

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

9.14.14 Sermon: “Betrayal of Faith”

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

There are times when questions of faith spontaneously arise. Imagine:

- An anxious patient with a troubling symptom hearing the doctor say, "You have cancer." and her world will never be the same again.
- A tired parent sitting by the bed of a child with a serious illness or a crippling birth defect who wonders why this beautiful little being has received this curse; a curse that may limit their ability to enjoy a full life.
- An alcoholic stops outside a liquor store noticing a sale on their favorite vodka. A gambler hears someone winning a jackpot. A porn addict sees the image of an attractive woman appear on his screen and feels the urge to visit a triple-X web site. As they feel the compulsion come up, they wonder if their faith in a higher power will satisfy their thirst ... enough ... to turn away from their addictive behavior for one more day.

These are the moments of vulnerability that come with being human, that come with the awareness of our mortality. As citizens in a free society, we have a lot of choice about how we live, how we face adversity, and make meaning in our lives in the face of death. And when we come face to face with death, we are often the most vulnerable.

Clergy know this and some take advantage of that vulnerability. How many of you have been at a funeral or a memorial service and heard a eulogy with a call to come to Jesus as your personal savior. With a gleam in his eye, the preacher will exhort you saying, It's not too late to save yourself from eternal damnation because of that disease of Original Sin; that venereal disease your mother and father infected you with at conception.

Many of us here would take major offense at such a suggestion in that setting. And many of us would have our skeptic engaged. After all, where is this hell anyway? Not in some underworld lair yet to be discovered. And I haven't heard any news reports of angels outside the windows of jet airplanes passing through clouds. And what about this “eternal soul” that would be suffering in hell? Just where does it reside in our body, like a little homunculus at the controls of our brains?

But who knows? Maybe the Fundamentalist Christians are right and we will suffer eternally without taking Jesus as our personal savior. The stakes are pretty high after all, if eternal torment might be our fate. Pascal wagered your best bet was converting, whether you believe or not, since the eternal benefit after death trumped any temporary intellectual discomfort in this life.

Sadly, science can't help us sort all this out either. It can only generate answers through empirical experiments and eternity can't be measured or quantified. Physics, mathematics and philosophy depend on human consciousness for their creation and application but cannot transcend it. The nature of what exists, what is true, is far greater than what our minds can imagine.

So we're stuck with this vulnerability that cannot be removed. There are vitally important choices we must make in our lives, with incomplete information to make those choices.

We've got to put our trust in that which cannot be proved absolutely.

In the religious world that promises answers to life's most persistent questions, those answers usually come via three sources: a prophet, a revelation to the prophet, and a community that perpetuates the memory of that prophet and the prophet's teachings. The presumption is the prophets are somehow more connected to truth than we are. They are either selected by God to receive direct transmission of truth as Moses was on Mount Sinai, or Mohammed was praying in a mountain cave in the vicinity of Mecca, or they are actually an incarnation of God as Jesus' followers claimed (and the Unitarians disputed). The Prophet's revelation is special because it points to the absolute truth that was revealed to the prophet. Once prophets die (and maybe came back to life in Jesus' case) the community that gathered around them organized the transmission of their memory and their message. Without the prophet, there could be no revelation. Without the community of devoted followers there would be no preservation and transmission of that revelation.

These prophets have promised that by believing their revelation and following the practices they and their community have defined, that vulnerability that life can thrust upon us, deeply embedded in the human condition, can be resolved. Many have happily said yes and accepted this offer of eternal security and reward. Others have grown up in these traditions and never questioned them, taking the assurance of salvation for granted.

Unfortunately, all three of these sources of faith can be betrayed. None of them turn out to be absolutely reliable.

The revelation that comes to a prophet is relevant to a specific time and place, in the context of a culture and a language. The meaning of that revelation erodes the greater the distance from the place, the longer the time afterward and without knowledge of the cultural context. It erodes further without knowing the individual personalities and the poetry and metaphor of the original language. We know a little of the problem when we share a story with a friend who shares it with another person and then it is passed around and around so when the story gets back to us, it is completely unrecognizable as what was originally said.

Oral tradition is notorious for its additions, embellishments and corrections. Even when the revelations were written down, errors crept into the ancient copying process that affected the meanings. Reminds me of the joke about a scriptural reference directing monks to be celibate; What the text actually said, before the copying error, was that they should “celebrate life” rather than lead a “celibate life.”

Revelation is also frozen in the science and technology of the day. Scientific advances invalidate the creation story in Genesis. We don't need humanity to go forth and multiply anymore. That's now the source of most of the world's problems. The ancient prophets didn't know the biology of how babies are made. We know that men are not planting their seeds in women's wombs. First century agriculture is a poor metaphor for how reproduction works. And it isn't a good model for anchoring the roles of women or understanding human sexuality and who should be allowed to get married. Nor is it a good civic model for a democratic, egalitarian society because it assumes kingship and slavery.

What about the prophets themselves, the sources of these revelations? Were they completely perfect and reliable? Moses didn't want the job of leading his people out of Egypt, Jesus didn't have much time on earth and we have precious little of what probably came from his mouth and Mohammed had his problems that I don't want to talk about publicly at the risk of being accused of defaming the Prophet, blessed be his name.

The most serious betrayals come from those who speak in the prophet's name and defame them by abusing their words as a way to gain influence and power for themselves. I doubt I need to spend much energy persuading you of this possibility. I think I need only mention names like Jimmy Swaggart and Jerry Falwell and rest my case.

And that example highlights the flaws of the communities, the institutions that arose to preserve the memory of the prophet and perpetuate the teachings. Once created, institutions take on a life of their own that is independent of their creators, a life that wants to perpetuate itself. The Catholic Church is being exposed for its covered up of sexual abuse by priests. Lest we think this is only a Catholic problem, sexual abuse is hardly a stranger to other religious organizations. I know how hard our Unitarian Universalist Association works to root out and eliminate such abuse ... and yet it still happens.

There is a lot more I could say about how religious institutions fail to live up to their aspirations and high ideals. I'm sure if you've been wounded by seeing your church teach one thing and the clergy and/or congregants do another, you have your stories to tell. I know I've heard many of them over the years from those who have come to our doors seeking refuge.

In the process of all this betrayal, people's faith can be broken. Many come to Unitarian Universalist congregations wounded, wondering if this will be a safe place for their hearts as they seek truth and meaning for their lives. And others bitterly reject religion as a way to find meaning and turn to popular culture as a solution; And some turn to sex, drugs and rock and roll.

I will assert today, relying on your common sense understanding, that materialism fails as a substitute path for truth and meaning. It fails both individually and collectively as we chew up our planet to satisfy our lust for stuff.

Materialism fails to answer the heartache of the parent at the bedside of a crippled child. It fails to satisfy the terminally ill patient. It fails most profoundly the substance abuser.

Thankfully, there is another way.

This way looks for provisional answers inwardly. It asserts that if God exists, the God found outside us will also be found within us and will be found as a unified whole. It tests and compares the answers that come from outside us with, and against, our own personal experience and understanding, independent of the existence or non-existence of God.

This way allows each individual to retain the authority to judge what is good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, and wholesome or unwholesome.

This way says relying on our inner capacity for discernment is best. It may not always be the best way, but it is ultimately better than giving our faith into the hands of another.

This way is supported by a community of "free seekers" who band together for their mutual growth and development.

This way is the way of Unitarian Universalism.

Our source of inner authority comes from acknowledging the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Because each of us is unique, the expression of that worth and dignity likely will differ from person to person. No tree will look exactly like another tree depending on where it is planted and how it grows. No nest will replicate exactly another nest. Each will still display the truth of their nature, as we reveal our worth and dignity in different ways. We need not think alike, feel alike, experience alike, to love alike, respect alike and learn alike. We have an open source faith that embraces diversity at its core.

Toward that end, in our tradition, the prophetic power of the minister is limited. The compelling power of the congregation is limited. The role of the minister and the congregational leadership is to support and inspire individual growth and development toward higher truth and deeper meaning. And both minister and congregation also have the role of challenging individual conclusions, appreciating we are all quite capable of error, and self-deception, of succumbing to the impulses of greed, hatred and delusion.

Finally we organize our congregation democratically. We make agreements together about what we value and how we will be together. We celebrate and follow our shared values rather than our shared beliefs.

The result is a religious tradition with limited institutional power and authority; limited ministerial power and authority; and openness to both ancient and modern sources of truth and meaning that radically respects individual autonomy. It makes no promise of escape from feelings of vulnerability, but it does make a few promises. Our congregation:

- Promises to welcome everyone;
- Promises to be a place where we freely seek truth and deeper meaning;
- Promises to pursue justice
- Promises to cultivate compassion
- Promises to cultivate love for the world.

The result of these promises is a limit to the risk of betrayal of faith but not its elimination. Unitarian Universalism has a very good method for balancing the risk and reward of communal religious life.

It works for me, it works for the members of this congregation, and I hope it will work for those who are guests with us today, considering whether they would like this congregation to be their religious home.