony, Pete Seeger, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dorothea Dix...to name just a few.³

Of course, UU's don't have any proprietary claim on heresy (lots of heretics aren't Unitarians!) We all have heard story after story about scientists, and artists, and philosophers, who defy the status quo and who are shunned by their professional colleagues, only to later be shown to have been doing visionary, 'break-through' work. Without heretics, it seems, there would be no progress in the world.

³ Doss, "UU Heretics or Heroes", UU Fellowship of Laguna Beach, 2009

Yet, I titled today's message "Heretics, Rebels, and Fools" because heresy also contains a caution. Just because something is heretical doesn't make it heroic, or good, or even true. And, heresy for heresy's sake is like rebellion for rebellion's sake, and is adolescent at best.⁴ We can be foolish in our heresy...not only because it might subject us to being ridiculed and ostracized (like, for example, I was recently called a "sky fairy worshipper")...but also foolish because we can cling to our rebellious spirit for its own sake, which is counter to the very notion of heresy.

Because heresy is just as likely to be closed minded as any orthodoxy, I'd like to suggest a picture of the ideal UU heretic (I know, the very notion of an ideal is antithetical to heresy.) Still, a heretic who is liberal, is therefore a heretic who also seeks "deeper and wider understanding, greater tolerance, broader definition, more inclusive language..."⁵ To be a model UU heretic, we must first know what we love, and be committed to what we see as true, and then, when that conflicts with the status quo, to be willing to stand up and speak out. To be that liberal heretic is to be driven by a spirit willing to defy societal norms and confront wrong where we see it, perhaps especially where that 'wrong' ideology is held by those who have power. But we also need to continue to be open to something new, something different.

Here's yet another joke...a joke that contains another caution for the heretic:

The devil and a friend of his were walking in the woods one morning, when they saw ahead of them a man stoop down and pick up something from the ground, look at it, and put it away in his pocket. The friend said to the devil, "What did that man pick up?" "He picked up a piece of Truth," said the devil, looking very pleased. The friend said, "I wouldn't think you'd be at all pleased about a man finding a piece of the truth." And the devil replied, "Oh, but you don't understand. Now I'm going to help him organize it!"⁶

The point being, any heresy claims a new 'truth.' However inventive, however creative, however willing to 'colour outside the lines or paint a blue horse'⁷, a heresy also has the potential to organize into an orthodoxy, and then to exclude difference, or to shun any differing views.

So, I have two challenges for you today. The first is for the 'regulars' here. Where do you see this congregation establishing 'norms' that might exclude others? Now, I'm not suggesting that 'anything goes' or that we should not create a culture that is true to our particular values and principles. But, where are we being inflexible in ways that shut out dissent or difference? I won't name anything specific, for fear that any of you might feel called out; still, I challenge you to pay attention and to scan what we do and say. Where are we setting 'norms' for behaviour and belief that go against our claim to be accepting and tolerant? Is it found in particular language? Or ritual? What about any

⁴ <http://www.uuchelmsford.org/component/sermonspeaker/sermon/10149-choosiiing-well-the-wisdom-of-heresy.html>

⁵ Muir, Fredric John, "Heretic Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals", introduction

⁶ <http://siouxcityuu.org/perspective.htm>

⁷ Reference to children's story "The Artist Who Painted a Blue Horse" by Eric Carle.

expectations we might have about social class, or education? Religious background or lack thereof? Personal habits? Involvement in particular political parties or causes? I challenge you to question if we truly mean what we say when we claim we can 'love alike' without 'thinking alike'... for to truly 'love alike' would mean we were willing to lovingly defend one another's right to hold a differing view or even to choose a more 'status quo' lifestyle and belief system.

The second challenge, for all of you, has to do with your view of religion and religious community. You may have heard me say before that choosing to be part of a religious community is a nearly heretical act in today's society, although maybe not in the ways you might imagine. Rev. Peter Morales, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, has said that while in the past, many in our congregations came to escape doctrine, there is now a new story he's hearing. "The new story is the tale of a younger generation, particularly people under 40. They come to us wondering if there is something more than a life spent pursuing success. They have no bad memories of indoctrination and rigidity. They do not come seeking refuge from orthodoxy. They come seeking community, a spiritual home that is a refuge from banality and emptiness. They also come longing to join hands with others to be a force for good in the world."⁸

Religion doesn't have to be about attaching ourselves to any particular creed, or even any brand of heresy. It doesn't have to be about accepting twenty impossible things before breakfast, but it IS, or can be, about being willing to do things that change us. And, one thing that is transformative is to move beyond putting people and ideas in boxes, and instead to develop a sense of belonging through relationships...REAL relationships that grow out of being both authentic and accepting of the other.

The challenge is look at religion in a new way...to let go of thinking of religion or religious community as a matter of what we believe, and to embrace it as a way of paying attention to 'what we give our hearts to' or what we hold as sacred. Let us not think of religious community as a place that requires us to be something we are not, but rather, a place that instills in us a sense of wonder and awe, and where we are called to live well-examined lives of compassion, and gratitude, and humility...a place where we can connect in authentic relationship. To change our thinking about religion I believe to be the great calling for Unitarianism in this time... and to be what my colleague Sam Trumbore calls a community that embraces "pluralism with heart."⁹ It's hard work to be in relationship across difference, and yet, it is work truly worthy of the risk.

To repeat Fred Muir's words, "As religious liberals we seek deeper and wider understanding, greater tolerance, broader definitions, more inclusive language. We want to stretch our minds and souls, pushing the limits of thought and spirit, redefining the boundaries of tradition and orthodoxy." If we are to be truly heretical, truly

⁸ <http://www.uucava.org/page/beyond-belief-by-uua-president-rev-peter-morales-feb-12-2012>

⁹ <http://blog.timesunion.com/trumbore/loyal-heretics/1193/>

rebellious, truly counter-cultural in these times, let us, with heart and conviction, work to create that meaningful and inclusive beloved community.

So be it. Amen.

RESPONSIVE READING *It Matters What We Believe* #657

* **CLOSING WORDS** *Drawn Together (adapted)* ~ Jennifer Leota Gray

We come together every week
Bound not by a creed,
Or a mutual desire to please one God
Or many Gods
Yet we are drawn together
By a belief, that how we are in the world,
Who we are together
Matters.
We extinguish this chalice,
together in the knowledge
That love, not fear, can change this world.

Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME