
Sermon
The Narrow Way

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First Reading: Matthew 19:13-20 NRSV

¹³Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

¹⁵Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Second Reading: Matthew 19:16-26 NRSV

¹⁶Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' ¹⁷And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' ¹⁸He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; ¹⁹Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ²⁰The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' ²¹Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' ²²When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' ²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, 'Then who can be saved?' ²⁶But Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.'

Sermon

A few weeks ago I was out running an errand when I found myself in casual conversation with a stranger. It was one of those chance encounters that leads to a few minutes of talk. In the course of exchanging pleasantries it came out that I was the minister here at Hope Unitarian Church. Oftentimes when that sort of thing happens, the person will say, "Oh, yes, "I've seen your big church and headquarters up in Missouri." I immediately know they are thinking of Unity, which is, of course, despite the

similarity in names, a completely different religious tradition. And for the record, the headquarters of our national association is on Beacon Street in Boston, not Unity Village in Missouri. But most of the time I just get a blank look. If they do know something about us, the most common response goes like this. “I know about Unitarians. They’re the ones that believe everything.” – or – “They’re the ones that believe all religions.” – which is what the person said this last time in addition to confusing Unitarians with Unity – or – “That’s the one where you can believe whatever you want to believe.” I sometimes hear the same sort of remarks from people who are members of one of our churches.

I think we bring it on ourselves. There are a lot of reasons, but I find two in particular to be irksome. First, we do it by talking too much about what we aren’t. It’s important to know what we aren’t. But if all we do is talk about what we aren’t, all we do is create a vacuum and anything that comes along will fill it. Second, I think we spend too much time talking about how open and welcoming we are. Time and time again I have read and heard pronouncements about how Unitarianism – or Unitarian Universalism if one wants to use the name of our national association – is a broad and open and accepting and welcoming way. I say it myself each Sunday morning:

Come, come, whoever you are!

If you look on our website you will find these words:

We welcome all who are searching and questioning, who want to be challenged to grow, who love justice and compassion. We welcome those who are rejoicing or filled with sorrows. We welcome those who are young and old, gay or straight. We welcome those who have a thirst for justice and compassion.

And so on.... I wrote those words and I mean them. We welcome everyone – regardless of where a person is on their personal journey. We do not require adherence to a particular set of beliefs. We’re not concerned with the color of your skin, your sex or gender or gender orientation or any of that stuff. And that’s important. I’m not suggesting it isn’t. But I don’t think being open and accepting of others really differentiates us all that much from other religions, other churches. I’ve known many churches outside our tradition that are open and welcoming of all who come to their doors. Enough that I don’t believe our tradition of openness makes us all that special. And even if it did, I don’t think it can be said to be what defines us, what makes us who we are as a faith tradition. That’s because I don’t believe it’s our willingness to accept people that defines us, it’s what they find when they get her. Because if it means something to be Unitarian, and it does, then somewhere the path – the ‘way of Unitarianism’ – has to start getting narrow. What defines us is not how easy we are, it’s how hard and difficult we are.

When I was thinking about this sermon I chanced to read an op-ed piece in the New York Times about Afghanistan. The author was arguing that President Obama – although he has not formally acknowledged it – has set us on a course of nation building in Afghanistan. Whether you agree or disagree with that as a policy I suspect all of us would acknowledge how hard that is. I can’t think of a more difficult task than trying to turn a group of tribal entities into a nation. And yet I think that is more or less

what the Unitarian tradition call for us to do as a church - not to build a nation, but to gather together a group of diverse people with different backgrounds and beliefs – contradictory backgrounds and beliefs – and turn them into a community – and not just any old community, but a Beloved Community. In some ways that is what all religions try to do. But we choose to do so in a way that I believe is harder than any other religion I know.

Most churches will tell you the glue that holds them together is common belief. Say the words of the creed and don't question. That's easy. You don't have to think about it, just believe it. Others will add to that a demand of hierarchical loyalty. If the priest says jump, you jump. In return for belief, in return for unquestioning loyalty, you will be a part of that community. Don't think about it, just obey. But we do it differently. We do not require common belief. It is an article of faith in our peculiar religion that common belief is not required. Each person is expected to believe – to believe with passion – that which the conscience demands. And each person is required to be individually responsible for such beliefs. The question is not so much the absolute truth of what a person believes – although that is important – but the rightness of what is believed. If what you believe makes you a better person and leads you to live a better life, then literally true or not, there is a rightness, an uprightness to your life that is more important than the literal truth of what you believe.

And instead of obedience, we emphasize faith. But for Unitarianism faith is not measured by what you believe or your loyalty to authority, but by your loyalty to those with whom you are in covenant. Faith in this tradition is about faithfulness to one another, not to abstract ideas or personal authority. The content of that kind of faith is not found in a creed, but in covenant. It is not the words of any particular covenant, but in the spirit behind the idea of covenant. I hear that spirit in the words of our covenant.

Love is the spirit of this church and service its law. This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace; to seek the truth in love; and to help one another.

I hear that spirit in the words of “The Invitation” by the poet Oriah:

I want to know
if you can sit with pain
mine or your own
without moving to hide it
or fade it
or fix it.

. . .
I want to know if you can get up
after the night of grief and despair
weary and bruised to the bone
and do what needs to be done
to feed the children.

. . .
I want to know if you will stand
in the centre of the fire

with me
and not shrink back.

And I hear it in stories about the narrow gate, about passing through the eye of an needle, because it isn't easy. It says we should not build religious communities on blind faith or unthinking obedience or the attitude of anything goes or by believing whatever you want. Rather, we should build connections, personal connections, we should fashion religious community amidst disagreements about matters that are important because we believe, as Francis David said, "We need not think alike to love alike." It is an idea found in the story about the rabbi and his three students. The rabbi asked them how they would know when the night had ended and day had begun. The first student answered that it must be when one can, from a great distance, tell an olive from a fig tree. "No," said the rabbi. Another said it was when you could tell a goat from a sheep. Again, the rabbi said, "No." The third implored the rabbi to give the answer and he responded, "When you can look into the face of any man or woman and see that person as your brother or sister then, and only then, will the night have ended and day begun."

It is easier said than done. I believe people are instinctively more comfortable amongst people with shared beliefs, who think and believe in common and who share respect for the same forms of authority. I believe it explains the most common question people ask about another's church: "What does your church believe?" But Unitarianism insists on being difficult. The answer I would give to that question is this: Church's don't have beliefs. People have beliefs and in my church different people believe differently. But we are united on this principle – that people are more important than what they believe. That regardless of how we may differ in our beliefs we should be able to sit down together and break bread. Despite our differences, we should still be able to recognize that our essential humanity unites us more than differing beliefs divide us.

It is easier said than done. There is comfort in knowing the person sitting next to you shares your beliefs. But I find greater comfort in knowing that even though the person next to me disagrees with my beliefs, that he recognizes we are in this together. I believe it is an approach to religion that requires a paradoxical mind set. On the one hand, with its insistence on the primacy of the individual conscience, it is a radical celebration of individualism that runs the risk of degenerating into a religion that is narcissistic and developmentally stuck in a form of selfish and arrested adolescence. On the other hand, its insistence on believing in the possibility of the human community opens us to the possibility of a naivete that makes us vulnerable to being nothing more than a group of well meaning people who sit around singing endless choruses of Kumbaya. Somewhere in between is a balancing of those two impulses. It is a narrow path, it is the razor's edge, it is not easily walked. It calls for us to be open and accepting without being foolish. As James Luther Adams said, it demands we have open minds, but not minds open at both ends. It calls for us to believe that good can triumph, but to have the common sense to know that it will not happen unless we work for it. And it challenges us to recognize that our shared humanity is not an abstraction. What connect us is not a philosophical theory about human nature. It is such abstractions that too often separate us, even when their intent is to unite us. We

become united when we sit and talk to one another and listen to one another and are able to recognize the other person as our brother or sister instead of an abstract and theoretical member of a group we are supposed to welcome.

To build a church, to build a religious community on this basis is not easy. It requires a commitment to individual conscience; a commitment to the idea of covenant, covenant being the bond of community; and a commitment to democratic governance that affirms the legitimacy of every other person, especially when there are disagreements. Such a religious community is bound together by a form of common worship, but not common belief. It is bound together by the promise to walk together that we might support one another and learn from one another and grow together. There is nothing easy about it. This narrow path is a hard and difficult way to walk. It is the way of this church.

Amen.