
Sermon
Calvinists in the Closet

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
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First Reading: Revelation 14:1-5 (NRSV)

¹Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ²And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, ³and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth. ⁴It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, ⁵and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless.

Second Reading: William J. Neely. *Heaven Within, Among, and Beyond*. (A paper presented at The Prairie Group, 2009.)

I'm sitting at a Shelby County Board of Commissioners public hearing on a proposed ordinance that would make it illegal for the County to discriminate against its employees on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. The meeting room is packed. The issue has simmered in the community for weeks now, and those in attendance have their minds made up. Pastors have joined the debate, with conservative clergy speaking publicly in opposition to the proposal and liberal ones responding with proclamations of support. I am there to speak, again, in support, with a United Church of Christ colleague on my left and an American Baptist colleague on my right. Several other affirming colleagues sit nearby.

Well into hours of public comment on the proposal, we watch a citizen step to the microphone and begin addressing the Commission. She is opposed to the ordinance, but that's not the interesting part. The interesting part comes toward the end of her improvised speech, when she several times punctuates her opposition by proclaiming, "I am elect." She emphasizes the "I" and the "ELECT". Her previous words were not memorable, nor were most of those heard that day; certainly my own were no exception. But "I am elect" stood out immediately in my ears and those of my colleagues. They sigh audibly. I sit in curiosity, wondering why the doctrine of election had been introduced into this civic discussion.

She was saved, indeed, she is saved. And in her self-assurance, she turns away from the concerns of the reprobates who surround her. Her pending residence with God in heaven gives her the authority to distribute justice here and now, and the

reprobates have no place in her line. With her eyes on heaven, she has little concern for the needs of those who will not arrive there with her.

Sermon

“Hail the Glorious Golden City!” The title and lyrics of our opening hymn offer a wondrous image of the world. Most importantly, it’s not an image of the world to come, but an image of the world as it is right now. And who has created this wonderful world? We have. I know this because the second verse of the hymn says so: “We are builders of that city.” We’ve done a wonderful job and we deserve a pat-on-the-back. Don’t get me wrong, I like the hymn. It’s upbeat and singable and it’s good to think well of ourselves, a better thing than Jonathan Edwards’ vision of people as “loathsome insects”. Not that we human beings are perfect. We have plenty of flaws. It’s just that I don’t see any reason to go around inventing imaginary ones. On the other hand, it is possible to have an opinion of one’s self so exaggerated that it can be destructive. I believe an example of that has been in the news lately. I am speaking of Tareq and Michael Salahi, the White House gate crashers. Based on what I’ve read about them it is my opinion that they are – to borrow a phrase from the vernacular – so full of themselves and their own self importance that they couldn’t believe they weren’t invited. They are people who understand themselves as being among “the Elect.” Perhaps not the elect of the Book of Revelation and Calvinism, but an elect nonetheless.

The idea of being part of an elect groups is indigenous to the Unitarian religious tradition. Our religious ancestors were the Pilgrims and Puritans. As good followers of John Calvin they held the deep conviction that they were among the Elect, the chosen few who would be saved. In order to become a member of one of their churches it was necessary to give evidence of your election. They would be among the select few who would sing the words of that new song before the throne. They did not necessarily hold to the belief that only one hundred forty-four thousand would be saved, but they knew it wasn’t everybody.

I suspect the Pilgrim and Puritan idea of the Elect is, more often than not, a strange melody to the ears of modern Unitarians. But it’s not that strange in practice. I was a Unitarian when I went to a Presbyterian seminary. Presbyterians, of course, share American Unitarianism’s roots in Calvinism, but they continue to openly assert his theological heritage. I didn’t expect to find much common ground between the contemporary manifestations of those two traditions. I soon discovered I was wrong. Attending a seminary where I learned much about Calvinism led to a surprising discovery. There is still much of Calvin to be found in our churches, especially when it comes to the idea of the Elect. A certain arrogance and feeling of superiority is not unknown among adherents of this faith – as is true of all faiths.

Bill Neely’s encounter with the woman who proudly declared, “I am Elect” is a good example of what I mean. She was talking about being a part of that one hundred forty-four thousand, about being a part of those who are going to be saved. But in universal terms she was declaring herself to be special, so special that she need not listen to or be concerned about others – except to look down on them. Pride. Hubris.

Set aside questions about divine judgment and inclusion in celestial choirs and there remains pride and hubris. In that sense there are definitely Calvinists in the closet of modern day Unitarians. I do not recall hearing a Unitarian declare he or she is “Elect”, but I have heard more than one Unitarian declare – in tones just as arrogant – their religious and moral superiority to others. Yes, there are Calvinists in our closets – and in other closets as well. On many occasions I have seen letters to the editor in our local newspaper declare that as Christians the writer was morally superior to other people, that it was the fact of being a Christian that made the person morally superior and those who did not hold such beliefs were – by necessity – morally inferior in behavior. I have heard the same argument made by Muslims and Buddhists. And if you read your newspaper yesterday you may have seen the article on the upcoming lecture by Greg Epstein, Harvard University’s Humanist Chaplain. He is reported as having said humanists - by which he means atheists (He has a narrow understanding of humanism!) – are statistically less likely to break the law than any other identifiable social group. But all of these examples share a common quality. Each is an example of people who see themselves as belonging to an Elect that excludes other people, setting the ‘other’ off as in some way inferior.

At this point, I believe I owe an apology to Calvinism. The belief that a person is part of an elect is not limited to Calvinism or religion. It takes different forms – sometimes religious, other times political, social, racial, ethnic or nationalistic to name just a few. Liberals are evil and conservatives good. Conservatives are evil and liberals good. Government bureaucracies are, by definition, bloated and inefficient, while bureaucracies don’t exist in the private sector. White people are better than people of color. Light skinned blacks are superior to dark skinned blacks. Japanese are better than Koreans. Those with money are better than those without. The last is the essential message of the Gospel of Prosperity. If God wants you to be rich, then wealth is a sign of God’s blessing and you are part of the elect. If you are poor, then obviously God doesn’t like you. And if God doesn’t like you, it means it is entirely appropriate for others to walk all over you.

One of the best known examples of being part of a religious elect is the tradition within Judaism of being God’s chosen people. It has descendents, most notably the idea of American Exceptionalism. But being part of an elect is not necessarily a bad thing. I believe it depends on what one means by the claim. If, as Bill Neely said of the woman at the meeting, it means one doesn’t have to be concerned with the needs of others, that one has the right to arbitrarily dispense justice to others, I have no use for it. It becomes the basis for empires – personal or national. It is the kind of Exceptionalism that insists one has the right to act for one’s self-interest without regard to the interest of the other because the other is outside the circle. That’s one understanding of the Jewish people as God’s chosen. But there’s another way of thinking about it. A Rabbi once told me that the real meaning of being God’s chosen people wasn’t about getting special privileges, it was about taking on the burden of special obligations. It wasn’t the right to conquer other people, it was the obligation to put yourself, your whole life, on the line that there might be justice for everyone – especially the weak, especially those who lack power. It’s an idea embedded in the Jewish scriptural tradition in Deuteronomy that says “And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.

I believe the same is true of American Exceptionalism which is rooted in the idea of America as the “New Israel”. As a country we can choose to be the Elect, the Elect of God, and see that as justification for an American empire, an American hegemony of the world, dispensing justice as we see fit, as it benefits us, taking the world’s resources without regard to how it affects others. We can also choose to be the country that has a special obligation to stand up for justice for all – and all that that implies. It would mean being not an empire of military might, but an empire of justice – a country with the greatest military might the world has ever known, but a country that understands might does not make right, that America will be in the right only if her power is used for the right. That is a much greater challenge than being the new Roman empire. And in our personal lives, it is a greater challenge to use our resources, our power for the cause of justice.

That does not mean that as individuals – or as a country- that we should shy away from the use of power. What it means is that if we are going to see ourselves as an elect, it should be as people who are called to set a special example and to exercise power with a certain humility. It is to reject the idea that power is self-justifying. That is how I believe modern Unitarians should see themselves – as putting upon ourselves not special privilege, but special obligations, higher standards and appropriate humility. Unfortunately, the lure of privilege is powerful. We human beings seem to have an innate tendency to believe we are special, that we are called to be a part of the heavenly choir singing the special song that no others can learn. It is an attractive idea, one that would seem to free us from the restraints that normally bind us. But I don’t think so. I don’t think the Salahi’s are an example of people who are free. I don’t think the woman Bill Neely spoke of was free. I see them as imprisoned by their own hubris, trapped in a prison they have selected for themselves.

I said that our religious ancestors were good Calvinists who insisted that only those who could give evidence of being among the Elect were allowed to join the church. An essential part of that evidence was the ability to describe a conversion experience. Over time they discovered there were many people living amongst them – especially amongst the children of church members – who seemed to be people of good character, but who, being honest, could not say they had had a conversion experience. Perplexed by the good character and honesty of such people they relented and began to accept people not on the basis of being amongst the Elect, but on the grounds of observable good behavior. It was an important decision, a retreat from pride. They stopped being churches that were only for the saints. They became churches of saints and sinners. It’s a lesson we would do well to remember.

Amen.