

Sermon: Us versus Them

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Reading pages 56-57 from *The Dignity of Difference: How to avoid the clash of civilizations* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (London : Continuum, 2003)

### Sermon

“At the 1993 General Assembly (it was held in Charlotte North Carolina, by the way) one of our African American ministers was in a hotel elevator returning to her room after attending a UU Women’s Federation meeting. Since she had not yet registered for GA, she was not wearing a GA badge. A (white) woman got on the elevator and said to her, ‘Well I guess you all must be busy getting ready for us.’ As the minister exited at her floor, she announced to the woman, ‘I am one of us.’” (Handout 8,d, Multicultural Religious Education: Handouts for Participants, Renaissance Program, UUA) What do you think: embarrassing awkwardness or insidious racism? I imagine that neither woman got much sleep that night.

“I *am* one of us.”

Who are we? Can you tell from an elevator ride if the person next to you is a Unitarian Universalist? Do we all have the same skin color? Are we all dressed in sensible shoes and natural clothing for which no animal gave its life? Do we all have a secret handshake? Do we all sport flaming chalice tattoos, cut our hair a certain way, wear something in particular on our heads, over our faces, around our necks, on our feet, speak one language or speak not at all?

The answer is no. So we cannot assume that the person standing next to us is *not* a Unitarian Universalist. We have to rely on badges, or souvenir pins, or t-shirt slogans or luggage or lack thereof. In the absence of cues, we have to rely on what’s in the air in the elevator – and that air is infused with who we think we are, and who we think of as other than what we are. A conversational overture with a complete stranger has to be “are you here for the conference?”

Look around the sanctuary, how would you describe us? Are we a community? Other than the fact we’re in this room, how would we know? I think it is significant that, as a denomination, we refrain from seeing ourselves as a community, so much so that we have difficulty recognizing one another.

I suggest to you today that Unitarian Universalists are lacking in that which sets us apart, and we like it that way. We are a people that lean toward philosophical ethics as a matter of course, and away from morality that is linked with identity. Just look at our principles:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

These are worthy principles, and I think they speak to how we as a people want to demonstrate those moral universals that Rabbi Sacks talked about; the sanctity of life, the dignity of the human person, the right to be free, to be no man’s slave or the object of someone else’s violence.

We say to one another: it’s not that you are free to believe anything you want to and be a Unitarian Universalist, it’s that you are free to believe what your conscience calls you to believe. (Kat Liu, *A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*, ed. John Gibb Millspaugh, Boston : Skinner House Books, 2009)

The actor and activist Christopher Reeve said of Unitarian Universalism: "It gives me a moral compass. I often refer to Abe Lincoln, who said, 'When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. And that is my religion.' I think we all have a little voice inside us that will guide us. It may be God, I don't know. But I think that if we shut out all the noise and clutter from our lives and listen to that voice, it will tell us the right thing to do. The Unitarian believes that God is good, and believes that God believes that man is good. Inherently. The Unitarian God is not a God of vengeance. And that is something I can appreciate." (Reader's Digest, October 2004)

These are my values, too. But what is missing? There is nothing in our principles that says: we are a special people and belong together. We have a particular message to spread to the world. There is nothing that says: there is something greater here to which I want to belong, and this is what I am willing to give up in order to belong to it. This is what I am willing to do in order to belong.

I know some of you are thinking – that's a good thing! Look how much damage there is in the world because of what people are willing to do! And you're right.

We see proof of that every day – from extremists of every kind. "...[T]here is a link between violence and belonging. 'The more strongly you feel the bonds of belonging to your own group', writes Canadian author, academic and politician Michael Ignatieff, 'the more hostile, the more violent will your feelings be towards outsiders.'" Our social reality is that humans gravitate toward communities where they may expect loyalty and obligations. With some rare exceptions, this is how we are built. The only difference is the depth to which we feel such a connection, the depth to which we need the connection, and the responsibility we feel toward outsiders. Ignatieff says, "You can't have this intensity of belonging without violence, because belonging of this intensity moulds the individual conscience." (Sacks, p.199)

What happens when the individual conscience is totally focused on belonging and not on well-being? Violence becomes possible, and even acceptable.

There is a scale of intensity in how we see ourselves and act on it. What is our response as a civil society to the events in Paris? "Je suis Charlie" I am Charlie. I am Charlie in the face of your passion and violence. But, as a human, I am also capable under the most right and awful circumstances of encompassing the death of Charlie.

In all human endeavors, there is a point at which the idea of giving up something of ourselves so that we can belong to something greater can cause injury to ourselves and others. Giving up something of ourselves can lead to denying our own identity and self-worth and choice and well-being and empathy for others. We are all capable of this, even if it's not clear to what we want to belong. Giving up something of ourselves can lead to taking from others so that we feel we are part of something greater. Somehow, being part of a great endeavor can make hurting others okay.

Even associations as benign as high school sports demonstrate this truism. A few years ago, after losing a high school football game in Medfield Massachusetts, one of the town's teenagers picked up a rock and threw it at the departing school bus of the opposing team. The school and the parents were shocked; the kids were shocked but not surprised. We associate social aggression, racism, and intolerance of all kinds with any social relationship that excludes others. As Unitarian Universalists, we try to guard against all those influences that would make us do the wrong thing. And part of that which we guard against, I think, is intensity itself. Fundamentalism is the attempt to impose a single way of life on a plural world. "Pluralism is a form of hope, because it is founded in the understanding that precisely because we are different, each of us has something unique to contribute to the shared project of which we are a part." (Sacks, p.203)

So, I understand when as an act of faith, many Unitarian Universalists look to humanity instead of humans, and principles instead of vows, and refrain from any notion of us versus them. But perhaps we go too far in the other direction. Look at what we lose when we don't see ourselves as part of something greater and different.

As a denomination, we run the risk of becoming relativists – of not being able to say "this is what we stand for and this is who we stand with." And in the world this means that we are inadequate to the challenge of those with more assertive

even fanatical beliefs. But let's take the focus away from the world stage. At the other end of the spectrum; without a shared sense of commitment to something greater, we lose the capacity to learn about our own private identities and allegiances – to know they exist and influence our lives even though we may not recognize them. We have attitudes and perspectives on what is right and wrong, on how to talk to each other, and bear responsibilities for our families, for this congregation, for our community and sometimes they are very different. How are we going to learn how to make promises to each other if we don't recognize that we need to make them?

We learn to practice morality, practice kindness and compassion and respect in the larger world, by learning to do it in here. We learn in our families, in our communities, in our congregations. What are we willing to give up of ourselves so that we may be part of something greater than we are? Without a bond and a commitment to something greater, we overlook opportunities to covenant with one another and promise to learn how to work and live and worship together because we are willing to give up something of ourselves in order to belong.

We must be willing to give up that which keeps us apart, while honoring our differences. What must we guard against taking from others, so that we may be part of something greater than what we are? We must preserve our well-being and the well-being of others and it's a fine and difficult line to follow.

We must be willing to accept our loving obligations to one another as a people. This is not an absence of conviction but a test of faith.

"The test of faith" says Rabbi Sacks, "is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God's image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his. (Sacks, p. 202) The promise we make to one another, the covenant, allows us to maintain relationships based on mutuality, dignity and difference rather than power.

I invite you to believe what your conscience leads you to believe. I invite you to accept your own marvelous identity. I invite you to accept your own shared identity as a Unitarian Universalist and together to create something unique, and strong and covenantal in the world. I am one of us. You are one of us. We are us. Starting here. Starting now.