

Sermon Doing the Right Thing

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There's an old joke that the Universalists believed that God was too good to damn people, while the Unitarians believed that they were too good to be damned. We can find some inkling of our understanding of morality in there – but the real contribution to our moral code came to us from the Humanists. They provided the secular influence on our dealings with the world.

I don't know about you, but when I was nine years old, I was a klutz. I'm not sure I would have left me in a room with something precious, in spite of all my good intentions.

But that's not the point of Phil Zuckerman's book *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions*. His point is that people who do not believe in God, nor participate in organized religion, can still be good and trustworthy people. As a matter of fact, their trustworthiness can come from a more evolved code of behavior – a code he calls empathetic reciprocity, otherwise known as the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule predates our notions of God, in fact, it doesn't require a God at all. All the Golden Rule requires is basic human empathy.

Is this something that occurs naturally for us? Well, yes and no. We do have a natural inclination to be good, says Zuckerman; it's a matter of social evolution. But fundamental human empathy and the willingness to do the right thing have to be cultivated.

Morality is coded survival instinct. Given by society, it is a set of rules of obedience to help the individual live among others. Those who adhere to morality survive within the group. We go through stages of morality as we grow up. In our earliest stages we do the right thing to avoid punishment. In our most evolved stage, we do the right thing out of a sense of universal ethics. A set of ethics is an individuals' code for society's survival. It requires insight and self-knowledge. To get to that stage, our ethical behavior has to be modeled for us by caring human beings, says Zuckerman, rather than a righteous God. We learn best from those we live with.

How do Unitarian Universalists fit into this scheme of things? We call ourselves a religion. We give each other what Zuckerman calls the three B's: belief, belonging and behavior. In other words, church is a place where we share our different ideas, engage in worship and ritual, and go out into the world and perform good deeds. How are we different from other faiths? Even Zuckerman treats us differently – we were presented as a haven for secularists looking for a community.

There are three main differences we have from other mainstream religions in the way we live out our moral code.

- The morality we teach is not grounded in a belief about God – it is separate from any particular belief.
- We are an examined faith. Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth, said Albert Einstein.
- Truth exists, and our understanding of it evolves over time and in community with others.

The morality we teach is not grounded in a particular belief about God – it is separate from any particular belief. The morality we teach is grounded in our principles of justice, compassion, inclusivity and respect. It is the greatest gift that Humanism brought to our denomination. We believe there are rights to which everyone is entitled by virtue of being human. These are the same beliefs that undergird the constitution. We believe there should be no one treated as lesser than, or with less dignity or greater cruelty because of who they are or where they come from or how they live their lives. We are an examined faith. Each one of us takes on the responsibility of identifying moral sources and/or authorities that inform our ethical behavior. This might be our belief in God, or our following of Jesus's example, or our experiences in the world.

Truth exists, and our understanding of it evolves over time and in community with others. Revelation is not sealed in scripture. It is through meaningful relationship with one another that we can determine what is best and most true. People cannot be ethical by themselves; ethical behavior is enacted in a community context. Ethical beliefs are irrelevant if they are not accompanied by action. Our accountability is to one another. We must answer to conscience and to one another when we fail to live up to our own expectations.

Why do I bring this up now?

When I think of our country, I get the sinking feeling that we are entrusting something precious to the hands of nine-year-olds – or at least in the hands of those who are still in their formative stages of ethical development. Children this age want things to be fair, and generally want to do what is right. I can't say that all our leaders in the public eye could do the same.

Lately, our airwaves and internet have been awash in public figures touting themselves in the media as offensive, egomaniacal, belligerent and *religious*. And they are proud of it. They, and many of the people who support them, wield religion as a weapon.

We shouldn't be surprised. In this country, religion and prejudice go hand in hand. It may be an oversimplified generalization, but there is evidence to support the statement that the more religious an individual is, the more prejudiced that person is. (*The Psychology of Religion, Fourth Edition: An Empirical Approach* by Ralph W. Hood, Jr., Peter C. Hill, Bernard Spilka) Our country was settled in large part by people who escaped religious intolerance in Europe, and then went on to impose the same in their new land.

It is no wonder that the creators of our constitution were so very careful to explicitly separate church and state in our public and judicial institutions. Our forefathers may have been Christian, or at least theist, but they created a secular constitution and then provided an additional bulwark in the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;" Article XI, section 3 of the Constitution states that: ... "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."

We were not *created* a Christian nation. The framework of our country, our constitution, is a deliberately secular document. Those who would yank this country away from those principles need to be faced in no uncertain terms. This requires great fortitude, and great conviction.

Unitarian Universalists explicitly try to break the link between religion and intolerance. But we are human, are part of the society that made us, and can be caught up in the same –isms as everyone else.

We can still be afraid, still be unclear or unconscious of what we fear in our dealings with others. We know this.

It's easy to be careful with the things we cherish. It is easy to dedicate ourselves to protecting the things we care about. It is harder to be careful with the things we do not cherish. It is harder to protect the rights of people we completely disagree with. Sometimes we fail. Sometimes we are not strong enough to do the right thing. These are all questions we need to wrestle with to be people of conscience.

So, with our humanist and secular principles to guide us, what can we do?

Know what it is that guides you. Know who it is that guides you. Who are you aiming to be like? Who are you avoiding becoming like?

Strive to push the edges of the constellation of people you care about. There is no more important task ahead of us. Listen to the politicians. See how they define the people they think they should care about. Are they protecting the rights of people they disagree with?

It is all about how we act in community with others. "We need to keep people close. We need to give them access to our hearts." (*For One More Day* by Mitch Albom)

The world needs us here and now. There is a great, spectacular, amazing, intricate and fragile work of art called our society that is entrusted to our care and we need to stand up for it. May it be so.