

## SERMON “Are We a Religion or What?”

By Rev. Susanne Nazian

“Where have you been all my life?” “I never knew a church like this existed.” “Where have you been hiding yourselves?” Those are the questions many people who are new to Unitarian Universalism ask when they discover a church home here.

Sometimes it’s hard to discover UU churches. They hide.

Look at most of the churches built in the 1950s and 60s. They are hidden in the woods. They may look weird, not like a church at all. Most have a “little fellowship in the woods” mentality. That says to the world that we are not for everyone. We see ourselves as rich (at least comfortable), intellectual, sophisticated, white, liberal and exclusive. We see ourselves as remaining small because the majority of people don’t believe like us. We aren’t even sure ourselves that we are a religion at all, but more like a Kiwanis club or a golf club for select liberals. When you don’t know who you are, you tend to hide. And we hide ourselves from public view. We have habitually, in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century hidden away, virtually unaffected by the teeming mass of humanity looking for a religious home.

But not always. Once our denomination was the largest Protestant denomination in the country. Didn’t know that, did you? And our venerable ancestor, Thomas Jefferson, once put in writing that every thinking man would be a Unitarian by the end of his century. Jefferson was brilliant, but as David Weissbard put it, “not infallible.”

But we have suffered the last half of the century just past from a loss of our bearings; a misunderstanding of Unitarian Universalism so deep as to render it virtually meaningless as much more than a social club or a bully pulpit for causes. Part of that problem lies within us and part of it lies within the current culture which has turned conservatism into a poor imitation of itself indeed. It has become difficult for us to see ourselves as a religious faith despite the strength and vitality of our history.

What is the definition of religion anyway? Webster says, “

n. 1. The outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of a god or of gods having power over their destiny, to whom obedience, service, and honor are due; the feeling or expression of human love, fear, or awe of some superhuman and overruling power, whether by profession of belief, by observance of rites and ceremonies, or by the conduct of life; a system of faith and worship; a manifestation of piety; as, ethical **religions**; monotheistic **religions**; natural **religion**; revealed **religion**; the **religion** of the Jews; the **religion** of idol worshipers.

Well, Webster tried to update. But his definition is still for men and not women. And Webster did update by including ‘ethical religions’. Then again, who appointed Webster the ultimate authority on definitions? What is a religion? *It is simply the institutional vehicle through which one apprehends the meaning and purpose of human life.* It’s that simple.

I believe we Unitarian Universalists have succeeded in going awry with our message. We have fallen prey to those for whom religion has come to mean “believing in”. I don’t believe in believing in. Free religion never has. Free religion has, and does, commit itself to be a vehicle to address questions of ultimate meaning and purpose to human life both freely and responsibly. We commit to use the guidance of reason, the chastisement of conscience and the fellowship of the community to grow our own personal and corporate ethical and religious principles. We covenant to experience the enrichment we get at observing the awe and wonder of the world and the creatures in it to enrich our human spirits. We agree to approach the vastness and magnificence of the world with humility, recognizing the small place each of us occupies in the grand scheme of unfathomable grandeur. And then we fall short. We forget that ultimately each of us will ask in the throes of death or in the desperation of grief the question “what has my life meant?” “What does life itself mean?” What have the deeds I have done meant if ultimately I have not found meaning or purpose in any of it? The late Forrest Church wrote, “Neither awe nor humility is served by those who refuse to go beyond the letter—either of scripture or of science—to explore the spirit.” We have traditionally been a church that is the home for free exploration of the spirit. To face the world with spiritual emptiness is ultimately the very definition of meaninglessness.

So, pretending that if we do not believe in God means that we do not have the need of growing our spirit diminishes us in so many ways. And pretending that we know what spiritual growth means to anyone else is a haughty presumption. As humanists look askance at those who do

believe in God, they are usually assuming that they believe in the same God you reject. I got news for y'all. They don't believe in that God either. Ask them. It's a good dialogue, and brings us a true diversity.

Another of the world's faiths that has no concept of God or dogma is Buddhism. For the Buddhists, religion is a way of being in the world; a way of living, a path and a journey along that path. Buddha did not deny or affirm the existence of a God; he simply didn't think one needed to address the question. Strangely enough, the founder of institutional Christianity, St. Augustine, didn't concern himself with proofs of the existence of God either. Like the Buddha, his concern was with the origin of evil in the world. No one has ever accused Buddhism of not being a faith.

Years ago, I was a director of religious education. The youth and I put together a set of questions to ask some of the adults in the congregation. The question was, "How does your Unitarian Universalist faith go to work with you? How does it affect how you do your job? There were a very few good and thoughtful answers. Most, however, replied "Not at all."

That response was and is sad to me. It's as sad as the insistence that we are not a religion. For that statement means that for those people Unitarian Universalism *is* a version of the Kiwanis club, a place merely to meet like minds, have an intellectual discussion and maybe stand for ethical and justice issues. Our churches have become places to congregate, not places in which we gather to examine our values, search deeply for inner peace, and practice that compassion in our daily lives. Our churches need to reframe their purpose; otherwise we fail in our responsibility to carry on the tradition of free faith to which we commit when we join this association.

For it is my opinion that we are the religious answer for the twenty first century. In the face of advancing knowledge and ability and in the face of the rapidly expanding destruction of the environment, the world needs an alternative to outworn and outdated dogma more than ever. And the old is falling away. Denominationalism is ending. People are searching for a spiritual home where they can explore freely. Will we be there with strength and conviction to replace that which is falling away with our message of hope?

Part of my concern is the fact that people do not know who we are or what we stand for, perhaps because we have not asked that question deeply enough of ourselves. Behind my message and ministry is the unshakable conviction that we have found a valuable truth, not *the truth*, but *a truth*, and that our particular approach to religion can and does stand us in good stead as we face the inevitable crises of life.

Speaking at a conference of large churches, the Rev. Gary Smith spoke about Unitarian Universalism:

“I believe we have a home, we have a spiritual tent, we have sanctuaries, we have sacred spaces that are large enough to hold those who hunger for something, hunger for something more in this lifetime. I believe that we have a message that speaks right to the deepest places of the human spirit as it cries out in its hunger and thirst. I believe that Unitarian Universalism and places like your congregations and mine are places where dreams have become realities for people, where they have been fed, where they have been given living waters.”

How is it that we could begin to move from the hidden almost church to the church with a powerful message to share? How is it that people could come here and be fed spiritually even as they enjoy fellowship of like minds and hearts? Can we begin to make justice and peace in the world by finding it in our own hearts here and now? Should we begin to develop the vision of bringing our message to this world and her people? And how to we go about it without creating an annoying, proselytizing message?

I am suggesting that we reflect on whether we want to do the intense work of growing internally

So many of you have already told me you are unsure of what to say when someone asks you what we believe. The writing and sharing of a five-minute answer to that question is illuminating and rich for members old and new. A surprising eloquence about our uncommon denomination comes through in that exercise. So, I want to invite you all to do that. Write an answer to the person who asks you to tell them about Unitarian Universalism. Then share that with one another.

We are a denomination that offers freedom and choice in religious matters. We reflect a diversity of belief and action that is truly uncommon in religious circles. You each come here for different reasons; you each define those reasons in different terms. None of you is here because you believe in the dogma we preach, for there is no dogma. Like Theodore Parker preached in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, dogma is impermanent. What is permanent is the loving community that nurtures our experience of religious truth when and where we find it. That is the message of Universalism—God is love---conversely, love is god. When we practice true love and acceptance of one another; the heart health that goes with that feeling is so deeply religious we feel it in the house of very being. Everything else comes from that love—the message of hope and healing we offer to individuals is what ultimately bends the arc of the universe towards justice. Nothing, not our fierce labor nor our fierce sacrifice, is ultimately meaningful unless it comes out of that love. “Faith, hope and love”, these three says Paul, but the greatest of these is love”. You know that in your homes, in your life partnerships. Think of giving and receiving gifts from your loved one. The gift you demand—the too expensive diamond ring—the original art piece you can’t afford—that gift is ultimately not as meaningful—not half as likely to make you happy-- as the tiny box all us moms got at one time or another—the tiny empty box presented at Christmas or at Easter bearing the words “it’s filled with love inside” It is always held in a tiny trusting hand looking up at you with love and waiting for the smile on your face and the hug in your heart. This is the message of our faith—that from peace and love within comes the real religious work and the real meaning of human life. Intellectually, truth changes. The advances of science and the advances in human knowledge tend to strip away the tenets of fossilized religion. Doubt becomes the watchword of the intelligent human. Sometimes people’s beliefs tend to fail to sustain them in the face of life’s bumps and bruises. But find a religious truth—something that answers your query about the meaning and purpose of your life—and it sets off fireworks in your heart. If your life is gifted with real joy, this is its source.

The time is now, and if we truly believe we have something unique to offer, something that stands the test of time and stress, something that can ultimately provide a saving message for the world, then **WHY IN THE NAME OF ANYTHING THAT IS HOLY ARE WE**

CONTINUING TO HIDE OUR LIGHT UNDER THE PROVERBIAL BASKET? We must begin to see ourselves as having a faith conviction that can create greater compassion, greater understanding and a greater sense of loving community. We must begin to see ourselves as having a faith that we experience as so strongly meaningful in our own lives that we feel confident in sharing it with others.

For too long we have hidden ourselves, believing somehow that we are the freaks of the religious world. I have news for you: we are about as mainstream as it gets. There are many outside these walls for whom the concept of a divine being makes no sense. There are many outside these walls for whom the idea of eternal reward or punishment makes no sense. There are many outside these walls for whom the dogma of traditional Christianity makes no sense, yet who still attest to the underlying truth of Jesus' message. There are many outside these walls who experience some divine force at work or at play in the universe, but who do not believe there is only one manifestation of it. And there are those whose experience with the divine is in terms of the divine feminine. And the news is *that those are also the people inside these walls*. Part of accepting others into our midst is to admit to ourselves and each other that we really are a diverse religious group, all pointing at that same overarching mystery and wondering what to call it.

It's time folks, to wake up and smell the latte. It's time to realize that we are no different than the vast majority of religious seekers. The difference is that we have found a congregation in which we can be at home, in which we can each believe as we really do, in which we can find human love and caring in abundance, **AND THROUGH WHICH WE CAN HEED THE COMMANDS OF CONSCIENCE AND THE CRIES OF NEED**. It's my strongly held opinion that we have a responsibility to offer this love to a community of broken hearts in order that they may then minister to those who are broken in body and in spirit.

May the joy you find here be with you as you make your life a witness to this free faith by spreading your love like a blessed contagion! May it catch fire and burn brightly for all to see – the possibility of transformation is real. And that, my friends, is the gospel truth of Unitarian Universalism. Amen. Blessed Be.