

LAST SERMON SERIES
PART 1: THE RESURRECTION OF ALL SOULS
 All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan
 June 6, 2010
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INVOCATION

We give thanks for this day, and its beauty and promise.
 We give thanks for the light returning from darkness.
 We give thanks for the blessings of family, friends, and the company of companions.
 We give thanks for hands that hold ours when we are hurting, that hold up our bodies when we are weary, and soothe our spirits when we seek solace.
 We give thanks for a day we did not create, and the hope that lies in every moment of trial and triumph.
 We give thanks for having been given trust and love, to give trust and love back to the world, and from the gift of this day, build a greater life for all souls.

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this Chalice to remember a truth,
 Consecrated through the ages by the service and sacrifice
 Of individuals and communities:
 There abides a unity and freedom of the Spirit,
 Expressed through a love for all souls.

READING

Unfold Your Own Myth, Jelaluddin Rumi

Who gets up early to discover the moment light begins?
 Who finds us here circling, bewildered, like atoms?
 Who comes to a spring thirsty
 and sees the moon reflected in it?
 Who, like Jacob blind with grief and age,
 smells the shirt of his lost son
 and can see again?
 Who lets a bucket down and brings up
 a flowing prophet? Or like Moses goes for fire
 and finds what burns inside the sunrise?

Jesus slips into a house to escape enemies,
 and opens a door to the other world.
 Solomon cuts open a fish, and there's a gold ring.
 Omar storms in to kill the prophet

and leaves with blessings.
 Chase a deer and end up everywhere!
 An oyster opens his mouth to swallow one drop.
 Now there's a pearl.
 A vagrant wanders empty ruins.
 Suddenly he's wealthy.

But don't be satisfied with stories, how things
 Have gone with others. Unfold
 your own myth, without complicated explanation,
 so everyone will understand the passage,
We have opened you.

Start walking toward Shams. Your legs will get heavy
 and tired. Then comes a moment
 of feeling the wings you've grown,
 lifting.

Prayer

Be still.
 Listen to the stones of the wall.
 Be silent, they try
 to speak your

name.
 Listen
 to the living walls.

Who are you?
 Who
 are you? Whose
 silence are you?

-Thomas Merton

Sermon

"In its very invisibility," wrote cultural analyst Slavoj Zizek, *"ideology is here, more than ever..."* Three centuries ago when the term "ideology" was coined it meant the study of ideas, but now it consists of a system of doctrines and beliefs not supported by rational discussion, but driven by an unwillingness to engage other perspectives or entertain compromise. Ideology is a singular perspective put forward as truth and fueled by humanity's darker motives.

Because it is invisible, ideology expands like a transparent oil to contaminate government and religion, conservative and liberal, national and local, social groups and individual psyches. It is the spiritual pollutant of our age.

The distortion holds there is one way to truth, and “I” possess it. The conservative politician proclaims this while the conservative religionist believes and lives by it. The liberal politician proclaims it while the liberal religionist and liberal secularist believe and live by it. The conservative claims to have the answer while the liberal claims no answers exist beyond what an individual believes. They are both slaves to ideology and they know it not.

This is the theological yield of my last ten years in Grand Rapids. I thought it might just be a local analysis. Locally, it yields the peculiar local need to be accepted by others and acceptable to others. But, I was wrong. It is not just local. It is the 21st century plague.

It is the offspring of the anxiety of uncertainty wedded to unreflective conceit. The conservative is insecure, the liberal timid and withdrawing. It drives the conservative to irrational commitment. It drives the liberal to unresponsive apathy, or worse still, equally irrational commitment. It separates and divides all social arrangements driving a wedge between all souls. And we grasp it not.

This is the first of my last four sermons, the last sermon series I imagine I will ever deliver. I may fill a pulpit here and there, but that is nothing like being in covenant with a particular congregation, established through the promises made between the two to walk together. In our faith tradition a minister and congregation share a special relationship, formed by a promise, our form of love, and aimed toward freedom. You promise to become a Unitarian Universalist church, disciplining yourselves collectively and individually using the values, principles, ideas and beliefs, customs and practices that we have embodied for centuries and which gives us our faith identity. I promise to tell you the truth as I see and experience it. You promise to embody trust in all human relationships. I promise to represent this “self,” this individual who I am, and no one else; live into who I am and who I become in relationship to you, as forthrightly as self-reflection musters.

Some have commented to me after I withdrew my name for your Called Minister position last September, in effect submitting my resignation effectively August 1, that I could now tell you the truth. From the beginning I hope I have not failed saying what I see and experience as true. To the extent I have failed to do that, I am sorry. I love you enough to try and not say what I do not experience or believe. It is from our love that freedom is possible.

Besides, in our covenant you are a better Unitarian Universalist church than you give yourselves credit for, and have loved even when you didn’t like what you heard from me, didn’t agree with what I did or said!

Because most of the time in religion people really don't want to hear the truth of someone else's experience. Most all just want to hear their own versions of truth confirmed, their own opinions writ large as God's ways. Conservative religionists want to hear their own orthodoxy, their own version of right and correct belief, spewed back at them. Liberal religionists are no different. They don't want to hear anything that might upset their orthodoxy that truth is completely relative, as in I have "my Truth" and you have "your Truth." Liberals don't want to hear they are accountable to something larger than their own ideas. They want to be beholden only to the "self" and not to an "other," unless it is a "politically correct other." If anyone knows the distortion which constrains liberals, and the pernicious effects of this self-imposed and concealed restraint, I do! It's invisible ideology!

The oil from the spill in the Gulf is toxic to life. But the irony is, there has been this invisible film infecting our world for quite some time now. The irony is just the evidence that material things hold spiritual revelation. Conservatives shouted "Drill, baby, drill," while for years now liberals have driven their SUV's to environmental demonstrations! No one is without taint, and your chuckling means you know it. "Humor is close to the red hot fire that is truth," wrote the poet.

"We 'feel free' because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom," wrote Slavoj Zizek. We are slaves to our insistence that we are right, and the chains of our uncertainty and the manacles of our hubris keep us imprisoned. And we keep this under a cloak of invisibility because we fear the future.

Humanity can do better than that. You have taught me that. Our walking together these past eight years has taught me that. You taught me that the spiritual life today is about training the eyes to see this distortion we move in, disciplining the mind to transcend this distortion and be free of it, and aiming the heart far, far past this distortion, and towards the Affection which formed all Creation, as an act of hope. Every Sunday I would try to preach from this pulpit how your teaching has influenced me through the bonds of Love.

We are all in this together. Whether building a single congregation from the ground up, or building bonds of affection amongst the human family from the wisdom of all human experience before us. We are all in this together. The "this" involves establishing bonds deeper than the blood ties of family and tribe, wider than ethnicity and nation and even religion, a *"freedom and unity of the Spirit expressed through a love for all souls."*

You taught me that existence is a Covenant of Being, a cosmic version of the covenant that binds you together as a spiritual community. This congregation is a microcosm of what can dissipate the ill effects of the ooze. Individuals who know who they are as human beings created in the Divine image that is freedom. Human beings who comprehend that we are, by our very birth, united together in existence's grand promise. And that it is a love for all souls, made real amidst humanity's unimaginable

variety of make-up and experience, which will not only save Creation but assist its flowering unto fulfillment.

On September 9, 2001, after your first meeting, when you called your group the Church in the Park, because you met in Manhattan Park, your leadership called me and asked if I would be your minister. Frankly, I had had it with churches, though I hoped you would become one. I believe freedom is spiritual, but I was exhausted with hearing people talking liberalism but walking the path of ideological narrowness. I love the prospect of a new day and was worn out with people who worshipped the past and former ministers. I will be a former minister on August 1st. I believe that a minister is a caretaker of the souls of his congregation, and I was tired of those who insisted that I conform to their unbeliefs. I have my own unbeliefs thank you, and don't need anybody else's. I needed something more than the ooze. But I did not know where it could be found.

So, when you first called, I said, "No, I don't want to be your minister. I will lead worship for you *if you want to become a Unitarian Universalist congregation*. You decide, and let me know." I was afraid of love. When you decided you wanted to become a church, and a Unitarian Universalist congregation at that, and wanted me to lead worship, and called, I said yes. Your consent met my consent, and we started writing a new story by making a promise.

And frankly, I didn't know how many chapters the story of our promise together would be. That's the nature of a relationship borne of spiritual freedom, in freely given consent and freely made promise. Neither knows because the bonds of love that keep open the gates of freedom, are aimed beyond any one of us or any group of us. That's what makes it free, and rooted in a Love that will transform us for the sake of all souls, and not just "me," and will transform us as we cannot transform ourselves.

And so we learned to walk together a distinctive path which I now think took us towards what can transcend the distortions and narrow ideological ways of our age. To remain open when the conservative insists upon the closed mind and the liberal resigns and retires to the hardened heart. To be willing to cast a suspicious eye upon those who claim to be certain, and keen on speaking for an "other" they won't even listen to! You even had this suspicion put on a T-shirt which somehow made its way all the way down to Austin, Texas, when someone called me on the church phone and asked where he could get the shirt that read: "Admire those who seek the truth, question those who have found it." Hold this suspicion close because human beings will quickly make idols of their politics and their religions. And we all will do this because we are all too eager to project our own wishes and preferences and beliefs and ideas and explanations upon others and upon all situations and events. Out of insecurity and fear we will not maintain the "otherness" of others, their dissimilarity from us. A world full of "Bretns" might be "right" from my standpoint, but there would be no delight or wonder. The variety of human experience is the inherent joy of creation, and humanity needs be rigorous in remembering this.

But, the spiritual life, we learned together, must also compliment this rigor with a strange vow of obedience: To promise to listen to each other. To promise to the future that we will learn to connect with all souls, every “other.” This is an even harder discipline. To be open to the experience of others, to hear their story, the narrative that makes up their lives. It is symbolized in your calling a minister to speak from your pulpit for you to hear; in order to gain the spiritual skill of allowing others’ lives to be symbols of the sacred and holy bursting into our world. To unfold your own myth needs another to read your life as a holy journey, a sacred narrative. We remain unfree until we gain the spiritual language of freedom, to listen and proclaim, “Your life holds the Divine within it. Seek that out and let it form your life on this earth.”

Two days after the first gathering of the group which would become All Souls Community Church, an event happened that, strangely enough, is connected to the Gulf oil tragedy and especially so if you have trained your eyes to see spiritually. The events of 9/11 violently cracked open a world threatened by ideology, by how human beings can hold their personal systems of political and religious beliefs as if they are God’s. Human beings will have beliefs and ideas and explanations, make no mistake about that. We will have faith, trust in something, make no mistake about that either. The question, then, is not to have faith or not, but which faith to hold. The events of 9/11 made that clear, like this current filthy ooze. Where will you aim your ultimate trust?. Will humanity remain ignorant of its real challenge and the ways it has been created in a Divine image to transcend those challenges? Will humanity continue live in fear, claiming a certainty it doesn’t possess or resigning itself to timidity because hope seems inadequate, incomprehensible, and absent?

The particular promise that we made that shaped the story of our togetherness these past 8 years is coming to a close. I will try to keep close what I learned from living in our promise, as I hope you will too, individually and as a congregation. I will venture out into the educational community of the university to challenge the distortions of our age in a new venue and with a new focus: To overcome ignorance with knowledge in order that the free mind might flourish. And your adventure will begin in a new way with a new spiritual leader, but with an old mission that has formed the best of all spiritual communities throughout all time: To overcome fear with trust, and give the world the hope it needs and deserves. Unfold your myth to love all souls as the source of freedom and human unity.

I think that is your myth because you gave me love when I was deemed unacceptable by liberal and conservative alike. Maybe your myth, your holy story, your sacred narrative to tell to the world in various ways, but mostly by your actions, is that you are called by a Wild-Eye God who has no standards by our measurements, to offer love to those who are deemed or feel themselves unacceptable.

You resurrected All Souls. Make the resurrection worthwhile and real and meaningful for generations to come. Bear your truth and live it so that our age will push past its distortions and live into the promise of all creation: *There is a freedom and unity of the Spirit expressed through a love for all souls.*

So Be It. Shalom. Namaste, Amen.

Benediction

And now, Be not afraid. And seeing there is naught to fear, and bearing witness to what can never die, go forth into the world in peace.

Be of good courage.

Search all things

And hold fast to that which is good.

Render unto no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the faint-hearted.

Support the weak.

Help the afflicted, and those deemed unacceptable.

Love all men, love all women, love all children,

Love all souls.

Serving the Most High.

And rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.

Amen.