

## **A Living Tradition**

Sermon by Rev. Mark Evens, Associate Minister  
Birmingham Unitarian Church  
Sunday Worship, April 1, 2007  
Open House Sunday

Welcome to Unitarian Universalism.

It's always good to remember what we are about here. Having you here as special guests with us today is an extra motivation for all of us to consider afresh why we come here, and for us to think together about what difference we want this church, or any church, to make in our individual lives and in the world.

Sometimes when I tell people I am a Unitarian Universalist they say, "Oh, I've heard of that. That's the religion where you can believe what ever you want to." I find this a bit exasperating. It's not as if one can just "choose" or "decide" what to believe. That is called pretending. We know pretending is an important part of childhood but has limited applicability for the serious business of adult living.

We adults and children too, have a need to make sense of our world. We need to have some way of answering the big questions:

- Why am I here?
- What should I do with my life?
- How should I relate to other people?
- What happens when I die?
- Is there a God, or something larger than myself that I should rely on, or be faithful to, or treat with reverence?

Does it make sense if I ask you "So what do you want to believe about these questions?"

Unitarian Universalism is faith where you get to believe what you do believe. "Here you can by yourself honestly." You get to be honest with yourself, and share your answers to these questions with others here without fear of being excluded or ridiculed. Here we call each other to live lives of personal integrity. Being honest about what we believe, about how we answer life's biggest questions is an important part of that integrity.

\*\*\*\*\*

The theological diversity within the Unitarian Universalist faith is almost as great as that within the North America as a whole. (I have to be careful not to be too nationalistic this close to the Canadian border. There are Unitarian Universalist congregations in Canada and Mexico. And did you know there are Unitarian and Universalist congregations in Britain, Spain, Transylvania...India, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Africa and few other places as well?)

Our theological diversity is significant. We are humanists, agnostics, atheists, Christians, pantheists, panentheists, Wiccans who follow earth-based spiritual paths. We come here keeping connections with Jewish roots Hindu roots, Moslem roots, Zoroastrian roots and many other religious traditions.

“We believe in life, and in the strength of love...” ...true, but we do not feel the need to agree beyond this level of generality. If there is something beyond this it might be called a “meta-belief,” a belief about beliefs, that sharing and growing and living together with our diverse views is an enough of an agreement to hold us together.

While the idea of “choosing” what to believe does not make sense to me, spiritual exploration that may change my beliefs certainly does make sense to me. Spiritual exploration is something I have certainly done myself on my journey from the Catholicism in which I was raised, through agnosticism/atheism, and earth-based spiritual practices, to the panentheism and metaphorical theism and humanism where I now continue to explore.

Exploration is something we encourage in Unitarian Universalist churches. Because we do not define ourselves by what we believe, you can go exploring here and find your self with a different theology, different beliefs about the big questions, and not have to change churches, not have to find new friends.

We do not have a creed: a set of statements you have to believe and agree with to be a member here. You might have noticed the unison affirmation. In its form and unison recitation it would be a creed in many churches, which is to say, a list of shared beliefs. Here in place of a creed we list things we do and ways we are with each other and with the world.

Love is our doctrine, the quest for truth is our sacrament, service our prayer. This affirmation goes on to list more things we do as part of a covenant. We will come back to covenant later. We are a covenantal faith.

\*\*\*\*\*

I adapted the reading that Doug shared earlier because, while the values it contains are central to us, I think in its expression of them it blurs this important defining characteristic of UUism. The original was stated as a list of beliefs. “We believe in freedom of religious expression.” “We believe in the authority of reason and conscience.” Believing in freedom of religion is fine, but what is essential to being a Unitarian Universalist is participating in and defending freedom of religious expression. We covenant to “live” together this way, and yes, that probably means we do “believe in” it too, but it’s the living of it that matters most.

\*\*\*\*\*

We value the religious truths present in all the great world religions. We draw on them for our own enlightenment and teach our children to understand and appreciate the great world religions too. We don't think any one religion or only one religion has all the answers. That's why we are not known for pushing our religion on other people.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ours is a living tradition. I was conscious of this as I chose to use but adapt the first reading. We see our faith as an ongoing creative process. We look to the past for religious and spiritual wisdom, but look also to our own experiences and apply our own reason, our rational minds and adapt, change and build anew as we go. This means we use the Bible, and other ancient religious texts, but selectively, in the light of our own questions and our own experiences. We use ancient religious texts but we also use the findings of modern science. We like to say we take the Bible seriously but not literally.

We like to say that revelation is not sealed. By this we mean that new spiritual truths are being written and shared today by our poets, song writers, philosophers, social critics and scientists.

\*\*\*\*\*

We like to explore spiritually and we sometimes need to range far and wide in our seeking, but, in tension with this, we also need to stay in one place and deepen spiritually. What good does it do to know a little about many religious traditions and practices if we do not stick with any one of them long enough to experience the depth and transforming power that sometimes only comes with discipline?

We are, more and more these days, seeing the value of not just spiritual exploration, but also of "spiritual excavation." Many of you do this deepening by practicing a spiritual discipline. Some of you practice Tai Chi here at the church or meditation. Some of us sing in the choir, which for me, at least, is a spiritual practice. We keep dream journals, or regular journals. We spend time in nature with our hearts open to awe and gratitude, and read and consider the meaning of new scientific discoveries. We contemplate sacred texts on our own and together in classes and small group fellowships.

\*\*\*\*\*

In our small group fellowships we also use modern poems, spiritual questions, or topics from current events, or common life events as a focus for mindful discussions. Lay facilitators help these groups be faithful to a covenant they have created themselves describing how they will be with one another to help bring forth all voices in the group so we can learn the contours of each other's hearts, and better know the capacities of our own souls. In this small group process there is something I experience as wondrous mystery, as contact with the Divine.

\*\*\*\*\*

We deepen too through taking action and living out our values in the world in challenging and easy ways big and small.

There was a UU woman in Nebraska, with a gay son. In 1982 the city of Lincoln, Nebraska was holding a referendum on a local gay-rights ordinance. She went in to Lincoln from the neighboring town where she lived one day to get a haircut. She says: "I went to the hairdresser's - it was kind of a "Steel Magnolias" sort of hairdresser's - and as I was getting my hair cut, people were talking about the referendum.

"They weren't being nasty, but they were definitely being negative, and I was just sitting there...I said, "Well, I guess you guys are probably glad I don't vote here, because I would definitely vote in favor of the referendum." Well, there was a little pause - maybe a long pause, actually - while they sort of went, "Eeeyew, she really said that?" But then people started - not everybody, but probably the hairdresser herself was the first to speak up, and she said, "Well, I've got a cousin who's a lesbian, and she baby-sits for my kids all the time, and they just love her." And then other people started jumping in, and the whole tone of the conversation shifted a little bit.

There was no confrontation - just a little nudge, really. But I understood that if I'd just sat there and kept my mouth shut, it probably never would have happened. With nobody to challenge them, they would have gone on and on and on." [Eileen Durgin-Clinchard, in the July/August 1994, issue of The World, pp. 25-26]

A small thing, for her to gently bring her voice into this conversation, but I imagine it helped her immensely to know that whatever happened, she could share the story of it with her UU congregation.

We need support for the brave actions we want to take that help us live out our values. These brave actions deepen us and grow our souls and make our world a better place. This congregation provides support for brave actions.

\*\*\*\*\*

This congregation, Birmingham Unitarian Church, sees itself as a sanctuary for all who face oppression due to their sexual orientation and or gender expression. We have a history of acting for social justice and social change in race relations, gender equity, environmental issues.... We often are out in front on these social issues, doing the exploration that helps the rest of society find its next step forward.

The Episcopal Church today is wrestling its way through inclusion and welcoming of gays and lesbians as priests and bishops. They have told us that the Unitarian Universalist's successful navigation of this issue and others has inspired many to know new possibilities.

You can find out about our new Green Sanctuaries environmental initiative and many of our other opportunities at the open house after worship.

\*\*\*\*\*

We are a love school.

Here we learn how to know and love ourselves, each other, and the world more effectively more whole heartedly.

\*\*\*\*\*

We are a spiritual cooperative.

We each bring ourselves, our talents, our interests, our knowledge and wisdom, and our financial resources here to share and make something bigger than ourselves that benefits us more than anything we could create or do alone.

\*\*\*\*\*

We are a spiritual gym: a place of gathered resources, including peers and experts, to help us with the discipline that spiritual exploration and excavation that spiritual deepening sometimes requires.

\*\*\*\*\*

We are a spiritual think tank, foundation, and venture capital salon, that discerns, equips, and mobilizes us to act on our values to make a positive difference in the world and grow our own souls in the process.

\*\*\*\*\*

This is your church, or could be.

Is it a place you want to commit or recommit your energies, invest your hopes? We will not push you. There are as many valid spiritual paths as there are people. We give each other room to decide for ourselves.

We don't choose what we believe but we choose where we spend our time and where we spend our time changes us.

Here is this week's homework: Two questions--ask yourself:

    "What do I want from my church?" and

    "What do I want my church to ask of me?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Here "We trust each other, accept each other."

Let us join together in “being kind to each other,  
true to each other” and living out the best values  
we can name.

May the power of creative love touch each of us this week.

May we find good work for our hands and hearts.

May we have friends who stay with us in our choices.

May we have faith that life is always good.

Amen.

**Benediction:**

May the Love which overcomes all differences  
which heals all wounds,  
which puts to flight all fears,  
which reconciles all who are separated  
be in us and among us  
now and always.

(#694 ~ Fredrick E. Gillis)

Amen and blessed be.