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Sermon  
***The Spirit of Goodness***

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Hope Unitarian Church  
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First Reading: Von Ogden Vogt. *The Primacy of Worship*. . Starr King Press, Boston, MA, 1958. Page 14-15.

The first religious absolute is the spirit of truth, the second is the spirit of goodness.

It is the glory of religion that this point needs little defense. It has an all but universal acceptance. Righteousness of life is an unqualified demand of religion. The spirit of goodness is a religious absolute, meaning not particular duties but love of the right, not specific ideals but the effort for ever larger realizations of goodness.

There can be no situation in which the demand for the spirit of goodness does not obtain. It is unconditional. In every circumstance and in every place, it is necessary to love the right.

The meaning of the right, however, has many different definitions. Different religions have differing morals. Some favor polygamy, others require monogamy. Moslem countries prohibit strong drink, Christian countries do not. Hinduism has for centuries maintained a system of caste, Buddhism has insisted upon human equality. Various groups or sects within the same religion differ in their interpretations of righteousness. Some Christians are pacifists, others favor legalized force; some hold that true Christianity implies a socialized economy, others believe in free enterprise.

Deeper than all differing ideas as to what is good conduct, is the demand for the spirit of good conduct. It is obviously not the specific virtues or ideals that are absolutes, for these are constantly changing. The absolute is the spirit of goodness.

Second Reading: Robert Fulghum. "Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten."

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sand pile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.

And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

### Sermon

This is the second in a three sermon series on the absolutes of religion. Not my absolutes, but the three absolutes suggested by Von Ogden Vogt, one of the leading Unitarian Ministers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Unitarian writer on religion and the art of worship who continues to be most widely respected across denominational boundaries. But I do not hesitate to say that I find his absolutes persuasive. The first absolute he suggests for religion is the spirit of truth, which I discussed last week. The second absolute, which I would address this morning, is the spirit of goodness.

One of the foundational questions of religion is this: What is its purpose? For many it is to praise God or to submit to God. But the one that has long attracted my attention is morality and ethics. Is not morality the central issue of religion? Years ago – shortly after discovering Unitarianism – I also become cognizant of Ethical Culture. There is an Ethical Culture Society and it operates local groups across this country that, in practice, are not that different from many Unitarian churches. The most important difference as a matter of principle is Ethical Culture's explicit rejection of theism – a rejection not shared in principle by Unitarians, but often shared in practice on the individual level. Both Unitarianism and Ethical Culture share an emphasis on religion as an ethical practice. A concern for ethics, a concern for goodness, lies at the heart of both traditions.

But neither tradition can claim to be unique in that respect. All religions, in one way or another, claim to be concerned with goodness – and I believe such claims. The impetus to praise God in the Hebrew bible, for example, is based on the “goodness” of God. One does not capriciously obey God's law. One is supposed to obey God's law because God and his law are “good.” Where the word “goodness” appears in the

Hebrew bible it is almost always used as descriptive of God. But that raises the classic question that bedevils all religious traditions – and it doesn't matter whether they are theistic or not because the problem applies whether one takes the language literally or metaphorically. This is the question: Is something good because God does or says it or does God do or say it because it is good?

That's why Von Ogden Vogt, just as he makes a distinction between truth and the spirit of truth, also distinguishes between the "good" and the "spirit of goodness". He says,

The spirit of goodness is a religious absolute, meaning not particular duties but love of the right, not specific ideals but the effort for ever larger realizations of goodness.

One can say absolutely that he or she is for goodness, is for morality, is for ethical behavior, but it becomes much more difficult when one wants to talk specifics. Is adultery wrong? Is it wrong to kill another person? Is it wrong to use drugs? Is suicide wrong? Most people would say yes but on reflection would recognize exceptions to all of them. For example: killing in self defense or using drugs not for entertainment, but medically to relieve pain and heal the body. And consider this story told by Joseph Fletcher. Fletcher was an Episcopalian Priest and Professor of Ethics who was on the ethics committee of a large hospital. He told of a patient he counseled in the late 1950's or early 1960's with terminal cancer – long before Cobra benefits or healthcare reform. The man was married with several children. Through his employer he had a large life insurance policy and health insurance coverage. The doctors agreed he could fight the cancer aggressively and would live at most two years. Within six months he would be unable to work and his life and health insurance would be terminated. The cost of treatment would drain the family's savings and leave them in debt by the time he died. But his life insurance policy did not exclude suicide. If he committed suicide he would leave them with a house paid for and over two hundred thousand dollars in cash at a time when that was far more money than today.

Where was the spirit of goodness in the decision he should make? What decision would be "good"? Do you believe for an instant his wife or children would prefer the money to two more years of his life? What would be the goodness if he left his family financially destitute?

Most of the time the choices we have to make are not difficult. We know what is good. We know what is evil. It is nonsensical to think we have to think about it. It is instinctive. And I suspect that is why it is tempting for so many people to believe they can declare without hesitation that they stand on the side of the good. It is that attitude that has helped to create the culture wars that tear at the heart and soul of our country. It is part of the rage that drives the tea party movement. It is part of the rage that has Code Pink protesting around the country. It is part of the rage that I've seen firsthand from protestors outside abortion clinics – sometimes from both sides. It is part of the rage one sees in the infamous demonstrators from the Westboro Baptist church. It is part of the rage that I see in the gun rights rallies and the enactment this last week of the anti-immigration legislation in Arizona. One takes such extreme stands because one knows – knows with absolute certainty – that one is standing up for what is good.

Such attitudes suggest the good is somehow tangible and concrete. There can be doubt about it. And when there is no doubt it follows that those who stand with the Good become the good themselves and those who disagree are the embodiment of evil. The result is the radical polarization that we see so often today.

But I think it is impossible to find a single specific example of goodness for which there is not some exception. It may be extreme, it may be unlikely, but it is there. Even amongst the staunchest opponents of abortion I suspect the majority would agree – perhaps grudgingly – that some exception is allowable in cases of rape or incest; just as proponents of a woman's right to an abortion would have to agree that it is not a right without limitations.

Yet there are those who think rights have no limitations. I have heard some proponents of gun rights make that claim. One might say they take the right to own and carry guns any when and anywhere as a religious absolute. And that is unfortunate, because the implication is that religion justifies extremes. And in fact that is how many people view religion. They make religion the justification for taking positions to the extreme. In the name of the goodness of God we declare others are going to hell. In the name of the goodness of God death threats are issued to the creators of a cartoon show because they make fun of the Prophet Mohamed. In the name of the goodness of God the Roman Catholic church covers up child abuse and then claims itself to be the victim when the New York Times reports the facts. The church is, of course, not alone. The Boy Scouts of America and other group are right there with them. Having identified themselves with goodness, they become goodness itself. To question those who those self-identify is to attack goodness.

That is not religion. Whenever a group of people decide they possess and have become goodness itself they are not engaged in genuine religion. They are engaged in idolatry. Idolatry does not require little clay figurines or other physical objects to be venerated as the Gods. Idolatry is what happens when one applies a false value. And you don't have to believe in God to be guilty of idolatry. That's why one can be an atheist and an idolater at the same time. You could say idolatry is an equal opportunity sin. All that's required is the willingness to believe that one has acquired goodness itself, that one has achieved a perfect moral clarity that allows one to see what others cannot. But I believe the opposite is true. To believe one has acquired goodness, to identify the self with goodness itself is evidence of blindness, evidence of an unwillingness or inability to confront the harsh and conflicting realities of the world.

It is easy to morally pontificate on the evils of sweat shop factories in the third world that enrich the owners of world famous brands of shoes and give us quality products to wear on our feet at cheap prices. It is more difficult to wrestle with the reality that for all the evils of that system that those working in those sweat shops may have better jobs and better opportunities in life because of those jobs. To believe that goodness is an absolute that one can acquire is to believe that one should choose between two alternatives when instead we should, by committing ourselves to the spirit of goodness, recognizing the shortcomings of both positions and work for something better.

Those who accept goodness as the absolute of religion can, having obtained it, rest easy. They can claim to be doing the good and, therefore, have no obligation to do anymore. But if the spirit of goodness is the absolute to which religion calls us to strive, then we cannot be satisfied. With goodness as an absolute Mother Theresa could have been satisfied with saving one orphan. With goodness as an absolute we could be satisfied with serving one meal to the homeless. With goodness as an absolute we could be satisfied with having once given away our Sunday morning offering to some cause beyond ourselves. But with the spirit of goodness as an absolute we cannot be satisfied. The spirit of goodness as an absolute says religion is not something to be obtained. The spirit of goodness makes religion something to be pursued. It requires us to continually question ourselves, to question our motives and to question the results we obtain. It insists there are no easy answers – and perhaps most discomfortingly, it says the status quo is not a defense. That's not to say the way things have always been done isn't the right way. Sometimes the old ways are the good ways. But not necessarily. And I think most importantly that the spirit of goodness as a religious absolute is a challenge to take ego out of religion. It requires a certain humility. Yes, we strive to do the good. We strive to save the world, to be worthy of the wisdom of the Babylonian Talmud that says,

Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.

But individual acts and individual goods are adequate only for that moment. The question is always what shall we do next? What challenge shall we accept tomorrow. That's the challenge of the spirit of goodness. It says that religion and faith are calls to action. The challenge of the spirit of goodness is what I hear in the old that story that says, "Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer . . . is that we do not stand at all, we move." It is also part of the answer as to why some churches grow and others do not. Yesterday I had the pleasure of hearing Anthony Healy speak. He is one of the top religious demographers in the country today. The secret to church growth, he said, is not in following any particular plan of action. The secret, he said, is in doing something. In moving, not standing. That's what the spirit of goodness calls for us to do as church – not to stand on our laurels, not to be too proud of ourselves, but to be committed to the lure of good, the challenge to pursue the spirit of goodness wherever it may lead.

Amen.