

“Gathering Truth & the Good”

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It is the weekend of Labor Day. Traditionally, this is a time when our thoughts turn towards in-gathering, towards reconnecting within the community. Next Sunday we will have our water and stone communion in which we will bring objects - stone or water - and we will share some of the events which have shaped our lives over the past several months. So today is kind of a way to draw to a close the summer. It's a threshold between that which is past and that which is about to commence.

Many of us have been very busy this summer. We have read magazines and newspapers, watched the news; perhaps seen a movie or two. Perhaps we went to see *Fahrenheit 911*, or *Outfoxed*. Perhaps we read a book like *The DaVinci Code*. Perhaps we have watched the news and heard candidates sling mud at each other and smear each other's war records. In these books, movies, stories, there is a common theme. It is a theme of truth and a theme you trust. It's actually a very old theme, a precious theme, a crucial theme. Not just in politics, fiction and literature, but also in religion. If you consider some of the stories in scripture, you will hear, for example, the story of Adam, Eve and the serpent. The story goes that God crafted a man and a woman. They are in a garden. They are given a commandment and yet, a serpent speaks to the woman, and the woman trusts the serpent. If you'll pardon the phrase, all hell breaks loose as a result.

There is a story elsewhere in scripture, the story of Solomon, how he is known for his great wisdom, because he could discern what was true, what was real. There is a story that is told how the queen of Sheba came one time and presented him with two plants, one manufactured and the other real. Holding them out a distance, the wise king was asked to tell, which was real and which was false. If you know the story, you know that a bee flew to the real plant and that was a signal to the wise king that the one was real. Because he could discern true from false, he is known as Solomon the Wise.

In the age of prophets, whether we're talking about Amos or Jesus or Buddha, often it was considered not enough to hear the prophetic voice. A prophet needed to get proof that he had God's favor and so people who heard the prophet looked for miracles. So many stories abound in the literature of the world of all the great prophets, Buddha, Jesus, you name the prophet - if he or she lived in ancient times, more often than not, many miracles are attributed to that person. That was the proof: if truly you came from the holy, if you had God's favor, you must be able to work miracles. No miracles, obviously God did not favor you.

In our own day, we have acquired many, many volumes, a treasure trove of scriptures from all over the world. Many of them have remarkable stories. Many of them are filled with miracle stories. In an earlier age and even among some of our cousins today in other churches, miracles are considered proof of God's favor. It is considered a sign that this person spoke the truth. In the liberal religious movement, though, going back 200 years, that test of truth was called into question. In the first great Unitarian sermon delivered on this continent in 1819, William Ellery Channing described what the liberal faith entailed. He described a faith where miracles were no longer necessary to prove something true or false. In his first sermon, sometimes called *Unitarian Christianity*, he leads with a quote from Paul, in a letter to Thessalonians. The scriptural passage says, "Prove all things! Holdfast, that

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which is good.” That really has been the motto, if you will, of the liberal movement for the last two centuries. “Prove all things! Holdfast, that which is good.”

There are some people who would say, “But wait a minute! There’s tradition!” Some religious communities are found upon tradition and it is imperative that the tradition be passed from one generation to the next, intact. Nothing added; nothing lost. Those communities are very distinct, very different from the liberal communities. In our tradition - if you can call it as such - it is tradition that is based upon change. It is evolving with each person who comes into the movement. It evolves with each person who leaves. So each generation has a different concept of what it means to be a religious liberal. If, for example, we could bring back someone like Channing or Emerson, give them a place of honor here in the sanctuary, they might be rather baffled because it would be very different from the experience they had when they were alive, when they were in a liberal church. But that is the way it must be, because we believe in open revelation. Things change. Understanding change. So we must change with them.

It opens the question: where is the source of authority? I mentioned earlier the word “real”, and often, I will use the word “real” as synonymous with the word “truth”, “truthful”. The word “real” actually comes from the Spanish *real*, which means “royal”. If something came from the monarchy, bearing the stamp of a king or a queen, you knew that it was authentic. It had merit. It had weight. It was royal. It was real. It was something to be listened to. In our tradition of the west, that is how many things are looked at. If something is passed onto us and it has a stamp of authority, it is considered real. It is considered true. In many communities, it is accepted without question. God help you if you ask a question! Time and time again, talking with members of this congregation or people of this community, I’ve talked with people, who, when they tell their story, of how they left a particular faith community and came to this one, they will make a comment like, “I talked to minister. I asked him a question. He gave the wrong answer.” Or, “I had questions that could not be...” (Tape ends)...but not unquestioning loyalty. If something is passed down to us from the previous generation, it is for us, the living, to look at that, examine it, determine is it relevant? Is it real? Is it truthful? Does it speak the truth to us today? That really is the tension between liberals and conservatives, and even between liberals within our own movement, because there are many competing truths. Where some people see blue, others will see red. Some people see god, other people see nature. There is much room for discussion and that’s what we do best. We discuss. Hopefully it is something that we will always do. It shows that we are using our critical faculties to examine the claims of authority and to determine what is going to be welded to us in our lives and what is of value to pass on to our children.

I find it interesting that people usually do not examine their faith and ask what is true until some calamity befalls them. If you win the lottery, if something spectacular happens to you, you don’t hear people saying, “Where was God?” If you win the lottery, usually you hear people giving thanks to God. Or maybe it’s a ball game, it’s a softball game, like you were talking about. You won, so God was on our side! You hear that a lot from the world. When things go well, when things are going good, obviously, if you believe in God and use that word, God must be on your side. Or at least you must be in favor with the Divine. But when things go bad - for example, Craig and Carol were talking about their daughter - when things go bad: all of your belongings suddenly disappear; when a hurricane sweeps through your neighborhood and destroys your home or a tornado; survivors of the Holocaust ask the question: Where was God? I’m sure in Russia today, the survivors and their families are asking, “Where was God?”

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It's in those dark moments. That's when our faith is shaken. The other day I spoke to a young woman who described the crisis of her faith. It happened when she was a young girl. There was a minister that was a mentor to her that fought the world. He died a very untimely death. That for her was proof that there could not be a god, at least not a good and loving god that worked for the universe. Time and time again I hear stories like that, along those same lines. It's when calamity falls, that's when people question their faith and ask, "What is true? Where is God?"

I think that there are certain basic presumptions that many people have about the Divine. Not necessarily so much within this company, but within the world at large. I think for many people their notion of God is that it's a cosmic Santa Claus. It's "Santa Claus" writ large across the universe. When you're good, you're rewarded. If something bad happens to you, you lose your job. You get HIV. You're homeless. Well, obviously you did something to deserve that. If you look at many public policies, you see that behind that, there's that notion lurking. It's not often expressed there, but there is the notion that if something bad happens to you, somehow you had it come and it's just God's way of paying you back. I would like to think that most religious liberals who have wrestled with the notion of god, with some of the great issues, have moved much further beyond that basic concept of god as Santa Claus.

We are concerned, deeply concerned with the notion of truth. In our chalice lighting this morning, and most Sunday mornings, we begin with the words, "This flame affirms the light of truth." We put it first. It must be important. What is truth? It's an imposing, daunting question. It's a question that people have been asking for centuries, if not since the beginning of time. It's a question that has gained notoriety. If you'll remember back to the Christian scriptures, Pontius Pilate, as he washes his hands and gives up Jesus to the executor, says, "What is truth?" Nonetheless, it remains a daunting question and a question that we must ask.

When we ask this question, we arrive at different answers. The answers that we seek are not simplistic. They are not always black and white; oft times, they are shades of grey. I'm reminded that back in the middle ages, there was a classic debate among Christian theologians. Many, the orthodox, adopted the view that, in order to understand, I must first believe. In other words, tell me what I need to know about God and the universe. Let me memorize it. Once I have that core of knowledge, then I will interpret the world events.

Apparently, that still works for many of our neighbors. But for most religious liberals, we have followed another path, a path less followed. It is a path that was first expressed, to my knowledge, by a gentleman named Dunn Scottis. He said, "I understand that I may believe. I understand first, and belief flows from there." This is really the path that most liberals follow. It's a minority view in the world. I mentioned the road less followed. It's a road filled with the spirit of inquiry in good faith and I think that most of us are comfortable with that path. It's not to say that it's the better of the two paths, but it is to say that it is one of two ways to approach truth, knowledge, understanding and perhaps even wisdom.

We choose what is true. We choose our path. The word "choice" in ancient Greek was *heretic*. We are heretics. Get comfortable with that word. We are heretics. We are those who choose. Originally, there was no stigma attached to the word "heretic" or "heresy". It simply meant a person who could weigh competing planes about truth and then chose the one that made the most sense to him or to her. Needless to say, this has not always been popular in the world, certainly not in the west. The bonfires of thousands of women and men, over the last 2,000 years, have dotted the plains of Europe and this continent. In some parts of the

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world, people are still actively persecuted, those who choose. You might say that there is much unfinished business for us liberals to do.

So we come to consider the notion of truth. While the truth be told, truth doesn't carry quite the same weight that it used to, among us. By this I refer specifically to our claims about theological truths, insights from the divine. It is probable, within our sanctuary, some will believe in a personal god, while the person sitting next to you does not. Some will use words like "God". Some may use a specific name for that entity. Some will describe it as "lord" and "lady". Some might be content to speak of yin and yang. There is a great percent of diversity within this sanctuary. Some others might refer to the notion of the divine as archaic and harmful, better, they might say, to follow the scientific path. I had a fellow student in seminary who drew his inspiration from ancient Egypt. He composed a poem one time. It was an invocation to Isis. He presented to our Arts Administry class and we were all supposed to chant in unison. I, the religious humanist, found the words catching in my throat. I believe all in diversity. I believe in religious toleration. But as I told him afterwards, I didn't give up God the father to embrace God the mother. There are many here who have given up much to embrace the faith that they've inherited. Many of us are still seeking. We have something that we hold onto now, but we're still seeking to explain that. More importantly, and this is an interesting characteristic about many liberals, it's making that truth relevant to us in the here and now. Because the here and now for most of us is what's really real. That's where the truth will be found.

I'm mindful that when we speak of religious matters, many people will talk about certain things, in particular, salvation. For many denominations, salvation is everything, and if you don't get the point, we'll thunder the pulpit. We'll thump on the bible and we'll say that Jesus tells you to believe this or God wants you to do this. There is the claim from authority. It's not just me telling you. I have the whole weight of authority behind me, pointing this finger and saying, "You must believe. You must act this way." And for what? Well, they're a little vague. There are some sketchy pictures about heaven and hell. Usually the pictures of heaven are much sketchier. The stories about hell are extremely graphic.

A philosopher by the name of Pascal listened to those competing claims as to whether there was an afterlife or that there was none. He said, "Well, let's approach this mathematically. You live your life and then you die. You know you're going to die. Well, if there is no afterlife, you haven't lost anything. If there is an afterlife and there is a heaven and hell, you could be tormented for all eternity! That's a pretty big risk!" So his wager, as it's called, Pascal's Wager, let's assume for the sake of argument that there is an afterlife, there is a heaven and hell, just in case, we'll keep our fingers crossed! Well, that particular wager has been condemned by the orthodox as unholy. I think in a lot of people's minds, that's something close to the mark, on how they approach the notion of heaven and hell.

The notion of salvation is approached very differently, depending on your upbringing. Let me mention something about Bertrand Russell. In his book, *Why I'm Not a Christian*, which for me was the gospel as I was growing up, he wrote that many people approach this notion of salvation very differently. You can differentiate between those who were raised Protestant and those who were raised Catholic. Bertrand Russell wrote, "Any person who has much contact with free-thinking people of different countries must be struck by the remarkable difference between those of Catholic and Protestant origin, however much they imagine that they have thrown off the theology that they were taught in their youth. Protestants," says Russell, "from the first have been distinguished from their opponents by what they do not believe. Moral fervor is the essence of the man. To the Protestant, the exceptionally good

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person is the one who opposes the authority and the received doctrines, and thus, the Protestant conception of goodness is something individual and isolated.” Let’s translate that.

If you are raised Protestant and you become a free-thinker, a Protestant’s Protestant, odds are you’re reacting against authority as all good Protestant’s should and you’re searching for salvation as an individual. Never mind about the rest of the people; they’re all going to hell! But you, you have that unique relationship with the divine and you’re going to make it. You’re going to cross through those pearly gates.

Bertrand goes on: “The Catholic has quite a different conception of virtue, a conception that is far more social and makes the rent far more greater when he or she severs his connection with the church.” In essence, Russell’s point is, and I believe it’s a valid one, is that people who were raised in a Protestant tradition strive for that solitary salvation, one on one, individual with the divine. Someone who was raised in a Catholic, Episcopalian or Jewish tradition, which are more social religions where community is much more important, is going to seek a form of salvation connected with community. I think that most UUs tend to move in that other direction. If we speak of salvation, we’re not talking about the great beyond. No. We tend to talk about salvation among people, here in the present, making the world a better place. That’s one of the reason why so many churches have such a strident view on social action and social justice. “We’ve got to save the world!” is the gospel preached from most pulpits in liberal religious communities. We must save the world.

I think that’s part of who we are. We can’t really escape it. Some of us in our spiritual paths might pursue something more solitary, at least part time. But most of us, if we are going to say that our faith is a valid one, if it’s true, if it’s authentic and genuine, have to have that component of connecting with community and making the world a better place. There are many traditions that embrace both extremes. Are they both valid? Well certainly monks, ascetics, would say that theirs is authentic and that they have a certain mystical union with the divine. Also people who strive for a more communal connection and a more communal salvation, they also assert with equal force, that theirs offers much. Perhaps both are valid paths. In this community, that is much more our way.

Next Sunday, we’re going to have a communion. “Communion” comes from the word “communal”, the world, with the world. It is a sharing of the individual with the community, much like we do with our joys and concerns. The individual comes forward, shares something that becomes part of the communal pool of knowledge and empathy. Next Sunday, we will share stones and water, and we will be connecting with one another and also with many other churches which will be following that same ritual next Sunday. Communion is important to us, not just prayer, not talking about the great beyond, but connecting with one another because it counts, because our lives counts, what we think counts. I think that as we search for truth, now and in the seasons to come, our focus will be focused on communion, on the community, on saving the world.

With this notion, I invite you to examine your beliefs. Examine how your sense of the holy molds how you relate to your self, to the person sitting next to you, to the universe at large. Whether you seek salvation as a solitary practitioner and believe that it’s a sacred journey, or as one who suffers and will have made whole, I ask that you share your journey. Listen when others share their journey. You may find that your own journey has been furthered by an exchange. It is by this exchange, by this listening, that we bless one another and further the collective blessings of creation.