

**United First Parish Church In Quincy  
Sermon for 11/16/08 by Rev. Michelle Walsh**

**“To Be A Decent Human Being”**

**Sometimes I do in fact believe that the Spirit moves in mysterious ways, and I’m learning to trust in the ways of that Mystery a bit more often. I had many other thoughts for my sermon this morning when, just as a conversation point, I asked one of the elderly residents I see for pastoral therapy in a nursing home what I should preach on this Sunday. I’ll call her Ruby, though that is not her real name.**

**Ruby is 86 years old and, like many of the residents in this particular nursing home, she has few family members left who visit her and she suffers from moderate dementia. This nursing home is constructed as a home, but there is really only one private room. Most of the residents, including Ruby, share a room with multiple beds and one single dresser for all of their personal belongings. Rev. Margie King Saphier once said to me that our lives often work in reverse when we are**

**approaching the end. While we begin life accumulating knowledge and things and relationships, we often end our lives, by voluntarily or involuntarily reducing and constricting our life in many of those same areas. The Buddhist practice of nonattachment comes to mind in facing these losses – and in fact, many eastern countries speak of Buddhism as being a popular practice for the end of life, whether they start as Hindus or Confucians or something else.**

**Ruby is a rather feisty elderly woman, however, and she can be sharp tongued and dismissive at points. I asked her my question because I knew that she very much loved the church she grew up in in Maine, but I did not expect much more than a gruff hand waving of my question away in response. To my surprise, however, Ruby gave me a very serious look and said “preach on being a decent human being!” “Preach on being a decent human being” – thus sayeth my wise, feisty 86 year old elder.**

**So here we are, in my sermon dedicated to Ruby, with the question of – What does it mean to be a decent human being? Do we as Unitarian Universalists hold this as a value and strive to be decent human beings? I have a tendency to go to the dictionary and look up root meanings for words – so I did that for the word “decent,” and here is what I found: “proper and fitting,” “not immodest; not obscene; chaste,” “conforming to approved social standards; respectable;” “satisfactory; fairly good; adequate;” “fair, kind, generous.” Hmmm, I thought, if I apply “decent” to being a human being, then some of this – not all but some of this – sounds like the Lord’s requirements in Micah, particularly the focus on modesty.**

**The translation for our reading of Micah this morning of the closing line “to walk humbly with your God” came from the New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible. But the Jewish Bible, the Tanakh, translates this line as “to walk modestly with your God” and it further adds “Then will your name achieve wisdom” – a line which interestingly has been**

entirely dropped from the Christian bible. [As a side note, I will mention that I do spend time in Sunday school emphasizing with the youth that what is called the “Old Testament” in the Christian Bible is called “The Tanakh” in the Jewish tradition. Somehow Jewish people object to their bible being renamed by Christians as “The Old Testament” – can’t think why, can you? (smile)]

But so my question then becomes, does being a decent human being *require* humility and modesty? And as Unitarian Universalists, how do we react when we hear those words as ethical requirements? Based on my observations and experiences over the years, I think that Unitarian Universalists do struggle a bit with the role of these particularly virtues in our tradition – a tension exhibited in our historical practices. Remember that I am training to be a practical theologian as part of my academic community ministry, and thus I tend to focus on our actual UU practices.

**Notice, for example, what happened when a Unitarian Universalist rewrote the words of Micah for our hymnal. We are now required to “live in quiet fellowship with your God.” That suggests a bit more equality in the relationship than having something larger than one’s self one to which one is required to respond and be accountable. On the other hand, our opening hymn this morning, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” suggested a different conception of divinity as “author of creation,” “mighty,” hidden and eternal. This conception of God in our hymnal is so transcendent and all-powerful one wonders how there is even a relationship to begin with to dare to walk humbly or modestly with such a God.**

**So I went digging a bit further in our Unitarian and Universalist histories and in our hymnal. I could not find one single reference to or category for either “humbleness” or “modesty” anywhere – though there are certainly plenty of references to love and compassion and to justice and integrity.**

**But none of those words get metaphorically to the same implications as “humbleness” or “modesty.”**

**I guess when the bulk of your heritage has been to stand up as heretics against the dominant tradition, including at the risk of death, there is not a lot of room for humility and modesty. For those of you familiar with him, certainly one of our classic Unitarian heroes of the Protestant Reformation, Michael Servetus, was hardly an example of humility in action, given to defying and taunting the Inquisition – even to the point where he was eventually burned at the stake by a fellow Protestant, Calvin. But is it true that being a heretic requires some arrogance? Quakers have somehow exuded a certain humbleness in standing by their faith tradition and faith proclamations, even to the point of death and persecution in history, too. It would be a bit of a stretch, however, to think of Quakers as arrogant. There is a subtle difference between needing to challenge injustice and taking glee in the painful struggle of that process.**

**But for us, possibly most strongly in our Unitarian heritage, our proclamations can take on a character of arrogance – so much so that we have a classic joke in our tradition about it. You may have heard this one, normally attributed to a famous Unitarian minister after whom one of our two UU seminaries is named, Thomas Starr King. It goes something like this: “Universalists believe that *God* is too good to damn them, but Unitarians believe that *they* are too good to be damned by God.” Now that’s all the way back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Unitarian tradition was seen to carry a certain arrogance within it – so much so that this particular joke has been passed down successfully through time!**

**We can point to a few more famous Unitarians in our history whom others have found at times arrogant – Ralph Waldo Emerson’s radical challenge to the preachers of his time that they had gone ‘stone cold’ and lost their soul and the spirit in their preaching; or our most famous theologian and social ethicist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, James Luther Adams’ choice to**

**preach his own ordination sermon – now that is true arrogance, not to trust that a colleague can preach words of wisdom for you at your ordination.**

**I do not have to reach far into our history to find a tendency toward judgment of others as less intelligent or less educated, as well as a specific discomfort with the word “humility.” I have sat among seminarians as well as among lay people who have spoken quite arrogantly about the religious traditions of others – usually evangelical or more conservative Christian traditions – and who have characterized those traditions as universally inferior to Unitarian Universalism. It is sometimes said that we seek the wisdom in all world religions *except* the Christian religion.**

**It seems in my observations that we UU’s want to be *more* than just “decent human beings,” but in doing so, we often denigrate those we perceive as failing to meet our standards of a being an “excellent human being” – or perhaps a “better kind of human being,” highly educated, rational, and middle**

**class – culturally white. Are we really open to learning from and being changed by people who are not like us?**

**In ministry itself, we are hearing the call for “excellence in ministry.” Some object to the use of a term that has such a strong association with the competitive nature of capitalism when ministry should set a counter-cultural tone. I am reminded of seeing five prominent hedge fund managers testifying this past week in front of congress. Given that each of them, *each of them*, took home between \$2-3 billion in their annual salary last year, we could certainly evaluate them perhaps as excellent hedge fund managers – but were they decent human beings?**

**At the recent New England Conference of Unitarian Universalists that I attended in October, we were presented with some of the work that the board of the Unitarian Universalist Association has been doing and our feedback was sought. We were broken up into small groups by table to consider our responses to the UUA’s statement of their core**

**values and global end/mission statement. Through a facilitated process, the UUA board had decided that their core values were “wonder, connections, and transformation.” Their global end/mission statement was: “Grounded in our covenantal tradition, the UUA will inspire people to lead lives of humility and purpose, connection and service, thereby transforming themselves and the world.”**

**Not surprisingly, the word that caused the most problems for several people at my table was the inclusion of the word “humility.” In general, it was women who objected most to the term, and this may reflect a real gender concern in that women have been most often told they need to reflect a humble and modest being in the world – which does become a suppression of self for women. However, during the break, a man that I know from the Newton congregation, Bob Zeeb came up to me very excited that his table had really loved the inclusion of the word “humility.” Knowing Bob and his work to role model a different way of humble being, I understood his excitement.**

**Bob is a man who emphasizes the need to do deep listening with those who are radically different from us. He gave an example once of the fact that he actually invited visiting Jehovah Witnesses into his home to listen and dialogue with their point of view. How many of us would engage that as a Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice and example of being a decent human being? Or to give you another example I just heard in a workshop at the UU Urban Ministry yesterday of a woman who won an award in Washington, DC and a chance to be with anyone she chose for 3 weeks. She asked to be with Jesse Helms so that she could better understand and dialogue with him. How many of us would make the same choice – or would we more likely toss Helms off as beneath our time and attention?**

**I want to suggest that there may be a much more valuable role in moderating our expectations of ourselves and others, and of striving to be *just* “decent human beings” among each other rather than excellent or superior human beings. Perhaps**

**we might be surprised and graced by a greater generosity of spirit and peace in doing so. I would suggest that perhaps we should allow for a much more substantial place for humility alongside our love for justice and kindness or compassion in our tradition. If you are a member of UFPC, you get a free copy of the UU World at home and I would recommend a close reading of the article in the current issue, “Be a Dignitarian” because it also speaks to many of these concerns.**

**Let me close with a story from the other end of my ongoing community ministry – not my pastoral psychotherapy practice called Sacred Play Explorations but my ongoing ministerial practice in the city called Tuckerman Creative Ministries for Justice. I knew very little about Cape Verdean culture when I was asked to step in and support Alexandra’s family at her wake and funeral this week. I only really knew two family members, and there were going to be a huge number of people coming.**

**I chose to purchase my very first collar this week as a sign of my ministerial status as well as a pastor sticker with a cross for my car – it is a rare Unitarian Universalist minister who owns and wears a collar under any circumstance in my experience, let alone a pastor sticker with a cross for their car. But I knew that I was going to need to set aside some of my normal ways of being as a UU minister to be there for this family in what they needed – *as* a UU minister. My requirement in that moment, to respect the worth and dignity of each person, was to set aside my cultural background and interests, to just be a “decent and humble human being,” and to fully immerse myself in their needs and concern, which included a deeply Christian way of being. I suggest that if we aim to fully embrace our grand goal of multi-culturalism and anti-oppression, we will not be successful unless we first grapple with an ability to be more modest in our claims that our way of being in the world is the best in all circumstances.**

**But let me pause here and find out more about what you think it means “to be a decent human being.” What thoughts or questions come to mind for you when you think about this in relationship to Unitarian Universalism?**