

Sermon: “Do You Have Religion?”
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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato
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Readings

“An Eternal Verity” W. Waldemar W. Argow

Ancient as the home is the temple;
Ancient as the workbench is the altar.

Ancient as the sword is the sacrificial fire;
Ancient as the soldier is the priest.

Older than written language is spoken prayer;
Older than painting is the thought of a nameless one.

Religion is the first and last –
The universal language of the human heart.

Differing words describe the outward appearance of things;
Diverse symbols represent that which stands beyond and within.

Yet every person’s hunger is the same,
And heart communicates with heart.

Ever the vision leads on with many gods or with one,
With a holy land washed by ocean waters,
Or a holy land within the heart.

In temperament we differ,
Yet we are dedicated to one august destiny;
Creeds divide us,
But we share a common quest.

Because we are human,
We shall ever build our altars;
Because each has a holy yearning,
We offer everywhere our prayers and anthems.

For an eternal verity abides beneath diversities;
We are children of one great love,
United in our one eternal family.

“A Prophetic Vision” Dana McLean Greeley

It is religion that adds dignity to life.
 I want a rebirth of religion for the sake of that dignity.
 We need to dream great dreams and to be dedicated to them,
 And to know that life is sacred,
 And to live heroically and courageously,
 And to love others.
 Religion is born with us when we are born.
 It cannot atrophy; only its forms can decay.
 Religion is a prophetic vision and the joy of life.
 I pray that we may more and more know ourselves
 And share together that vision and that joy.

Sermon “Do You Have Religion?”

There is a popular newsletter column which circulates through our congregations from time to time. Written by my colleague Peter Lee Scott, it offers suggestions for how to know when to call the minister for an appointment. There are the obvious moments: when you are planning to be married or divorced; when you wish to dedicate your child; when you would like to make suggestions about the programs of the church; or when someone close to you has died or is critically ill. Then there are the less obvious reasons, which are just as worthy: call your minister when you don't know her, but would like to; when you are pregnant and are glad you are, or wish you weren't; when you want specific resources for your spiritual growth; or when you feel that something important is going on in your life, but you don't quite know how to give it a name or what it might mean. It is a good list, an important list, and each minister who offers it to their congregation as a reminder personalizes it with additions and subtractions of their own.

Recently it crossed my desk again, but with a new twist. Marilyn Sewell, minister of one of our largest congregations at the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon, has added a new section at the end, entitled: “When not to call the minister.” Needless to say, I was intrigued. It was a good list, too. Don't call the minister, she suggests, when you want to give her the “real scoop” on another congregant; when you want to explain that you'll have to lower your pledge because you plan a trip to Europe next year; or when you want to tell her that you didn't like what she wore in the pulpit last Sunday. But at the very bottom was one last suggestion that really hit home for me: don't call your minister when you want to clarify that one of the reasons you are a Unitarian Universalist is that you have always distrusted organized religion (she's *trying* to be organized and she *is* religious).

If I had one dollar for every time a Unitarian Universalist has declared their anti-organized religion stance to me, I'd be rich beyond my imagination! But what amazes me even more, is that the irony of the situation usually escapes these honest, well-meaning

people. There they are, a signed member, an active participant, maybe even a committee chair or a board trustee of a Unitarian Universalist congregation standing in animated conversation with a real, live, ordained and fellowshipped Unitarian Universalist minister – but organized religion? Oh, no, they want no part of it at all. What could I possibly be thinking?

There is a rather large, often unexamined assumption hidden in this stance, and that is the assumption that the alternatives to organized religion can do no harm. For me, this is one assumption that I am not willing to take on blind faith. The first and most obvious alternative is simply to have no religious life of any kind, either personal or institutional. In religious language, this is called choosing the secular life. To choose the secular life is to be devoted to things of a worldly nature, explicitly choosing not to live in relationship to sacred things.

It is a fair choice. I know many people who are satisfied to live this way, but like any path, there are both benefits and dangers. The greatest danger comes when in fact we are not satisfied, and seek to fill the void in our lives with destructive substitutes for meaning: materialism, fadism, addiction, or violence, to name only a few. A lesser danger is that we will choose to live with an unmet hunger. I think of the many couples, who are not members of a church, who come into my office seeking my presence at a wedding or a child dedication, because somehow the blessing of a judge or a doctor is not quite enough. I think of the wide-ranging conversations I have had on airplanes, buses, or in shopping lines with people who have discovered I am a minister and are eager to engage in dialogue about their spiritual search, because they have not found another person or community with whom to voice their questions. The challenge of the secular life is how not to confuse the trivial with true things of worth. The danger lies in finding a way to satisfy our human hunger for meaning without substituting idols that still leave us empty inside.

The second and increasingly popular alternative can be found by walking into your local bookstore and wandering into the Spirituality section (as distinct from the Religion one). There you will find a wealth of resources offering practical suggestions for how to gain the benefits of a spiritual life without the religious baggage. Frankly, I have more difficulty with this alternative, because I think much of it is false advertising. Although there are occasionally some jewels of wisdom to be found amidst the glitter, many of these authors are merely modern day spin-doctors of religious marketing. They tell people what they want to hear: that a deep spirituality can be attained without significant struggle and pain; that the right spiritual path will ensure one's worldly success; that inner peace can be obtained all on one's own. What I appreciate about the these authors is that they have brought the language of spirit and theology back into the center of our culture. What worries me is that they offer a version of religion "lite" that does not speak honestly about the complex nature of our world, and does not ask us to engage in the real work or the outward connection that will give us strength in our times of need.

So what about organized religion? To be honest with you, I have some sympathy with our historic and instinctive distrust. I would even argue that a small to medium dose of it is healthy. After all, many of us in this room are here today, because another form of organized religion failed us, or at the very least failed to speak to us at a critical point in our lives. As a woman of Jewish descent, I can talk very personally of the atrocities and hypocrisies that have been committed in the name of organized religion – knowing I would be only one voice among many. This long litany of faults can very naturally lead to the conclusion that we would be better off without any kind of organized religion at all. At most, if we absolutely had to have it, we could probably tolerate a disorganized religion. Disorganized religion would save us from the tyranny of having any one set of beliefs or moral code imposed upon us. Disorganized religion would maintain the critical separation of church and state, based on ineffectiveness rather than principle. Disorganized religion would lack the power to make its real voice heard, thereby relegating it to merely a source of comfort to its own people, but rarely a transformative threat to individuals or society at large. Sounds appealing - or does it?

What is left for us to choose? An organized religion which has already betrayed us? A disorganized one which lacks both power and vision? A life fully separated from sacred concerns or a spirituality that refrains from touching both the darker and more hopeful side of our humanity? It is enough to send this organized, religious, and ordained minister into hiding. But I'm not willing to go there yet. "Ancient as the home is the temple; ancient as the workbench is the altar," writes Waldemar Argow. I believe that each of us is born with the religious impulse deep within the core of our being. To me that impulse is as much a part of being alive and human as the air we breathe. It is no accident that the word spirit was once understood to be synonymous with the human breath. But while this impulse may be our birthright, we are not all religious. Religion itself is a path that must be chosen. Religion is body of knowledge that is taught, collected, woven together from the wisdom and experience of its members. Religion is the body of beliefs and rituals and values that rise up from the shared life of a people. Religion, at its best, can be a body which is home to the highest aspirations of the human spirit; and at its worst, an embodiment of our darkest failures. This is both its greatest danger and its greatest hope: it is a human institution in which we can both fail and learn to try again.

I am here in this pulpit today because I have not yet given up on religion. Why? Because there are some things still worth organizing for. As a young prince, Siddhartha did not originally set out to start a new religion. Instead he encountered human suffering for the first time and had to respond, asking, why is there such suffering in the world? And, if there must be suffering, then why is there not more compassion among us? From these questions, his ministry began. From that ministry came the eight-fold noble path toward enlightenment, and so Buddhism was born. The same can be said for Jesus of Nazareth, who arguably did not set out to start a new religion separate from his Jewish roots, but rather sought to call his people back to the true principles of their faith. He took

his ministry to the outcasts of his society and reminded his followers that what love and mercy can be found in this world must be extended to all. The fact that his followers through the centuries have strayed from this does not change the actual truth of the principles for which he lived and labored. "We need to dream great dreams and to be dedicated to them," Dana Greeley reminds us, "... to know that life is sacred, and to live heroically and courageously, and to love others."

So, do you have religion? I invite you to consider the question seriously this morning. Because I suspect that you do. After all, you are here in a more or less organized fashion. The challenge before us, then, is not just whether or not we have it, but whether or not we have the right kind. Do we have the kind of religion that seeks to rise above the mistakes of the past? That seeks to reform the institutional tendencies toward complacency and self-preservation? That aspires to serve a prophetic and just vision and to proclaim the joy of life to all? These are hard questions that we must be willing to ask ourselves, for ultimately, this is the only kind of organized religion worth giving our allegiance to.

But let me also suggest that there are some tell-tale markers for discovering the presence of religion in your life. Three specific ones come immediately to mind that you might begin to recognize. First, do you have a vision of peace and wholeness that extends beyond yourself? For the heart and strength of religion lies in the deep suspicion that somehow the ethical, moral and spiritual dilemmas of your neighbor are somehow related to your own. At its best, religion does not narrow one's worldview, but should widen it, until each of us feels ourselves to be not just an amazing part of the universe and its destiny, but also a player within that destiny, connected responsibly to all of creation. At that very moment of connection, you have within you the seeds of religion, for the root of "religion" is the Latin word "religio," which means "to bind together." A worthy religion is founded on the understanding that the welfare and wisdom of one of us is connected to the welfare and wisdom of us all.

Second, has there been a moment in your life when the principles and beliefs of your religion have called on you to commit to something you really, secretly didn't want to do? A moment when you had to say to yourself, well, if I really believe X, then I really must do Y? I think of the members I served in the congregation of Flint, Michigan who participated in the Welcoming Congregation class even though it made them uncomfortable, who dared to wear supportive buttons of public witness and affirmation of gay and lesbian right to their workplaces. I think of the honest, difficult discussions we have when we truly strive to be respectful of the real diversity of one another's political and religious beliefs. I think of the ways in which we try to conquer our own fears and doubts as we walk with each other during times of sorrow and loss, even without the ultimate answers. I think of those who confessed to me this past Wednesday at the vote on purchasing the Victory Life building that they voted 'yes' believing it is the best for our future, even though their heart still loves this home. If this experience of stretching your soul has at one point or another touched you, then you have discovered the purpose

of religion. A worthy religion is not easy. It requires each of us to grow beyond our own desires and needs.

Third, can you name a moment when the sound of a familiar hymn or the words spoken at a wedding or a funeral brought a tear of recognition to your eyes? There are so many moments that bring them to mine: the sight of the candlelight being passed around the circle on Christmas eve; the sound of a congregation filled with people dear to me singing together; the moment when a child is brought forward to be dedicated as a new member of our human family. Why a tear? Because there is a sense of awe that comes, when I think of the long line of humanity that has gathered before us to celebrate and honor the mystery of life. And after that awe comes a profound gratitude that I do not stand before that mystery alone, that there is a community of people here with me, week after week, year after year. If you share in that gratitude, then you have discovered the true gift of religion – a community of faith. A worthy religion is one that can speak to the heart as well as the mind and soul.

Organized religion? What could I possibly be thinking? That there *are* some things worth organizing for. That there are some ideals worthy of our devotion, despite all of the human imperfections that surround them. That we need a vision which challenges us to reach beyond ourselves and a community in which we can both practice our moral success and understand our failure. That deep within us there lies an ancient impulse that longs to be heard. Organized religion cannot be taken on faith alone. It must constantly be examined, tested, and always reformed when its prophetic voice ceases to be heard, but still I believe it is the best path that we have. The great peace-maker and activist Gandhi put it best when he said: “This and this alone is true religion – to serve thy brethren. This is sin above all other sin – to harm thy brethren.” So may it be.