

**United First Parish Church In Quincy  
Sermon for 11/11/07 by Rev. Michelle Walsh**

**“The Paradoxical Heart of Unitarian Universalism”**

“Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest of truth is its sacrament and service is its prayer.” This is a longstanding covenant within the Universalist faith tradition. Let’s consider it another form, written by James Vila Blake, who lived from 1842 to 1925 and who also served this congregation in Quincy according to the *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism*: “Love is the spirit of this church, and service its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.”

For the past few Sundays, between Sheldon and I, we’ve been preaching on the topic of our Unitarian Universalist faith. Sheldon proposed in his sermon last week that “spiritual freedom, freedom of mind and the right of individual conscience...is the radical principle of our Unitarian Universalist religion. It is the principle of the free mind and the free moral conscience that most uniquely defines our faith.” I’d like for us to think about that for a few minutes this morning and to consider the possibility that that formulation is incomplete as it stands.

Let’s start by asking what makes us unique as a *religion*? Implicit but not made an explicit focus in Sheldon’s formulation is the fact that we *are* a religion – as much as there are many who would challenge that, including those who have challenged our religious tax-exempt status in courts in some states. In doing so, these people tend to argue that we are nothing but a secular social action group, and a liberal political one for that matter.

But let’s return to the question: what *is* a religion? The root meaning of religion is “to bind back” or “to bind together” and today religion concerns beliefs, practices, worship and ethical systems that bind people together for a transcendent purpose, for a larger ultimate and guiding life purpose. A religion is made unique not only by the professed beliefs of that religion – one also needs to consider the religion’s forms of actual practice. A person can believe in the freedom of mind and right of individual conscience and practice *spiritual* freedom on their own – as any of the various New Age meditation and retreat centers will testify. What is different or unique about Unitarian Universalists is that we choose to come together in our belief in spiritual freedom and to be challenged by the *practice of being* together – practices that encompass being together in worship, in congregational administration, in educating ourselves and our children, and in service to one another and to the larger world.

There is something rather paradoxical about this faith tradition, is there not? Listen again to the reliance on paradox in the marketing ads that the Unitarian Universalist Association is putting forth: “Is God Keeping You From Going To Church?” (how does God keep you from going to church?) and “Find Us and Ye Shall Seek” (how does one continue to seek after one finds?) Neither of those questions make too much

sense unless you are a potential Unitarian Universalist. So we anticipate that such ads will certainly catch the attention of and call to people who share our beliefs, but they won't become Unitarian Universalists unless they share our desire for our particular forms of practice.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe deeply in and treasure our spiritual freedom, but we also want to be together on Sunday mornings and to be *challenged* in our beliefs and in our practices. Being a Unitarian Universalist is *not* a comfortable practice. I remember once when a lay minister I deeply respect in Newton, an elder of the church, said that her greatest spiritual practice on Sunday mornings was one of "tolerance" – this is because she is an avid humanist and did not always hear what she needed to hear on Sunday mornings (perhaps she frequently did not hear what she need to hear), but she did believe that it was more important for her to practice being part of a religious community every Sunday morning than to sit home alone with her beliefs. And think for a moment about what the implications are for the world, a world torn apart by violence in its diversity, by demonstrating a deep practice of tolerance in being with one another, at least on a weekly basis.

We choose to *be* together on Sunday mornings and we "choose to *walk* together," as Conrad Wright, a Harvard church historian who specialized in Unitarian Universalist history, writes. This is the paradoxical heart of our belief *manifested in practice* – our practice of polity or church governance. We bind ourselves to each other through *covenant* – through a *promise* to be together, to walk together and to share our journeys with one another. This is our *ecclesiology*, our practice or way of summoning and calling out our particular people into an assembly. Listen anew to the covenant of this church that we read together every Sunday morning: "As a free – *free* – fellowship of this historic church, we unite – *we unite* – to lift our hearts and open our minds to a larger reality – *to a larger reality*; to accept, support, and encourage one another – *to accept, support, and encourage one another*; to seek the wisdom in all religions; to cherish and sustain the web of life; and to strive for justice, compassion and peace." These are all *practices*. This is both a call to like-minded individuals and a challenge for those individuals to engage in shared practices together. How much do we practice our faith tradition?

Ideally, we are not just sitting together in our respected, spiritually free but isolated beliefs on Sunday mornings – we are actively engaging with one another on Sundays and beyond in our practices. Do you know that we are unique among denominations in the emphasis we place on lifespan religious education – on curriculum development for adult religious education? It came as something of a shock when I discovered in seminary that most other religious traditions offer nothing more than some bible study, if even that, to their adults. In Newton, I had "grown up" with small group ministry encounters, yoga classes, world religion classes, spiritual discussion groups, film groups, book groups, and yes, even bible studies. It was through these forums that I got to know my fellow congregants in more depth – these in addition to serving on committees, assisting in lay ministry support, and participating in social justice projects together.

I learned through these practices, as James Luther Adams points out, “the skills required for effective social organization.” Our free church tradition does not work by relying only on the minister or on coming together for worship on Sunday mornings. Our free church tradition requires, as a *practice*, the full participation of *every* member of the congregation – through their volunteer labor on committees and during events (such as in Newton our annual all church retreats to Ferry Beach and Sandy Island or in any of our churches the running of religious education programs for adults and children), and also through each member’s financial support of the church. Having primarily grown up among the unchurched, with only a small exposure to the very hierarchical Catholic church, I really did not know these practices. I needed to engage them to understand them and their importance. We truly are responsible for the health and vitality of our church – unlike the Catholic church, no outside authority will ever shut us down, but we may fail to keep our church growing and thriving. We are not merely consumers of the church – we ARE the church and the life of the church depends on each of us.

I also got to know my fellow congregants in Newton through the words of wisdom they shared on Sunday mornings in dialogue with the minister’s sermons (and also through their own monthly lay-led sermons and worship). This was a new and revelatory practice to me as well – one that thoroughly engaged me when I first walked into Newton’s Episcopal style building with stain glass windows and saw a female ministerial intern preaching from the pulpit on Woody Allen’s “Crimes and Misdemeanors” and then come down from the pulpit to engage the congregation in dialogue. I know that while several of you have enjoyed the experience of congregational dialogues during sermons, others find this experience uncomfortable. This form of preaching is actually part of our Universalist heritage for your own historical record. It is alternately called “dialogical preaching” or “relational preaching” and reflects a belief that the minister and the laity are in partnership on Sunday mornings – that sermons arise from the people in the pews *through* their preacher and that the preacher is not the primary source of authority. The wisdom of any preacher’s words is validated through the participation of the people in those words and in the sharing of their wisdom. We are, as James Luther Adams writes, a church that honors both the priesthood and the prophethood of all believers. This is seen with particular clarity in our practice of ordination – only the congregation, the gathered people, not the minister or the denomination, can engage in the priestly act or practice of ordaining a person into the Unitarian Universalist clergy, as you did for me this past June. The primary source of authority in our tradition is the individual, but it is the individual who is a member of a congregation that reflects the gathered wisdom of *all* of the individual members.

We are called to encounter one another in depth and in peace and love, and to encounter the world, to serve the world, beyond our church walls as well through these practices. And this call stems from an even deeper call to seek a larger reality – to seek the truth in the many forms in which it manifests. Our sacrament is the quest of truth. And what is a sacrament? A sacrament is our most sacred promise to each other as a practice. The root meaning of sacred is holy or that which makes us whole, sound, and

happy. Paradoxically, we realize that we can never be truly spiritually free, we cannot be whole, unless we are all free together.

But what does freedom mean? Are we only talking about the freedom of our minds? Is ours a disembodied religion then? What about the freedom of the body? Is there a call built into our religion for social justice in ensuring the physical welfare of each person, not just their spiritual freedom? One of our few African-American ministers, the Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed, states that freedom meant two very different things to the Boston Unitarian Brahmin elite who lifted up freedom of the mind and belief in the comfort of their privilege and to African Americans who lifted up literal freedom from bondage as an enslaved and impoverished people. They were like two ships passing in the night when speaking about “freedom,” Morrison-Reed states. I could not help but think of his words when Sheldon quoted Thomas Jefferson last week: “I have sworn, upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” Let alone focusing upon Jefferson’s choice of the word “man,” I wonder what difference it would have made to this elite white founder of our country and slave master if he had instead written his vow of hostility toward tyranny over the mind *and* the body. If we are called to a sacrament, a sacred practice, in quest of truth, then we need to remember the whole truth of our history as Unitarian Universalists, including our historical complicity in oppression even as we sought and seek freedom in parts. This is the call at the heart of voluntary associations that institutionalizes “gradual revolution,” as James Luther Adams writes, and it remains our call for unity in our diversity with all peoples today.

Thus the heart of Unitarian Universalism is a paradoxical one. Unitarianism lifts up reason, tolerance and freedom historically and Universalism lifts up love, faith, and hope. In merging these two traditions, we bring them into dialogue and tension with each other. We treasure spiritual freedom but in covenant with one another. We promise to walk together as we seek the truth of a larger reality, knowing that each of us is limited by virtue of our experiences to only parts of that reality. Our wholeness comes in our promise to practice together – to dialogue with one another about the truths we seek and find and to engage one another within our church walls and also to engage the larger world beyond our church walls. We are, as Tom Owen-Towle writes, “free-thinking mystics with hands” who know that we know more when we share together and we accomplish more when we work together. Above all else in our quest for spiritual freedom, as Bill Schulz writes, “we respect the mystery more” and our call is to walk together in this mystery, to be humble in our approach to each other, and to love the world deeply in our quest for truth and justice. May we be challenged in the coming weeks to think about how we can engage more deeply in being a church in and for the world together in our practices. And may it always be so. Blessed be. Amen.