

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

9.28.14 Sermon: "A Second Chance?"

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

Everyone deserves a second chance.

I am able to serve as a credentialed Unitarian Universalist minister because I got a second chance.

To get one's ministerial credentials, the jargon we use is, "becoming a fellowshipped minister," one must be reviewed by the Unitarian Universalist Association's Ministerial Fellowship Committee. That review process, includes reading a long list of books, filling out an elaborate grid showing one's life experience, seminary and non-seminary training, doing an internship and serving in a clinical pastoral setting, When all this is finished, the ministerial candidate must meet with the MFC in person. At that meeting, the candidate preaches a 10 minute sermon and answers questions from each committee member. At the end of the interview, the candidate is ushered out and the MFC decides whether that person will be accepted into preliminary fellowship ... or not. They have several choices besides yes. They can say yes with a list of conditions to satisfy. They can say no, with a list of conditions to satisfy and invite the candidate to come back for another interview. Or they can say no, and we don't want to see you again.

I was signed up to see them in the beginning of 1990 in Berkeley, California. I felt quite confident that I would sail through without any problems. My friends and teachers thought so too. What I hadn't expected was how nervous I would be when I walked through the door, shook hands with the committee members and began my sermon. Something was off and I clutched. My mind went blank. I couldn't remember answers to some of their questions and must have looked very anxious as I replied. In my self-confidence, I hadn't expected the stress of having the rest of my life hang in the balance of their judgment would affect me in such a disruptive way. As I walked out, I knew I was in trouble. The committee gave me a soft no because of their confusion. There was a big disconnect between who they saw in the room and who they read about and who they thought I was. They gave me some things to do and asked me to come back.

Less than a year later, I saw the committee again, and everything went splendidly. At the end the second interview, the members of the committee remarked that it felt like they were seeing a different person, the one they had expected to see from what they had read about me in the materials I submitted. I got a second chance and I was able to prove that I have the ministerial presence to do the job.

Second chances are really important. And they come in many different ways.

Some of us have been offered a second chance in our doctor's office. In a routine physical, our cholesterol or blood pressure may be too high, maybe we've gained some weight, maybe our fasting blood sugar numbers aren't good, and the doctor sits down with us and gives us the ultimatum. Change your lifestyle, exercise and eating habits or your life could be in danger. Some of us got that lecture after having a damaging heart attack. With a stern look, the doctor will say, "This is your second chance to live a more healthy life. You may not get a third chance."

A more extreme version of this ultimatum may arise from within a person in the thralls of substance abuse. When the addict hits bottom, the ultimatum may be "make a change or die." That ultimatum comes from some mysterious place, something from deep within, call it God, or Spirit, or the momentum of billions of years of evolution, whatever that force is, it shakes the addict enough to turn away from substance abuse and seek help. They realize that by themselves they do not have the ability to make that change, but with a higher power they can. Those who do make the change in their life to start moving away from their addictive behavior, express gratitude for getting a second chance at life.

The ones who yearn strongly for a second chance are those who have been incarcerated. Whether trapped in the cycle of addiction, absorbed into a violent gang, tempted by desire for what others have or just to survive, time in prison can help clear the head and straighten out their lives. I visited a young man in our county jail a few years ago who had been sent there after several DWI's. Prison was a big wake up call for him to deal with a number of bad choices he'd made, particularly some of his not-so-good friends. I remember the passion he had for wanting a second chance to prove himself to his parents, his girlfriend and to society.

The problem with our criminal justice system though is it isn't well set-up for second chances. Too often the supports aren't there when people are released from jail. They don't get help to find a place to live, get a job, go to school, and become a contributing member of society. And there are many ways to make a small mistake and end up back in jail when you are on parole.

These ex-cons deserve more support than they get. After all, how many of us have followed the laws exactly. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but how many here have driven over the speed limit? How many have parked illegally? How many have J walked ... in the last week. I hope no one has cheated on their taxes. >>>

What about smoked marijuana? There are young people of African descent, I remind you, doing 25 years to life for that crime. Has your skin privilege prevented this ... or has your lack of skin privilege endangered you?

Well, our common human vulnerability to stray from the way of the Lord, so to speak, makes the Jonah such an engaging story. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and he goes the other way. Jonah must know that running away from God's directive isn't a wise choice, but he does it anyway. Of course, God doesn't let him get away with it and stops the ship with a storm. Jonah's lack of courage to do God's will causes great distress to everyone around him as they empty the hold of cargo hoping to save the ship. And does he care about their distress? No. The captain finds him fast asleep below deck. Today we might say, Jonah was in serious denial.

Jonah only takes responsibility when they draw lots. When he gets the short straw it is obvious that he is the source of the problem. Still, the crew doesn't want to throw him overboard but finally they realize that is their only option.

God isn't done with Jonah so God sends a fish that rescues him from drowning. In the belly of the fish, Jonah finally figures out that he isn't going to be able to run away. Jonah prays for forgiveness. God commands the fish to spit him up on the shore. Then God gives Jonah a second chance. This time, Jonah goes to Nineveh to preach against them as God had commanded.

The story of Jonah is commonly used during the Days of Awe for inspiration as Jews are repenting their sins of the past year and asking for forgiveness from each other. Jonah's impulse to run away is one that is far too common in human relationships. Feelings get hurt in relationship. Rather than apologize and ask for forgiveness, too often the one who causes offense is silent and the other person becomes resentful. In this sort of relationship breakdown, there isn't an offer of a second chance to get it right.

This happens a lot in families. It happens most often when the emotions are high and results in a disconnection. Effective communication stops happening because of the power of anger. I know I've sometimes preferred to nurse my anger against someone rather than try to work out my disconnection and give the other person a second chance. What I may not realize in that moment of self-righteousness is the harm I am doing to myself by not striving for reconciliation and offering a second chance to mend the relationship.

What is lost when anger is frozen in our hearts like this is the life giving power of offering a second chance. I am inspired by the selfless love of those who rescue children and animals who have been abandoned, giving them a second chance. People like my cousin John who has given 49 gallons of blood. He donated one of his kidneys to a woman he knew who was dying of kidney failure. I was there with his wife and his mother, my aunt, as he was going through the transplant procedure. I'm not sure whether or not I could do that for someone I didn't know. I hope I could do it for someone I did. Giving someone a second chance, in a small way or a big one, and watching that person use that chance well, survive and thrive can be deeply meaningful.

The last kind of second chance I'd like to talk about isn't a personal one. It is the kind of second chance that humanity needs.

Could those of you who were at the Peoples Climate March in New York City last Sunday, stand up and be recognized? Thank you for stimulating our awareness of a need for change in our relationship with our planet.

I dearly hope there isn't anyone here who doesn't believe that humans are having a devastating impact on our planet. Some of that impact can be recognized in the steady rise in carbon dioxide and other even more dangerous greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Some of that impact can be seen in the extinction of species. The latest one coming to our attention is the steeply declining Monarch Butterfly population migrating to Mexico. The endangered species list continues to climb, only getting smaller as species go extinct. The PH of oceans is slowly rising as carbon dioxide slowly dissolves in the sea water. This creates a threat to every sea creature that has a shell. The transition of our food production to factory farms that treat animals inhumanely; The huge amounts of toxic effluent generated by these methods that threaten our water and soil. The danger to our water supply by faulty well casings used for fracking oil and gas; are all examples of the trouble we are causing that threatens the wellbeing of all species on our planet, except maybe cock roaches.

I need not go on, we all know the damage seven billion of us are doing to our planet as we create and maintain a style of life to which we have become accustomed. A lifestyle we broadcast to the world, feeding their desire to live like Americans and Europeans do, accelerating the threat.

And these problems are compounded by what Europeans have done to each other and those around the world. European enslavement of Africans, the policy of genocide by the American Government against Native Americans that started with the Doctrine of Discovery, European and American oppression in Central and South America, Jim Crow policies of mass incarceration, exploitation of countries to extract their resources from Tea and Opium grown in Asia to oil in the Middle East, to chocolate and coffee in the developing world. Some of the worst crimes are the legacies of hatred between ethnic groups left behind when the colonizers leave as seen between Sinhala and Tamil peoples in Sri Lanka.

We, in the developed world, who are responsible for so many of these problems need to wake up to what we've been doing and ask for a second chance to choose a new direction. It isn't anything we can do as individuals, but it is something we can demand from our governments who represent us. We can make a commitment to express our desire for our country to be a good global citizen dedicated to building a sustainable world community with peace and justice for all. The way we must express that desire is by voting for candidates who will support this agenda.

If we do indeed choose a new direction as a country, asking for a second chance, I wouldn't blame the rest of the world if they were a little skeptical of us. Alison Bryant had a great blog on allwomenstalk.com about whether to forgive another person and resume a relationship with her or him. As she points out, there are times when couples break up and do successfully come back together.

What allows relationships to be repaired between individuals is good guidance for what allows communities to heal. First and foremost, there needs to be genuine repentance. The other needs to recognize the harm they have done, regret the action, be willing to make amends and promise to not do so in the future. The other needs to demonstrate that there has been some maturation that has happened through the process of repentance. The other needs to show that they have learned a lesson from that process. Finally, there needs to be confidence in the goodness at the heart of the person or persons who have harmed us. Recognition of our common humanity, our mutual inherent worth and dignity is critical to facilitating the change of heart that allows us to offer and accept a second chance.

Whether we are striving to solve the world's problems or get a second chance to deal with our own, May we get our names written for another year in the Book of Life.

All of us deserve at least a second chance to get it right. Maybe this year we will.

Copyright (c) 2014 by Samuel A. Trumbore. All rights reserved.