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Sermon  
***Good News: I Just Couldn't Keep it to Myself!***

Mr. Randy Lewis  
Hope Unitarian Church  
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Mr. Lewis is a seminary student at Philips Theological Seminary.  
We were delighted to have him as our guest preacher.

**Sermon**

Rev. Bryant gave me some advise concerning preaching. He said, "Preach on the burr under your saddle." The things that are under my saddle are not necessarily popular issues and may not be even relative to the audience, but I have been told to trust the process.

Last year, I had the pleasure of accompanying the Senior Pastor of All Souls, Marlin Lavanhar, to the annual Prairie Group meeting in Illinois. While there, I met many ministers who, for the most part and with the exception of All Souls Church of Tulsa, had medium to small congregations. Many of them had to deal with church growth issues, or, maybe I should say, the lack of growth.

One of the primary issues was generational in nature. They were concerned about the average age of their congregants and about the future of their churches. The prevailing question was, how can we as Unitarian Universalists identify and draw those who would become the next generation. How can we build a viable congregation to ensure the life, the continuation of the church? My mind began to run to some of the possible solutions to the dilemma, but I kept silent; I "just held my peace." I wasn't there to teach or to impart my limited knowledge to these very learned scholars, ministers, and educators; I was there to listen and to learn. So I just filed it away to visit some other time...

Much later, I was in a church meeting at All Souls and I overheard the senior pastor say that growing a larger church was not the church's vision. On another occasion, I overheard the same minister defend himself and deny a charge that he was trying to grow a mega-church. Now, this was one of the strangest things I had ever heard. Coming from a fundamentalist background, I thought the statement was very odd, but like with the previous observation, I just filed it away.

Recently, I took a class with Rev. Ron Robinson on Unitarian Universalist history and polity with Phillips Theological Seminary. It was an intriguing class but I left with the feeling of wanting more. I have a long history with fundamentalist religious organizations, but I still knew very little about Unitarian Universalists, so I was hungry to learn as much as I could. One of the required readings was a book by Conrad Wright entitled "*Walking Together.*" In it, he spelled out the differences between Unitarian Universalist and evangelical fundamentalist churches. The primary issue, he denoted,

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is the overall message. Our message promotes freedom, tolerance, reason, and individualism. The author emphasized one of the most important differences, the difference between the creed and covenant, of course. I was looking for him to add one other important factor, a difference that was very clear to me but one that he did not mention or discuss much; and again, I just filed it away in my internal central processing unit to visit on a later date.

You should be able to imagine now that there was so much under my saddle that the ride was getting a little uncomfortable.

Then finally, I was in a unity and diversity meeting at my church when I suddenly said a taboo word. A brother looked at me and pointed out that “we don’t do that here,” people come as they will. Another brother looked at me and said, “Yeah, it’s the culture.”

The word was ‘evangelism’... I know... But please don’t leave me without hearing me out first...

This is what I was thinking during Prairie Group in Illinois; this is the word that Conrad Wright spoke very little of in his book, and this was by far one of the biggest differences between fundamentalists and UUs... It is their culture that from the time you accept their creed, you are taught how to proselytize.

This is a major difference that I discovered experientially between fundamentalist churches and UU communities. In our effort to distinguish ourselves from evangelical, we have disavowed certain liturgies and religious verbiage that could, for all intents and purposes, serve us well. We have disavowed the concept of evangelism and ceased sharing the good news.

Perhaps, we trained ourselves to be content with so little, in terms of even accidentally running into someone who holds the same values as we do. Perhaps, we settled on keeping the peace and not rocking the boat with our progressive ideas amidst our conservative and fundamentalist surroundings. Sure, we would accept those who come to us, but we often will not make it easy for them to find us or to find out about us; sort of like in a medieval quest.

And perhaps, this is precisely why our churches do not experience much growth. Church strategists have remarked that in order to remain a viable denomination, there should be 38 new churches each year... Last year, there were only 6 new churches in our association.

Recently, Marlin preached a sermon entitled “*How Jesus Saved Me.*” In the sermon, he encouraged the church to reclaim certain liturgies that have been mostly professed and frequently abused by evangelical/fundamentalist religious organizations. He emphasized that our UU history was founded on Judeo-Christian values. This rich history should lead us to a more inclusive approach of all the traditions UU encompasses. Still, we may want to rediscover original meanings and symbolism by stripping away the incorrect interpretations, negative connotations, and misleading

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assumptions that the modern fundamentalist Christianity assigned to these liturgies, words, and concepts. We may want to seek what these ancient concepts, in their original unadulterated states, could hold for us, UUs, today.

Humanist and author Greg Epstein weighed in on the subject in his book *“Good Without God.”* Epstein compels all nonbelievers to reclaim certain religious rituals and symbolisms – rituals, surrounding births, deaths, and marital unions, that hold them sacred. I will add that today, we are challenged no longer to let those who have hijacked religion with their extreme views dictate how we will respond to the needs of our community and the world.

Being a business major, I am familiar with concepts and strategies that successful businesses employ to increase their exposure, potential customer base, and overall profitability. Business strategists will confirm that at least ten contacts must be made for every one and a half successful turnovers. So, from a business prospective, it is imperative that our offerings, as a religious organization, are made known.

Now, I am not trying to equate business with religion. However, it is important to realize that human psychology works in general very similarly. Where a certain particular product sold by a company may enhance the perceived quality of the consumer’s life to a certain degree, ideas and worldviews may make a difference between life and death, and tremendously change, hopefully to the better, the individual.

You see, the dilemma I have is this. I am in a culture that does not encourage me in the sharing of my faith. I was raised in a culture that taught me that I must share my faith. I was ashamed of many of the things I said to others in the past as an evangelical, but I am now proud of who I am as a Unitarian Universalist. It is as if when I meet people and they say, “Hello, I am Mike,” I say “Hello, I am a Unitarian.” Because they don’t know anything about us, they usually say, “A Uni... what?”

They might even ask me about where I am getting that joy. “Well, I am glad you asked,” I would say to them. **AND THIS IS HOW WE EVANGILIZE.** You see, there is a community of believers and nonbelievers, of humanists and Buddhists, of ‘butchers, and bakers, and candlestick makers’... There is a community whose message is not one of bigotry and hate clothed in the garments of religious fanaticism that preaches a message of fear and intolerance while claiming love, or a denomination whose message discourages inquiry while claiming faith.

For UUs, however, the word ‘evangelism’ should not mean proselytizing, converting, or brainwashing. The word ‘evangelism’ does not mean a pushy salesman trying to sell you something that you don’t need nor want. The word ‘evangelism’ does not involve being threatened by lemon-faced, hellfire-and-brimstone believers telling you about the otherness of existence. No, no, no. **EVANGELISM** for us is simply responding to the inquiry about the joy that sustains us. Somebody may want to know why you are always happy. In a world full of bad news and little hope, why are you so hopeful? “Well,” you can say. “I have some good news.”

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For there is a community whose message of hope is such a treasure. It is not a message of imposition, seeking to convert and conquer. In a world stuck in intolerance and divisions, ours is the message of harmony, peace, and joy. It is a message that can transform this world. It is what many are hoping and searching for. It is a message of which I am not ashamed: It's the GOOD NEWS of Unitarian Universalism.

This is my dilemma. Like the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament, this truth is like fire shut up in my bones. And I just can't hold my peace. I have got to tell somebody. And I know, the more that I share my joy, the more others will be drawn to the source: this community. Can you imagine what our churches would look like if sharing our joys and values was our culture?

I am not saying that church growth is good purely for financial benefits or to ensure the next generation church viability. Church growth should be a result, not a goal in itself. It is more about sharing the good news and about the continuation of our values. This is our foundation that upholds, heals, restores, and reconciles. With sharing our individual and religious freedoms and our vision and by opening our community to those who may want to join and help us to achieve this vision, we have nothings to lose, and, oh, so much to gain. Perhaps, it is time for UUs to intentionally reach the world with our message of hope and to share our dreams. Perhaps it is time for us to "go out into the world" and build practically upon our principles that celebrate diversity, acceptance, inclusion, and intellectual ascent.

So the challenge may be to each of us to reclaim and redefine words that could serve our cause. Let us share the good news of Unitarian Universalism and keep it to ourselves no longer. **And when we encounter people who are in need of hope, we can say this: there is a community, and its name is Hope.**

**Amen.**