
Sermon
The Human Heart

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
January 20, 2010

First Reading: Ephesians 6:10-18.

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Second Reading: Julia Kasdorf. "What I Learned from My Mother."

I learned from my mother how to love
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand
in case you have to rush to the hospital
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants
still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole
grieving household, to cube home-canned pears
and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins
and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.
I learned to attend viewing even if I didn't know
the deceased, to press the moist hands
of the living, to look in their eyes and offer
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,
what anyone will remember is that we came.
I learned to believe I had the power to ease

awful pains materially like an angel.

Like a doctor, I learned to create
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.

To every house you enter, you must offer
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself,
the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch.

Third Reading: David Budbill. "The Three Goals."

The first goal is to see the thing itself
in and for itself, to see it simply and clearly
for what it is.

No symbolism, please.

The second goal is to see each individual thing
as unified, as one, with all the other
ten thousand things.

In this regard, a little wine helps a lot.

The third goal is to grasp the first and the second goals,
to see the universal and the particular,
simultaneously.

Regarding this one, call me when you get it.

Sermon

Each religious tradition has its shortcomings. I could go on and on about the failings of the Roman Catholic Church, Presbyterians and Baptists – as well as Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and others. But before addressing the shortcomings of other traditions it is not only good manners, but wisdom, to first consider one's own tradition. As the good book says, "first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." Turning my attention to this tradition I am compelled to say that I see as many, if not more shortcomings, than all those other traditions combined. But that is because this is my tradition and I am closer to it and in a better position to see and understand its faults. Having seen them I have made the conscious decision to live with them. That does not mean I have decided to ignore them. What I mean is that because I love this tradition they are the problems I have chosen to live with and to wrestle with – and from that struggle – I hope – to grow. Having said that I would speak to one issue this morning, a matter concerning the heart.

Ours is a tradition that cherishes the use of reason. William Ellery Channing's injunction that we use reason in matters of religion may be the most repeated admonition in our history. Compare a Unitarian service to a traditional Protestant service and the emphasis on the use of reason is – more often than not – obvious. And it is an emphasis that is often carried to an extreme. I believe the use of reason in our churches too often becomes a reductionist device to shield one from a confrontation with the demands of the heart. The passage I quoted from Ephesians comes to mind. I would paraphrase it thusly: “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the heart” for it is passion and emotion and feelings that I think our tradition too often identifies with that metaphorical representative of evil we call the devil.

Let me say this again: I embrace the use of reason in religion. I also – more so as the years pass – am aware of how one can use reason as shield from the demands of the heart. And I believe that is not healthy for religion. Religion is not just about logic chopping. Nor is science. Karl Popper, the renowned philosopher of science, said there is no logic to scientific discovery. There is only logic to the testing of the fruits of scientific discovery. I believe that is a hundred fold true of religion which begins with the heart. God – whether you use the word or not, whether you believe in what the word points to or not, and whatever you may mean by the word – is a proposition of reason, an attempt to reduce what we feel to something tangible and logical that we can add, subtract and divide. But as David Steindl-Rast has said,

Religion does not start out with the notion of God. It starts with a personal experience, the overwhelming experience of ultimate belonging.

Religion begins with personal experience that manifests itself as feelings – and such feelings are not a matter of logic, they present questions of the heart, questions we sometimes wish to avoid because to meet such questions head-on is to put oneself at risk. To descend into endless arguments about the existence or non-existence of God is to evade the real questions – which are about the experiences that precede all else and lead people to the words and ideas that we associate with religion. In doing so we almost always mistake the particular for the universal. We confuse the various systems of belief that we call religions for religion itself which is not about any of the particular religions, not about any particular set of beliefs or words, but the universal touchstone of human experience.

The words of C.S. Lewis come to mind.

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket- safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”

If we make reason into the armor of God and wrap ourselves in it to protect ourselves from our hearts, we run the risk of becoming “unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”

The propositions that we create in response to the experience that is the foundation of religion should be subject to verification and test as should any other propositions in any field. But that must not stop us from an open and honest engagement with the heart of religion – the feelings from which it springs. Steindl-Rast argues that there are three ways in which all of us engage with those feelings. The first is the attempt to intellectualize it. Whether you do so by using the word God or denying its validity, that's what we do. The second is the attempt to engage with others, to find a sense of belonging, by seeking out those who believe – or disbelieve – as we do. Lastly, we seek to celebrate our experience through the actions and words we call rituals. But regardless of how we do so, Steindl-Rast insists one essential remains if we, as religious beings, are to be healthy. That is to never forget that our “morals, dogma[s] and rituals[s] remain rooted in [the] authority of the heart,” a heart that “stands for the whole person.” When our particular religion is rooted in the heart it becomes a prophetic religion. That is not a religion that predicts the future. It is a religion whose adherents, by virtue of their awareness of their connection with others, do not stand apart and criticize, but stand within and demand justice. Not a justice based on arbitrary rules and beliefs, but justice based on the demands of the heart that sees past the arbitrary and capricious and recognizes the underlying and universal connection that each of us has not only with our fellow human beings, but with the whole of creation itself.

I believe that is the lesson Julia Kasdorf is trying to teach us in the words of her poem, “What I Learned from My Mother.” She says,

I learned from my mother how to love
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand
in case you have to rush to the hospital
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants
still stuck to the buds.

Her words are a reminder of that universal connection we have with one another. It is not enough to reduce that connection to a formula like a problem in middle school math. Having given it the structure and dimension of reason it is necessary that we return to the impractical and the illogical demands of the heart. We must do so because, as Blaise Pascal said, “The heart has reasons that reason cannot know.” The neighbor facing the loss of the one they loved above all else does not need a lecture or treatise on the biology of death. They do not need to hear a statistical and political analysis of the latest polling on public attitudes about healthcare reform. They need, as the poet says, to feel the hands of living, to see their eyes and to know that they came and were there with them. Words do not need to be exchanged. What matters is that someone came. Such a ministry of presence is not a matter of logic and reason, it is a matter of the heart.

There is irony in David Steindl-Rast's claim that religion begins with a personal experience of the “overwhelming experience of ultimate belonging” because all too often the fruits of that experience are creeds and dogmas and beliefs – all carefully and logically constructed – that build walls of separation between one another. We

Unitarians are not exempt from building such walls because such walls can be built from what one refuses to believe as well as the beliefs one embraces. The rejection of a particular belief can create a sense of superiority equal to that of the doctrinal arrogance of any Pope or priest.

Channing said, "Say what we may, God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it. We may let it sleep, but we do so at our peril." Channing was right. But it is also true that God has given us a heart and will call us to account for it. Just as religious propositions should be subject to the test of reason, so too must they be subject to the test of the heart. Dogmas and creeds – no matter how rational and logical and consistent they may be – must fail if they do not comport with the needs of the heart. That is the essential message implicit and explicit in the words of Francis David: "We need not think alike to love alike." Any religious belief or dogma or creed, no matter how logical, is false when it is used to drive a wedge between people. That is why doctrines such as original sin are untenable. They presume to permanently separate us from God and one another. And here I should say something about God. David Steindl-Rast, who is a Catholic Priest, says of God,

Now, some of us feel comfortable, more or less, in calling that ultimate reality to which we belong God. Others have exactly the same experience, but do not feel comfortable calling it God. Personally, I'm never quite sure whether I do or do not feel comfortable with the term God. I think rather not, because it is too easily misunderstood. But I . . . belong to a tradition that gives the name God to that reality, and so speaking out of this tradition, I can conveniently also call it God.

I am suspicious of the word God, but I belong to a culture that uses it and I choose to give that name to the "experience of ultimate belonging" that Steindl-Rast describes. That is why I believe doctrines and dogmas and creeds that cast God or what people believe about God as separating us from one another are false because they do violence to the underlying human experience of ultimate belonging. It doesn't matter if you believe in God and use the word or if you deny the existence of God and refuse to use the word. If you do so in a way that separates you from others, then the use or non-use of that word is false and fails the ultimate test of religion, the test of the human heart.

I affirm the use of reason in matters religious and I demand the use of the heart. Without heart I believe religion becomes an empty husk, dried out in the sun and wind. Combining the two has its challenges. As the poet said,

The first goal is to see the thing itself
in and for itself, to see it simply and clearly
for what it is.

No symbolism, please.

The second goal is to see each individual thing
as unified, as one, with all the other
ten thousand things.

In this regard, a little wine helps a lot.
The third goal is to grasp the first and the second goals,
to see the universal and the particular,
simultaneously.

Regarding this one, call me when you get it.
For a religion of the human heart,
Amen.