

**United First Parish Church in Quincy**  
**Sermon: “Holding Memory, Knowing Peoplehood In Our Vision,”**  
**12/31/06**

Well, we’re about to ring in yet another New Year – and in addition to being a time of festivities, it’s a time of ritual re-evaluation of one’s personal life – memories and commitments of the past year are often examined and plans for new personal commitments in the coming year are made. Typical of our secularized American culture, however, we usually think of our life and plans in individualistic terms, at most extending our thoughts to our immediate families. We don’t generally think in terms of “peoplehood” – that memories, experiences, vision, values, and commitments can also reflect our selves as being part of a people and that’s people’s heritage.

This is a religious lens and frame for viewing our life – experiencing our selves as tied to a “larger reality” which includes being part of a people in history, such as Unitarian Universalists. My last sermon in November was on the issue of our language of reverence as Unitarian Universalists. This sermon is a

consideration of our liturgical calendar as Unitarian Universalists – finding a regular place in our year of sermons to consider our own history as a people and the role of that history in our ongoing vision and development *as* a people. We often weave in recognitions of these types of holidays into our services, such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur from the Jewish calendar, Lent from the Christian calendar, and Ramadan from the Islamic calendar. But *as Unitarian Universalists* we are missing a ritualized location for our own stories and practices that cultivate a sense of connection to more than the self – that places the self in the context of a our larger UU history. Well, I think our New Year’s services might be the perfect annual location for just such a ritualized cultivation, and I’d like to start today!

To begin with, there is a short hand we learn in seminary for thinking about our respective heritages as Unitarians and Universalists. Unitarian history has often entailed a focus on the values of freedom, reason, and tolerance in our historical experiences, while Universalist history has often focused on faith,

hope, and love in our historical experiences. Now, if these two religious traditions were strictly and separately focused only on these respective areas, the two might never have joined together in 1961. But I think you will see from the stories of our people, followers of these respective traditions often embodied elements of all six of these values, even while they also tended to stress some of those values more than others in their respective traditions. Reason and faith went hand in hand, as did freedom and hope and tolerance and love.

In our readings today, for example, 19<sup>th</sup> century Universalist minister and activist Olympia Brown stressed the need to stand by this faith, a faith that embodied God's love – yet she also stressed that truths could find new applications. Brown's own striving in life for new options for women was an example of her extension of faith while also using reason to increase her freedom and sense of hope. 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister and social ethicist James Luther Adams stressed the freedom of the church and its openness to new insights and resistance to idolatry of absolute human

authority, but Adams also lifted up faith in a sustaining and transforming power and bringing individuals into a caring and trusting fellowship. Unitarians and Universalists were two sides of one coin, sharing the same metal but molded by different historical experiences.

I'll start with one of my favorite historical figures in our Unitarian heritage, even though theologically he predates the development of Unitarianism proper – Michael Servetus. Servetus lived during the time of the early Protestant Reformation and to understand his history, you need to remember that the early church post-Jesus consisted of many different communities of Jesus followers, some Jewish and some Gentiles and some mixed – and they all had very different ideas of who Jesus was and what he and his life represented.

It was not until a series of religious councils by the Roman Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. that a creed distinguishing Western Christianity was established and church and state merged in the form of the Holy Roman Empire. The creed that was established

was intended to suppress any heretical options and potential for religious conflict – remembering that the root meaning of “heretic” is simply the “ability to choose.” Everyone was supposed to believe in the Trinity – that God consisted of three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but one substance – the point being that Jesus somehow had to be considered as God. If you don’t immediately understand that, don’t worry – the council had to pull in some pretty complicated Greek philosophy to make its formulation work, and it remained something everyone was supposed to accept on faith without thinking about it too much. Education and thought was the purview of the religious elite for several hundred years.

Now it might have stayed that way if it wasn’t for, among other things, the cultural rebirth of the Renaissance and classical humanism, the development of the printing press, and the beginnings of principalities and nation states in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ideas are very hard to suppress, and heretical options in Christianity hung around the edges in Europe waiting for an

opportunity to be re-heard. Michael Servetus provided one just such opportunity.

Servetus was just 6 years old, a young Catholic in Spain, when Luther started the Protestant Reformation with his 95 theses attacking various economic practices and abuses of the Catholic church, getting himself ex-communicated and needing to take cover with his German prince. As a teenager studying initially for a career in the law, Servetus read the bible for himself and decided that the doctrine of the Trinity had no biblical base and that the Jesus of the Gospels didn't match up with the Jesus of the Christian creed. He also witnessed the public pomp of the Pope in crowning Spain's Charles V as Roman emperor and decided that this corruption was not to be borne. At age 20, in 1531, Servetus decided to take on the entire Roman Catholic church and published *On The Errors of the Trinity*, a best seller in its time. Listen to the sound of just this one selection and imagine the reaction of the powers that be to his boldness:

“...How much this tradition of the Trintiy has, alas! Been a laughing-stock to the Mohammedans, only God knows. The Jews also shrink from giving adherence to this fancy of ours, and laugh at our foolishness about the Trinity; and on account of its blasphemies they do not believe that this is the Messiah who was promised in their law. And not only the Mohammedans and the Hebrews, but the very beasts of the field, would make fun of us did they grasp our fantastical notion, for all the works of the Lord bless the one God...”

As if that wasn't enough, Servetus continued: “This most burning plague, therefore, was added and superimposed...which our fathers did not worship. And this plague of philosophy was brought upon us by the Greeks, for they above all other men are most given to philosophy; and we, hanging upon their lips, have also become philosophers. Perhaps some will deem it a slight fault if I admit that they may have erred. But I prove this in no other way than by showing that they never understood the passages of the Scriptures which they adduce with regard to this matter. If

they distinguished the brightness that then was from their own darkness so utterly confused...”

Remember that Servetus was only 20 years old at the time! But then, our people are nothing if not bold and maybe a little brash or arrogant at times, and possibly, just possibly, a little unwise occasionally – in Servetus’ case, taking on the Catholic church during the time of the Inquisition. There is both brilliance and folly here for Servetus – integrity but maybe some poor timing, too. Servetus had to flee for his life and go into hiding. He worked as a doctor for several years under an assumed name and actually was the discoverer of the pulmonary circulation of the blood. Eventually, however, he couldn’t resist religious debate and he published a new book, *The Restoration of Christianity*, and which exposed him again for who he was.

Servetus flees once again, but this time he (knowingly or unknowingly, it’s still debated) makes the mistake of going through Geneva on his way to Italy – perhaps in hope of converting Calvin to his beliefs at last. Calvin had been no friend

historically to Servetus, as most of the Protestants at the time were less interested in challenging the Christian creed than in challenging the Catholic church and the Pope. Servetus was captured in Geneva and, after a trial, Calvin has him burned at the stake. Reportedly, one of Calvin's fellow observers witnessed that Servetus retained his beliefs and did not recant his position even as the fires burned around him – a man of integrity to the very bitter end at age 42. Between Calvin and the Catholic church, nearly all copies of Servetus' books were also burned. In the aftermath, however, many were outraged and challenged Calvin for his extreme behavior in burning Servetus, which became a widespread call, by Protestants at least, for greater tolerance in religion. Today there is a statue to Servetus in Geneva.<sup>1</sup>

From Servetus, we see that we are nothing if not assured of our intellectual opinions and integrity as a people! The flip side of this righteousness means that it is sometimes difficult for us to

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<sup>1</sup> You can read more about Michael Servetus in *For Faith and Freedom: A Short History of Unitarianism in Europe* by Charles A. Howe (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997) and in *The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion* compiled by David B. Parke (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1985). The selected quote in this sermon is from Parke, p.5.

show grace, diplomacy, or an alternative tactic when our reason and logic are challenged, particularly when the perceived stakes are high. John Murray, a Universalist minister in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is another of my favorite historical characters. This part of his story, however, takes place when he's still a Methodist minister in England. He finds himself in a situation where he is called to debate with a young woman who has been converted by the writings of Charles Rely to Universalism. Universalists believed in an all-loving God who planned to save everyone regardless – in contrast to the prevalent belief that God would only save those who believed in Christ.

Despite Murray's reputation as a skilled debator, he is unable to get the better of this young woman and her logically reasoned belief in the loving nature of God. Murray writes later of their conversation:

“Do you think Jesus is your Saviour, sir? [she asks]

“I hope he is. [Murray responds]

“Were you *always* a believer, sir?

“No, madam.

“Then you were once an unbeliever; that is, you once believed, that Jesus Christ was not your Saviour. Now, as you say, he never *was*, nor never *will be*, the Saviour of any *unbeliever*; as you were once an *unbeliever*, he never can be your Saviour.

“He never was my Saviour, till I believed.

“Did he never die for you, till you believed, sir?

[Murray is stumped by her question and writes]: “Here I was extremely embarrassed, and most devoutly wished myself out of her habitation; I sighed bitterly, expressed deep commiseration for those deluded souls, who had nothing but head-knowledge; drew out my watch, *discovered it was late*; and recollecting an engagement, observed it was time to take leave.

“I was extremely mortified; the young lady observed my confusion, but was too generous to pursue her triumph. I arose to

depart...From this period, I myself carefully avoided every Universalist, and *most cordially did I hate* them...”<sup>2</sup>

There are further stories of Murray’s eventual conversion to Universalism and his travels to America where he became the foremost evangelical preacher of Universalism for his time, fostering its organization as a denomination in this country. But I’m rather fond of the fact that he married a woman who would become, as a Universalist, one of the first American feminists and an advocate for the full equality of women, Judith Sargent Murray. His wife would write under the pseudonym Constantia: “Are we deficient in reason? We can only reason from what we know, and if opportunity of acquiring knowledge hath been denied us, the inferiority of our sex cannot fairly be deduced from thence.”<sup>3</sup> I like to think that the graceful and diplomatically reasoned argument of the young woman from England had a long term

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<sup>2</sup> This quotation is from *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*, edited by Ernest Cassara (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1971), pp. 58-59. You can also read more about Murray and Universalism in *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism* by Charles A. Howe (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> This quotation is from *Standing Before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women and Social Reform: 1776-1936*, edited by Dorothy May Emerson (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2000), p. 151.

impact on John Murray and his eventual ability to appreciate and love a woman such as Judith Sargent.

Murray also demonstrated growth in a more confident and humorous ability to fend off attacks on his person. Responding to a large rock being thrown through a window during his sermon in Boston and narrowly missing him (it was a little dangerous to be a minister in those days!), Murray picked up the stone and said: “This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational nor convincing...Not all the stones in Boston, except they stop my breath, shall shut my mouth.” On another occasion, Murray won over the audience with his own response when an orthodox minister named Bacon challenged his views. Upon departure, Bacon’s supporters pelted Murray with eggs, to which he responded: “These are moving arguments, but I must own at the same time, I have never been so fully treated to Bacon and eggs before in my life.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Both quotations from *The Larger Faith*, pp. 4-5.

In the end, we study history both for the enjoyment and inspiration of stories and to learn from history in the hope of improving our future. The stories are fun, but they are also instructive of who we have been and who we may hope to be as a people. We are a people of integrity and a people of dissent. We are a people capable of risk, sometimes bravely and sometimes perhaps foolishly if it stems more from ego and pride than from a larger truth and reality. But we are a people capable of learning through our reason and through our love, and thus a people open to hope, change, and transformation. As we consider our New Year's resolutions this year, let us also consider our resolutions as a Unitarian Universalist people in the year 2007 when we envision our role in our congregation, community, and world. May we live up to the best of our faith traditions and heritage. Blessed be.

Amen.