

Freethinker Friendly

A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

By Christine Robinson October 4, 2015

A Congregation Beyond Belief

Say, I want to welcome everybody to this time, with its focus on freethinking and Unitarian Universalism, and when I say, everybody, I mean, not only the people here and at the second service, but also folks in our branches in Socorro, Edgewood, and Carlsbad, and also folks in our subscribing congregations. By popular demand, we package up four sermons in the Fall and Four in the Spring for the use of lay-lead congregations near and far. Most are in southern Colorado, and we've had subscribers in the Midwest and the south as well. Also, lots of individuals all over the world watch these sermons on the internet...sometimes they even send money to support this part of our ministry. So...lots of folks get these sermons, thanks in large part to the video and audio teams...yeah!

And also...welcome everyone. Whatever you believe or don't believe or have questions about...you are welcome here. One of the things we are going to talk about this morning is the subset of our congregation...about a third, at last count, who are sometimes called "freethinkers"atheists, secularists, humanists, skeptics, and some agnostics. Another thing we are going to talk about is how most UU's, whether they think of themselves as liberal Christians, pagans, or believe in some kind of transcendent power in the universe, are actually also Freethinkers, because Freethinking is a WAY of coming to conclusions, not a particular conclusion. We'll get back to that.

Unitarian Universalism is the largest of only a few faith groups which are open to Humanists at all, and the American Humanist Society has challenged us to take a careful look at our practices to the end of being "freethinker friendly." (And here's a shout-out to Roy Moody, who brought this to my attention.) Looking at their program, I think we come out pretty well in this congregation. We've got several discussion and practice groups specifically for people who don't go with the god hypothesis, we don't sneer at anyone's faith, and I think we say fairly frequently that, while we have a worship service that must meet the needs of many kinds of faiths, nobody has to believe in or even participate in things that don't feel right to them. We encourage people to take things like hymn texts as poetry rather than rigid statements, and that makes us much better hymn singers...which is more fun.

That Hindu story of the blind men and the elephant...that's one of our core stories. The whole truth is larger than anyone can know, and given that, it makes perfect sense to both honor the experience and reasoning that people have about the meaning of life, AND to provide opportunities for introduction to the way others view life. That's the message of the mural behind me: that different values, philosophies, and traditions are both beautiful in themselves AND a part of a whole.

One thing that caught my attention in the Humanist's literature was the statement that while we UU's know what we mean when we say that we're open to people of many beliefs, some of the Freethinkers who might come to us DON'T know what we mean, and they are sometimes averse to that word, "belief" and assume the worst. (The worst being believing, as Mark Twain quipped, "what any damn fool knows ain't true.") I'm thinking that that's a very good point, and that, until we have a chance to explain to folks what we mean by "belief" it would be good to advertise ourselves as open to persons of many beliefs and no beliefs. Even though to my way of thinking there's nobody on the planet with no beliefs, I think we should reach out to Freethinkers by starting where they are.

Freethinkers have good reason to feel suspicious of organized religion, of course, because as a whole, organized religion has been at best dismissive of them and at worst, dangerous to them. Atheists often don't feel free to share their faith with their co-workers or neighbors for fear of being rejected. Until a few years ago, surveys showed that the religious preference that the most people said they'd never tolerate in a presidential candidate was "atheist"...and that's by a margin of nearly 50%. Unfortunately, that's lately been surpassed by "Muslim"...but of course, what's unfortunate is that anybody has to even do such a survey at all in a nation.

We've had a couple of politicians in this congregation over the years...one found that his opponent had published a pamphlet criticizing his religious faith, assuming that if he was a UU, he did not believe in God or wasn't a Christian...assumptions you can't actually make about persons in a free faith. The other, State Senator Mimi Stewart says she has encountered enough scorn and ignorance from people about her faith that she is very careful about whether she shares it.

There are a lot of atheists, agnostics, and humanists in this nation: the US Census suggests about a million and a half atheists, two million agnostics, and 90,000 humanists in this nation and very likely...since all three of these designations are correlated with high education levels...that at least some would make fine holders of political office. It's likely that many of those atheists and agnostics would identify as humanists but didn't know the definition of the word.

And what is the definition of those words?

An atheist is someone who doesn't believe there is a god or spiritual realm in our lives. They believe that this earth is all we get, and that what we know by reason and the scientific method is what we know.

Agnostics believe that it is not possible to know for sure whether there is or is not a god. In my experience, agnostics come in two varieties, those who know that they don't know but lean towards thinking there is no god, and those who know they don't know but lean towards thinking there is some kind of higher power, spiritual realm, or God in our universe. But nobody ever asks THAT on surveys.

Humanists began in the renaissance as believers in God who put a special emphasis on human reason, human welfare, and humanity in general, but these days, almost all humanists are atheists or agnostics who believe that, as was said, many centuries ago, "Man is the measure of all things." Humanists hold a high opinion of human nature and consciousness, which they believe arose naturally in the course of evolution. They would mostly balk at calling this sacred, but humanity fills the role in humanism that divinity fills in many other religions: the thing at the top of the heap.

Now, to break things up a little bit, we have two readings. The first reading is about atheists...actually it is a joke....and we tell it in fun, but also because it also shows up some traits which atheists and freethinkers often display: an integrity to their own experience...this guy you are going to hear about only believes what he has experienced...he is faithful to his own heart and mind. Atheists are also often very ethical people, glad to prove that you can be good without god. Finally, atheists are often very appreciative of the beauty and abundance of nature. You don't have to be grateful TO anybody to be appreciative. The second reading relates to a key value of Unitarian Universalism, one of the things that distinguishes us from other faith groups, especially Christian faith groups.... We honor doubt.

The Atheist Meets a Bear

Buddha Reading

Freethinking as a Way of Life

“Cherish your doubts,” wrote one UU minister in a reading which has been in two hymnals now, “for doubt is the caregiver of truth.” The Buddha would agree. So would Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of our forefathers, who wrote, in an essay on Self Reliance, “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.” In those days, the word “mind” was used to mean, not only the rational mind, but the feeling capacity, so it’s most accurate for us to say, “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind and heart.”

Unitarian Universalism is a free faith, or, a free-thinking faith. We don’t rely on creeds to articulate what everybody has to believe to be members, or on scriptures, wise though they might be, nor traditions. Each individual has the right and the responsibility to use those sources, and others, like reason, science, and those unexplainable experiences of awe and wonder which sometimes overtake us, to come to their own understanding of life and the world, of god, death, and meaning.

In that sense, we’re all free thinkers. Some of us are freethinkers who have concluded that there is no god, and some of us are freethinkers who have concluded that there is.

The ability to be a free thinker is not born in us, and it does not develop in every person. Children by nature first focus on imitating and then understanding how their parents and teachers and other significant people in their community make sense of the world, and that’s necessary and completely appropriate. So our own children are very likely to sound like freethinkers, because that’s the major value of the community they are immersed in...they are told over and over that we will respect their beliefs and encourage their growth in faith, we ask them what they think rather than telling them what to think, and so on. So while they sound like highly advanced freethinkers, they are actually just as intellectually immersed in their community as almost all children their age.

At adolescence, and often later, human beings develop enough emotional and intellectual tools to actually become freethinkers; to separate enough from “what everybody who is anybody” believes and ask and answer the question, “Do I REALLY believe that?” Not everyone develops the intellectual skill to do this, and many who are perfectly smart never feel a reason to do it. The faith of their childhood works for them and they don’t feel a need to delve deeply into it.

But most of us can remember a time when the faith of our childhood didn’t work well for us. Perhaps we couldn’t square the idea of a loving god with the idea of hell, or the literally read creation story with what we were learning in science class, or the idea the our friend who was Jewish or Gay was not “saved”. Alternatively, perhaps we were raised with a rationalist or secular faith and then had a spiritual experience that we couldn’t explain away, or discovered a need for and a comfort in prayer. Perhaps our new beliefs involved a painful confrontation

with those significant others whose teachings we were leaving. Becoming a freethinker is not an easy step, and some just don't take it.

Here, we believe that it is often a necessary step to take, a step of self knowledge and a step of coming fully into ourselves. And although it might happen first during college or military service years, it can happen again, as we continue during our lives to sort out what we believe, how to think about our lives and our experiences, and as we learn more of human wisdom. There are people here who think for themselves at age 25 and leave their childhood faith for this one, and at age 65, come to see a new way of thinking about the faith of their childhood that allows them to return. We wish them well when they go, and rejoice in the part that this community played in nurturing growing faith and freethinking, wherever it takes us.

And we insist that everyone is welcome here, including those who are happy with what they believe and see no reason to change. We trust individuals to know where they should be...we don't make that decision for them. The only way you can get thrown out of this church is by behavior that we just can't cope with and the person can't or won't change. We've only removed a person from membership twice in the past 27 years...and both times the matters involved the police.

And perhaps this is the moment for me to defend my opinion that nobody is without beliefs. While honoring the sensitivities of newcomers who equate "Believing" with "believing irrational things," or "traditional beliefs," the fact is that everybody has beliefs. A belief is an assumption about life that can't be proven as fact. One belief that many of us have, for instance, is the belief in the basic goodness of human beings, as distorted and even dangerous as they can sometimes be. You can't prove that, and it's challenged in every day's paper. But that's the fundamental belief of Humanism. Rationalists believe that there is no spiritual realm from which to draw wisdom, and that we just be content with what science can prove is true, but paradoxically, that too, is a belief. We mostly believe in treating others as we wish to be treated, but that is not written in the stars, and it can end very badly indeed, as yesterday's newspaper story about my doctor proved all too thoroughly. But we choose to believe and live it anyway.

Well, we told an atheist joke, so now we need to tell a believer joke, just to keep things even. This is one comes from the Jewish tradition.

There is this guy names Goldman, who's always been poor, and without much education or many skills, he knows he will always be poor...unless he wins the lottery. So he decides to add to his daily prayers that he will win the lottery. Every day, he prays to God that he could win the lottery, and it never happens.

One day, when he's very old and frustrated, he gets on his knees and prays, "God, I'm a good man, and I've lived a good life, and I pray faithfully every day. And all I have ever asked for is to win the lottery. God, it's my only chance for a little comfort in my life! Would it hurt you so much to let me win, just once?"

And suddenly, there was a clap of thunder from the clouds and a loud voice said, "Do me a favor, Goldman, BUY A TICKET!"

You know, it is great fun to have a job which require you to spend time on internet joke sites, and in my perusal, I found one more joke which made me laugh out loud. It doesn't really have much of a moral, but I'm going to tell it to you anyway.

Late one night, a burglar breaks into a house that he thinks is empty. He tiptoes through the living room and suddenly he hears a loud voice say, "Jesus is watching you."

He freezes and looks around fearfully. In a dark corner, he spots a parrot on a perch.

He heaves a sigh of relief and asked the parrot, "Was that you who said Jesus is watching me?"

"Jesus is watching you." says the parrot.

Now, the burglar is really relaxed. "What's your name?"

"Clarence," said the bird.

"That's a dumb name for a parrot," sneers the burglar. "What idiot named you Clarence?"

The parrot says, "The same idiot who named the Rottweiler, Jesus."

With that good laugh, lets acknowledge that there are many kinds of religion, and they have many uses in our lives, but like all powerful things, some dangers: That good ethics, appreciation, and a wise proactivity about our lives are good things for ourselves and for others, and that we who have found ourselves to be freethinkers, atheists, agnostics, Humanists, and skeptics have ways to live rich and faithful lives, and always remember that all are welcome to this freethinker friendly congregation.

Now...let's sing!