

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Faith Without Abusive Authority”
 Rev. Sam Trumbore March 4, 2012

Spoken Meditation

The Psalmist (7) cries out:

My God, I take refuge in you;
 save and deliver me from all who pursue me
 or they will tear me like a lion and rip me to pieces.
 O LORD my God, if I have done this and
 there is guilt on my hands--
 if I have done evil to him who is at peace with me
 or without cause have robbed my foe--
 then let my enemy pursue and overtake me;
 let him trample my life to the ground and
 make me sleep in the dust.

Judge me, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity.

O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts,
 bring to an end the violence of the wicked
 and make the righteous secure.

Those who dig a hole and scoop it out
 fall into the pit they have made.
 The trouble they cause recoils on themselves;
 their violence comes down on their own heads.

Whether we seek the divine hand for help
 or the goodwill and support of family and friends
 or the restoring justice of the power of law,

May the abuse of authority come to an end,
 in our lives and in the lives of the powerless and oppressed.
 In the words of the prophet Amos:
 May judgment roll down as waters,
 and righteousness as a mighty stream.

Readings

Ezekiel 34:1-16

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them. "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ... I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves... I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land ... I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

Mark 10:42-45

So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to offer the spiritual gift of liberation for the multitudes.

1 Peter 5:1-3

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it —not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.

SERMON

This sermon begins a series of five sermons I'll be giving that culminate in the Easter family service, April 8th. Each sermon will celebrate our uncommon approach to religion. While no one of these sermons will outline a completely unique approach, the five together will define the value of our unique approach to religion. I want to persuade you and deepen your appreciation of our approach to religion that is right, even urgently needed, for this time in the world's history.

And, that approach to religion is still evolving. In each sermon I'll be talking about the challenges of doing religion as we do. We do religion really well for a certain spectrum of people, but not for everyone. If you don't trust your own judgment and you want someone else to tell you what to believe, you're unlikely to be happy here. If you think this world isn't as important as the next world beyond the grave, you're very unlikely to be happy here. If you think there is only one way to do religion or to believe, you're extremely unlikely to be happy here.

I will also be making the claim that the world itself needs our approach to religion to keep those set on getting to heaven by any means necessary from destroying it. The planet also needs protection from those who would compromise it for their personal, corporate, political or their religious gain. Central to Unitarian Universalism is the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

May these sermons help deepen our appreciation of and support for this congregation, our larger religious movement and the shared values and commitments that unite us.

On to my topic for today, authority.

We Unitarian Universalists have an authority problem. We will not tolerate the abusive use of power in our movement or in our congregations. And our sensitivity to ***the potential*** for abuse of authority often leads to difficulties between ministers and congregations as we seek to spread our message and promote our values.

I'm quite sure I need not quote Lord Acton about power corrupting. Keeping a wary eye on the powerful is an article of UU faith. We all know the strong frequently abuse their power over the weak. Even the saintly succumb to the temptation to control and dominate.

All of us who hold power in leadership positions would be wise to reflect on the Ezekiel passage I read earlier and review it before making important decisions or taking decisive actions. How are you doing tending your sheep? Are you strengthening the weak, healing the sick, binding up the injured and bringing home the strays and the lost? Or are you ruling them harshly and brutally?

History is rife with examples of the latter. In the two thousand years of Christianity, there are abundant examples of both. Martin Luther protested the church's practice of selling

indulgences, calling it an abuse of authority. That one controversy split the church, a rift that may never be healed. Here is an example of how indulgences worked. Imagine your beloved Cousin Vinny has just died. Vinny was no angel and had sinned frequently, taking other kid's lunch money being the least of his crimes. You expect Vinny is quite likely going to a very hot place for a very long time. The priest informs you that bad as Vinny was, you could actually help him get to heaven, or at least ease his eternal torment, by paying some money to the church. (actually in Vinny's case probably a LOT of money) Now think of how many relatives you might have who could use a little insurance that their sins will not interfere with getting to heaven. The Pope had come up with usurious way to pay for building cathedrals that his agents zealously pursued.

Clerical abuse of authority featured prominently among the Protestant's complaints against the Church. For that reason, the major Protestant denominations do not have a singular pope equivalent. Power is distributed more widely. The Puritans who came to the Americas brought with them the fear of clerical abuse and devised a way to curb it in 1648, calling it the Cambridge Platform. Much has changed about how we do religion over the last 364 years. What endures is the Bible based system of governance they devised we today call "Congregational Polity."

Under this system, the ownership of property and institutional governance of the congregation belongs to the members and its elected leaders. The worship life of the congregation belongs to the minister. The congregation has the authority to select and remove a minister. Ministers have the freedom and authority to preach and teach the Word as they understand it. This division creates checks and balances to prevent the abuse of authority.

But even without the power of the purse, ministers still can abuse the authority granted to them. That's because we ministers can craft our words in ways that can cast a spell over people's hearts. Throughout history the silver tongued speaker can move people to follow them sometimes to their own destruction. Be it Hitler or Jim Jones, the Branch Davidians or Heaven's Gate, charismatic leaders can do tremendous harm.

Today, Unitarian Universalism has institutionalized a number of defenses against the abuse of authority. Just because I am a minister, it doesn't mean my words are any more sanctified than the words of our custodians. My ordination doesn't give me any special hotline to God. My ordination is a public commitment to the service of life, of love, of truth and of our common heritage. I serve as your minister through your assent and consent. The measure of my words must be assayed in your minds and hearts. Rather than granted through my office, I earn your trust through my deeds and example.

To protect individual's beliefs and personal lives from coercion, we require no theological test for inclusion and membership. You need not believe in God nor must you reject the belief in God to be a member here. You need not believe in the saving power of Jesus nor reject such a belief. No Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Rastafarian, or Communitarian beliefs are required or binding. The one belief I'd say we might claim is the sanctity of the individual conscience, cast in our Unitarian Universalist Association Purposes and Principles as the inherent worth and dignity of each person and the right of conscience.

As we claim freedom of belief, so we also claim freedom of sources for guidance and inspiration, none of which are authoritative or binding on us. For a Sunday service, I can quote the Bible as I have today, but I could just as well have quoted the Quran, the Upanishads, the Buddhist Suttas, Mary Oliver, Emily Dickenson, Emerson, Thoreau, Walt Whitman, John Dewey, William James, Margaret Atwood, or Brittany Spears. We claim the authority to receive words from many sources, interpret them, and find meaning in them, even if their words define wrong rather than right. Sometimes bad examples are as useful in forming our character as good ones.

What we do **not** do is use words to abuse others. Unlike Biblical literalists, we do not abuse obscure Biblical passages to demonize those who are non-heterosexuals. We will not pervert the message of the Gospel of John into a reason to torture and kill Jews.

The last safeguard we have followed for over 350 years is the democratic approach to governance. No minister, leader or cabal rules this congregation. Small decisions or implementations of larger decisions are the purview of the Board of Trustees. Big decisions are made by congregational votes. The power is held by the members not the minister who serves at their pleasure.

The Cambridge Platform has worked pretty well for all this time to balance the power of the clergy and the laity, but not perfectly. Go to any denominational meeting and you'll hear stories of ministers overreaching wanting to exert too much power. Go to any ministers gathering and you'll hear griping about congregations infringing on the power granted to ministers. I've heard the argument countless times that if the other would just let go a little bit, we could really do some great things ... together.

I'll tell you what we ministers want – a little less knee jerk resistance, a little more trust and confidence and a little more engagement with our inspiration and ideas. We're thrilled to get a thoughtful and self-reflective response to our words. We thrive on creative interchange that mutually transforms both of us. Most ministers I know, love and respect, are in this work seeking lifelong growth and development.

Beautiful as our free and responsible search for truth and meaning is, it too has some problems with it. I've seen people get pretty lost on that search, ending up in some confining cull-die-sac's. Our enthusiasms can narrow our minds rather than expand them. Engaging in a free search doesn't mean we do it all by ourselves. The free search just means the final arbiter of turning right or left, going ahead or turning back, or just standing still, is each one of us. We need each other in that process of deciding. We especially need someone who has traveled ahead and knows the terrain to help us chart our course. As any sailor knows, having a map can keep you from running aground on dangerous shoals.

So how do we resolve these sources of mutual suspicion and distrust built in to our anti-authoritarian approach to religion? The growing edge solutions we're working on, and doing pretty well with right now, I might add, are **shared ministry, shared leadership and shared commitment to growth and development.**

While our bylaws give me authority over what happens on Sunday morning, I choose to share the design of our service with the Religious Services Committee. We work collaboratively to balance the different elements of the service. I share the Call to Celebration portion of the service with the Service Leader. The first part before the service formally begins is handed over to institutional business aka announcements. Joys and Sorrows is another shared ministry moment in our service. On average, one Sunday a month the congregation controls the pulpit. I share the work of pastoral care with the Pastoral Care Associates. I share the work of teaching with the Lifespan Learning Committee.

The leadership of our congregation does a great job sharing power skillfully. Sometimes a committee or task force can do a much better job than one person can do. Watching the collaborative work of the Stewardship committee is very inspiring. The team spirit organizing our fundraisers, the great party for Dave Stone's retirement, the ever hard working UU Weekend committee, everywhere you look, so much is happening here in groups. If you want something done right here, find someone to help you do it!

The most exciting growing edge I see developing here is a shared commitment to growth and development. Implicit in our positing the source of congregational authority in each individual, is an attentiveness to developing a relationship with that source. The responsibility to guide this congregation is no small matter. Our governance isn't a matter of personal preference or taste. We have contested elections every year. Discerning who to vote for is a serious business. While all are qualified and worthy through the fact of their nomination, there is still discerning if this is the right time for them to step into leadership. Congregational votes can have serious consequences. The decision to build Emerson Community Hall was made by congregational vote. How many of you participated in making that decision? The consequences for the life of this congregation have been huge.

Holding power, as each member does, requires, maybe even demands, developing one's inner life and capacity for wise discernment. And this work is just what ministers long to do with their congregational members.

Balancing the power and authority of ministers, leaders and members in congregations has no perfect solution. Historically, this congregation hasn't always had such a good balance. Let's celebrate today the great job we're doing here to find that balance. Let's ask why, not to inflate our egos but to learn, to grow and to develop. I think we have something to share with others. I think we have something now I'd like us to preserve for the future flourishing of this congregation and those who come after us.

Benediction

Each of us has been a sheep
 for each of us was once a helpless lamb.
Each of us will be a shepherd
 for each of us tends the vulnerable.

May we tend the flock before us with care,
May we tend them in good grazing land and rich pasture,
May we bind up the injured and strengthen the weak,
May we tend the flock
 entrusted to our care
 with love and justice.