

“A New Heaven and a New Earth”

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Comment dit-on en français “Howdy Y’all!” Mais oui, “Bonjour tout le monde!”

I want to begin this sermon by openly acknowledging that there may be some cultural differences between Paris, France and Knoxville, Tennessee. However, we do share some things in common as Unitarian Universalists.

Perhaps some of those areas of common ground can be summarized by the words of the religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs who wrote, “Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved and the unsaved, friends from enemies. Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern.”

In Tennessee, religion is different than it is here. On the interstates of Tennessee it is not uncommon to see a billboard that asks the question, “Where are you going? Heaven or Hell?” (The word “heaven” having a blue background with clouds and the word “hell” having a red background with orange flames, pretty good graphics) If you are driving fast and only see the first line of the billboard then you might be inclined to answer the question, “Where are you going?” with “Chattanooga” or “Johnson City” or “Dandridge” but the billboard seeks to move us beyond questions of regional geography to matters of spiritual eternity.

I grew up in the South, in the buckle of the Bible Belt, so I am used to such signs. In France there probably aren’t billboards like this but I have noticed that when you walk into many of the Cathedrals there is the image of Jesus on a throne, with happy people on one side of him and tormented people on the other, which is more or less the same principle, with a bigger art budget.

This stands in contrast to the spirituality of many UU’s that is more in line with a story that will be familiar to anyone who has been part of a Unitarian Universalist church for any length of time.

A group of people are walking down the road, so the story goes, when they get to a fork in that road whereupon they see a sign that points in one direction that says, “To Heaven” and another sign that points in the other direction that says, “To a Discussion Group about Heaven.” You can tell who the Unitarian Universalists are because the saunter off to the discussion group.

If you are new to the church but you feel that under similar circumstances that you too might be inclined to choose the road to the discussion group, then all I can say is, “You might be a Unitarian Universalist.”

A good discussion group requires differences of opinion. I am reminded of the story of a group of Unitarian Universalists who were having a disagreement about theology. They decided to go to God to see if God could settle their dispute. Of course, there was a line waiting to see God, so the UUs had to wait for their turn. The first two people in line were a Protestant and a Catholic from Northern Ireland, and they asked, God, will we ever have peace between the Protestants and the Catholics in Northern Ireland? And God said, Yes, but not in your lifetime. The second two people were a Muslim and a Jew from the Middle East, and they asked, Will there ever be peace between the Muslims and the Jews in the Middle East? And God replied, but not in your lifetime. Finally the group of Unitarian Universalists came before God and asked, Will there ever be a time when we can get all Unitarian Universalists to agree on theology? And God replied, Yes, but not in my lifetime.

We need differences in order for there to be a creative exchange. Once John Tyler, the 10th President of the United States for those of you rusty on your American history, was asked to state his position on a controversial issue and he replied, “Half my friends are for it, the other half are against it, and I want you to know I intend to stand with my friends.”

In a politician, this statement will sound like an artful dodge. Yet how many of us have friends who are different for us and yet we still find we can be friends. For instance, a Unitarian Universalist church is a place where an atheist and a believer might be friends, a person of faith and a person with doubts might be friends. For reasons that go far deeper than the artful dodge the Unitarian Universalist church gives us a place where we can stand with our friends.

Mark Twain advised us to “Go to heaven for the climate and hell for the company.” His statement is intentionally irreverent but it does speak to the reality that when we start screening out our friends based on ideology or theology we often end up with a very short list (Perhaps, this is why statistics show more and more people are reporting having fewer and fewer friends.)

And I don’t want to be dismissive of the idea of hell because I’ve known too many friends who’ve gone through it. In Alcoholics Anonymous they say, “Religion is for people who are afraid of hell, spirituality is for those who’ve been there.” I’d be willing to bet that everyone in this room at some time or other has been there too.

When I was a teenager my older brother Bill died in a car accident. It was a traumatizing experience for me. Although I was an active member of the Episcopal Church it was my friends who were the least religious who were the most helpful, my friends who did not go to church, who did not think about theology, who did not practice any religion.

The Reverend William Ellery Channing said, “No one can be excommunicated from this church except by the death of goodness in his (or her) own heart.” This is another way of saying that the most important thing in religion is not good doctrine or dogma but a good heart, and you might find that inside or outside of a church.

The importance of a good heart is why every Sunday in my church in Knoxville we say words at the beginning of the worship service that speak to those experiences that go deeper than theology, deeper than ideology, “Love is the spirit of this church and service it’s law: To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love and to help one another , this is our great covenant.” These are heart values.

A good discussion group requires a willingness to admit we do not have all the answers. The philosopher Socrates, who was considered wise by his fellow citizens of Greece, argued that the only reason he might be considered wise is because he knew what he did not know.

Socrates felt that wisdom could come through discussion but in order for it to do so we must be willing to be changed by that conversation. Which means Socrate’s idea of dialogue is different from the idea of dialogue that we see role modeled by various partisan commentators. So much of what passes for discussion in our time is about defeating an opponent or humiliating an adversary, it is about winning an argument instead of winning a friend or winning new understanding.

Even a discussion group about heaven can turn into hell if we are not careful about how we speak to each other. In politics it is common to throw verbal zingers, one-liners that scorch. In politics this is par for the course. But any family counselor will tell you that zingers will destroy a marriage. Zingers will destroy a family. Zingers will destroy a friendship. Therefore if we want to keep our discussion group about heaven from degenerating into hell we need to not only “seek the truth in love” but “speak the truth in love.”

I went to a Quaker theology school and that’s where I learned that both Quakers and Unitarian Universalists enjoy being a part of a good discussion group about heaven. One of my favorite Quaker teachers is Parker Palmer who once wrote,

"Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline," and in this conversation,

"We invite DIVERSITY into our community not because it is politically correct but because diverse viewpoints are demanded by the manifold mysteries of great things.

We embrace AMBIGUITY not because we are confused or indecisive but because we understand the inadequacy of our concepts to embrace the vastness of great things.

We experience HUMILITY not because we have fought and lost but because humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen - and once we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible.

A discussion group, a place where two or more are gathered, can be so much more than an academic exercise. It can be a transformational experience. The theologian Martin Buber once said, “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.” When two or more are gathered there is power in the room, a power that may be named (and most religions do offer up a name or names) or the

power can remain unnamed.

Confucius was an Eastern sage who said that his thoughts about religion did not begin with Heaven. Instead, he started “from below” in order to get through to “what is above.” He started with humanity and through humanity found a way to heaven.

A billboard on the side of the road may be used as a way to get people into heaven. Authentic relationship is the way to get heaven into people.

I like the idea that Robert Fulghum has about carrying around a list of “conversation lifeboats”, questions you can ask on the spur of the moment to take a discussion to a deeper level like, “Have you ever had a really great teacher? Tell me.” or “Do you remember your first love?” Maybe one such question could be an open ended question, “Where are you going?” Maybe if we could resist the temptation to supply the options or to narrow the choices, we might get an interesting answer, one that would broaden our horizons, one that would lead us to wider and deeper sympathies, “Where are you going?” Is the answer the name of our Metro stop. Or do you have our eyes on the prize of that which is eternal?

Muriel Humphrey once gave her politician husband Hubert Humphrey a piece of advice. Right before he was about to give a speech, she said, “Remember, Hubert in order for a speech to be immortal it does not have to be eternal.” With that thought in mind I will end this sermon so that we can sing a closing hymn and move toward the fellowship hall for our coffee hour where the discussion can commence.