

It's What We Do

Sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered 11/27/2016

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Several years ago, before I was a Minister, I served as youth advisor to my church, and a young man named George was a member of its YRUU group. (YRUU=Young Religious Unitarian Universalists.) I liked George a lot, in part because he reminded me so much of me when I was his age: curious and passionate but also a bit shy and awkward. I often felt remorse, because when I was coming of age I didn't have a YRUU group that was as accepting of me as his group was of him. But in spite of this George struggled with many of the same issues I struggled with as an adolescent -- how to be accepted and cool, and how to walk that delicate line between being appreciated by your parents, teachers, and peers all at the same time. How to express your thoughts and feelings in ways that people understand; for that matter, how to be yourself and expect people to understand.

This youth group periodically held worship services during our Sunday evening gatherings. I remember one service where the topic was the "first" UU principle -- the inherent worth and dignity of every person. As often happens in youth-led worship experiences, all of the participants passed a candle around a darkened room, and as each person took it he or she shared what the inherent worth and dignity of every person meant to him or her. When the candle came to George, he took it, and with great enthusiasm sat up and began "The inherent worth and dignity! -- is uh... um... it's like... well, like, every person is, uh... um... well, like, you know, everybody is cool, or something... um..." When he couldn't find the words

to finish his sentence he quietly sat back in his chair and passed the candle on. As a youth group advisor and Coming of Age teacher, I must admit I felt a bit disappointed with him. After all the time he spent in and around his UU church, where everyone was encouraged to articulate their own beliefs, George seemed unable to do so. Some people claim that our congregations and our Religious Education programs do a great job of touring the religions of the world, but often fail when it comes to instilling in people a solid Unitarian Universalist identity. Was George one such failed product of our Religious Education programs, unable to articulate the basic principles of Unitarian Universalist faith?

No, he wasn't, as I would soon find out. Over the course of several weeks at our Youth Group meetings, George shared with us some difficulties he was having at school. Apparently, many of his friends were beginning to make him feel uncomfortable. Almost without him noticing, they had started to make jokes about "fags and queers" and started poking fun at and even bullying some other schoolmates that they thought fit this category. George was bothered by their antics, and even more bothered that he quietly went along rather than standing up to them. He struggled with this for several weeks until, one Sunday in January, he came to Youth Group in a particularly excited mood.

"I did it," he declared to the group, "I finally told them what I thought. I told them that they didn't know what they were talking about and that they were wrong to assume that just because someone might be gay that that's a bad thing."

I, like most others in the group that night, was profoundly moved by his experience. I thought about all the times I've had difficulty speaking my

values against the tide of popular opinion -- not just as a youth but also as an adult -- and I knew what a difficult and wonderful thing George had done. Someone in the group asked George how he felt, to which he replied "It was really scary -- I don't know if they'll want to be friends with me any more. But I spoke up anyway because I knew that you guys would support me and I knew that what I was telling them was true."

I knew that what I was telling them was true.

So much for my disappointment at another failed product of our Religious Education program. George, while perhaps unable to articulate the precise beliefs of his religion, was able to live his life and act with courage and conviction in a way that does all of us proud. This is the essence of Thomas Jefferson's words "for it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read."

In our contemporary culture religion is often misunderstood to be defined by belief alone -- what you believe defines your religion. Many of us are terrified every time we are asked the question "What do UUs believe?" and we often despair that not having a concise answer somehow disqualifies us as a religion. Many of us feel that one of the primary objectives of our Religious Education programs is to learn how to answer that very question about what we believe. But this understanding of religion based on belief loses relevance when we step outside of our particular place in culture. Travel around the world and see that religious identity is not always defined by belief but more often by practice. A Muslim is a Muslim because he prays five times a day facing Mecca. A Jew is a Jew because she observes Shabbat. A Buddhist is a Buddhist because she meditates. A Unitarian Universalist is a Unitarian Universalist

when he comes together in religious community to affirm and promote religious values, and learn, as George learned, how to live according to these values.

In spite of this, we live in a culture in which religious identity is often defined by belief: do you believe in God, and if so, which one? So to explain ourselves to others, many of us attempt to answer that perennial question by citing our seven principles. These principles are the covenant adopted by Unitarian Universalist congregations. The first one reads “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Unitarian Universalists often use these principles as a teaching tool and a way to help us talk about our religion. Unfortunately, all too often these principles are treated as a statement belief. We even have printed posters designed for children in which the introduction to the UU covenant, “We ... covenant to affirm and promote” gets translated into “We believe.” While this translation serves a useful purpose, it also changes the meaning of these words. It diminishes the significance of the covenant as the underlying foundation of our religious community. When we say what we are not, a religion with a creed, we should also remember what we are: a religion based on covenant.

As a religion based on covenant, we are defined by our practice and not our belief. As Rev. Rebecca Parker has written, “Covenant is, first-most, not a verbal agreement but a practice”. In other words, it is our covenant that binds us together, and our covenant is not who we are or what we believe, it’s what we do. As I’ve announced, I plan to offer a series of sermons over the next few months that will explore each of these

seven principles and what it may mean to practice them. Not to believe in them, but to practice them. Today I'm focusing on this first principle. If you're curious and want to look ahead, the UU covenant in its entirety is printed on the back of your order of service.

The UU covenant is beautiful in its simplicity. It is a simple statement of what we do as a religious community. We don't *believe in* the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we covenant to *affirm and promote* the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The point we often miss is that you need not unconditionally believe that each and every person is born pure and good in order to affirm and promote the worth and dignity of all people. We sometimes become so focused on the words and their implications that we lose the true meaning of these active verbs. Affirm and promote. We come together, and stay together, not to believe in something together, but because we do something together.

The thing is, we UUs like to discuss the theological and philosophical implications of these seven simple principles to no end. Simple as they are, we seem to be as adept at chewing them up and spitting them back out as a hungry cat on a slow mouse. "The inherent worth and dignity of every person?" someone might ask, "what about Adolph Hitler?" Or "The goal of world community? My gosh, that means world government!" "The democratic process? That's politics, not religion!" I've even heard people criticize these principles because they are not "different enough" from what other religious traditions uphold -- as if they are worthless unless we can raise some feathers when people hear them. This may be a symptom of a tendency to focus so much on defining

our *beliefs* as Unitarian Universalists that we forget the more important task of defining our *values* as a religious community.

The beauty of our covenant is that it is simply a statement of what we do as a religious community. We need to step outside of the Christian-centric way of thinking that says that to be religious you must believe in something. No, religious people *act* religiously. We *live* religiously. To act religiously in our world is to *affirm* and *promote* the good in human beings, whether you believe in predestination, original sin, universal love, random chance, or any other theological doctrine about the nature human beings. It is not what we believe that makes us religious, it's what we do. We affirm and promote the worth and dignity in people to the best of our ability – even if, and especially if, we doubt that they *have* inherent worth and dignity. Our covenant asks us to affirm and promote: To act to bring out the best in people, to liberate the oppressed, to heal the sick, bring joy to the alienated, and, lest we forget our own souls, to renew ourselves in our ongoing quests to find spiritual wholeness. Affirm and promote. It's what we do.

OK, so I make it all sound simple, right? It can be much more difficult when we are dealing with people who are harder to like. People who don't seem to see worth and dignity in others. Murderers. Rapists. Abusers. Racists. Homophobes. People we don't like very much form our biggest challenge in practicing this principle. There still is that perennial question: what about Adolf Hitler?

And that is just the point: Even when we have trouble seeing inherent worth and dignity in people, our covenant calls upon us to affirm and promote their worth and dignity in spite of what we believe to be true about

a person. To do so, we first need to be reminded that affirming and promoting the worth and dignity of all people does not imply that we affirm the worth and dignity of all behaviors. Indeed, we do have standards of what is acceptable and what is not, and certain behaviors – especially those that are harmful to others – cannot be tolerated without consequences. So in our broader society we have laws and the means to enforce them, and in our congregations we have behavioral covenants, policies, and standards – even if they are not always as explicit as we’d like them to be. It is indeed possible to affirm and promote the worth and dignity of a person, even as you protect yourself from harm or punish someone who has violated a covenant. Indeed, it is naïve to think we can promote the worth and dignity of every person without having some standards of behavior.

Furthermore, to affirm and promote inherent worth and dignity of people we don’t like, we have to base our actions not on a *belief* that there *is* inherent worth and dignity in all people, but with *faith* – the kind of faith immortalized by theologian Paul Tillich as “faith beyond belief.” When our beliefs are not enough for us to affirm and promote the values we express, we call on our faith as a basis for action in which we suspend our cognitive doubts and act with conviction anyway; we affirm and promote worth and dignity with the faith that there is a possibility for goodness or redemption buried deep inside even the most reprehensible people. And we do so with faith that, in the end, the world will be a better place if we treat one another in a way that will better the odds that some goodness and redemption will result. So we look the hateful person not in the eye, but in the heart, and

look to our own hearts to find the faith that there is a path to salvation and healing for even the most wretched souls.

I want to offer another way to look at this first principle that, for many, is at odds with much of our experience. Many of you are familiar with a movement within our association to change this first principle from affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every *person* to the inherent worth and dignity of every *being*, with the objective of widening our compassion and sense of responsibility beyond the human world and to the world of animals and other beings. While I have great sympathy with the aim of this endeavor, I very adamantly oppose it. I oppose it in part because I hate to see our penchant for individualism extend further than it already has. One of the criticisms that gets levelled sometimes at UUs and our principles is that we are too individualistic – which rings with some truth, I think. We should respect and care for nature and all non-human beings not so much because they are individual beings, but because they are all part of the same interdependent web which we acknowledge in our seventh principle. I also think that if we want our principles to better articulate our sense of compassion and responsibility to non-human beings, we should change our second principle from “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations” to “justice, equity and compassion in *all our* relations.” But more on that when we take on the second principle.

But the main reason I oppose this change from *every person* to *every being* is because I think it would benefit all of us to think about these principles not only in an objective way but also in a subjective way. In other words, they don't just apply to how we see or treat the world, but how we fit in to the world.

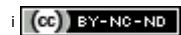
I've been around UU churches long enough to remember the days – not so very long ago – when people who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or queer, who had been rejected or turned away not only from their families and friends but in many cases by their religious communities, who might have come to a UU church not knowing whether they and their lifestyles would be accepted here. And I know many of them felt comforted and embraced by a church that said at the outset that *every person* had worth and dignity in them; that every person would be welcomed. Many of us may never have directly experienced being in a situation in which our own inherent worth and dignity were denied us, and so we tend to not automatically think of things like these principles applying not just to how we treat the world but how the world treats us. While it is very good and noble to say that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of orcas and dogs and songbirds to a level that may be equivalent to that with which we treat all people, don't you think that those who are questioning their own sense of worth and dignity need to hear more than a statement that they have as much worth as the family dog? In this day and age of safety pins and renewed threats to the freedom and dignity of many people, I think we need to not only hold on to our first principle as it is, but work ever harder at practicing it, not only as we try to treat others, but as a testament to the welcome we offer; a welcome well-summarized by a recent facebook meme I shared: In this house, Black Lives Matter, Women's Rights and Human Rights, No Person is Illegal, Science is Real, Love is Love, and Kindness is Everything.

So let me offer another way to frame our revered principles using simple language and clear concepts suitable for children. Rather than using the problematic phrase “we believe,” let us reframe our message into something more like “As Unitarian Universalists, this is what we do: We try to bring out the best in people, especially people who have been treated poorly. We work to make our world more fair. We treat everybody as an important person. We help people find what is right and true,” and so on. Let us declare what it is we do.

And let us, drawing on the strength of community and our faith, find the courage to do it.

Marge Piercy writes: “The pitcher cries out for water to carry, and a person for work that is real.” Let me assure you, our work as a religious community is real. In a secularized and broken world that no one of us can fix on our own, our religious work is more vital than ever. Let us be reminded, like my friend George reminded me, that our work is always in front of us, calling us to act for justice, healing, and love. This work is often daunting, but we come together in religious community to find the strength, courage, and inspiration to carry on.

Carry on, friends. These days as much as any, we have work to do.



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