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Sermon  
***Truth or Consequences***

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Hope Unitarian Church  
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First Reading: Sophia Lyon Falls.

Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged. Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies. Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children's days with fears of unknown calamities. Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness. Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies. Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern. Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction. Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration. Some beliefs weaken a person's selfhood. They blight the growth of resourcefulness. Other beliefs nurture self confidence and enrich feelings of personal worth. Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world. Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.

Second Reading: Mark Twain

I wish to run on the Truth Party. Wouldn't that be refreshing in Washington? Always tell the truth; it will amaze your friends and confound your enemies. No party holds the privilege of dictating to me how I shall vote. If loyalty to party is a form of patriotism, I am no patriot. If there is any valuable difference between a monarchist and an American, it lies in the theory that the American can decide for himself what is patriotic and what isn't. I claim the difference. I am the only person in the sixty millions that is privileged to dictate my patriotism. I had been accustomed to vote for Republicans more frequently than for Democrats, but I was never a Republican and never a Democrat. I owe my allegiance to country and to the Constitution of the United States.

Truth is the most valuable thing we have. Let us economize it.

Third Reading: Parker, Theodore, *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, reprinted in *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emerson-Parker*, p. 129 (Skinner House, 1986).

Almost every sect, that has ever been, makes Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, and not the immutable truth of the doctrines themselves, or the authority of God, who sent him into the world. Yet it seems difficult to conceive any reason, why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than the truths of science on that of him who makes them known first or most clearly.

## Sermon

I have a confession to make. I'm addicted to the news. I can't help myself. If I'm working on the computer I have this compulsion at least twice an hour to look at the latest news reports on the internet. If I'm at home I have trouble turning off the news networks. More often than not I will flip channels between different newscasts. It's compulsive behavior on my part which doesn't make much sense, because I find when I am away from the news for a few days – which happens occasionally – I'm usually in a better mood. That may be because of one of the prime characteristics of the news I keep hearing. At least it's how I perceive many of the news reports. It seems to me – based on all the news I see and hear and read – that's there's an awful lot of lying going on out there. A lot of people seem to have taken to heart Mark Twain's quip that the truth is valuable and, therefore, we should economize it. Whether they've ever heard of Mark Twain or not, there are a lot of people out there following his advice. Twain, of course, wasn't being serious. But that doesn't bother some people.

I should, however, qualify what I just said. Sometimes it isn't about people lying – which I would define as deliberately and maliciously telling a material falsehood. I use that definition because I'm not thinking of "little white lies." I'm concerned with the big stuff. Oftentimes people are just wrong. That could be any of us. It's easy to be wrong. People don't do it on purpose, it just happens. I try to never be wrong. Sometimes I succeed, other times.....because no matter how hard you try and how well intentioned you are, sometimes you just get it wrong. That's because knowing the truth and getting it right every time is a difficult business.

I saw a good example of this last week when I picked up a copy of Scientific American. The entire issue is devoted to optical illusions. The magazine contains some one hundred sixty-nine illusions. I found many of the illusions to be obvious. Looking at them I knew I couldn't be seeing what I thought I was seeing. But there were others that were completely and utterly deceiving. One in particular showed a cube with different colored squares covering each side. Two of the colored squares looked to be completely and totally different. One was a moderately bright orange, the other a dark brown. Looking at the image I would have sworn on a stack of bibles that the two squares were different colors. In fact, they are the exact same color. It is only when you completely conceal the surrounding images that you can see they are the same color. Here is a simple truth about the search for truth: Seeing is not believing. The problem is not what we see, but what we think we see. And the problem is bigger than optical illusions.

Several years ago this church adopted as its vision this statement: Seeking Truth, Sharing Love – Within – Among – Beyond. I like it. I agree with it. You should know it's not an unusual vision statement for a church, especially a Unitarian Church. We take our Channing seriously. But as time goes by I have become increasingly uncomfortable with it. I still like and agree with it, but it troubles me. The problem is with knowing the truth when it is apparent that often times we cannot trust ourselves to know the truth even if all the facts are right there in front of us. Consider the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Whatever shortcomings BP may have, I am convinced that they are one of the most technologically capable companies in the world. Their capacity for world class engineering is the equal of anyone. I suspect they knew a certain truth –

they knew with absolute certainty the truth – the truth that their Macondo well could not suffer a catastrophic blowout. But it did. I'm not so sure about their early estimates of how much oil was being sent into the Gulf. I suspect they knew better. But self-interest can color one's judgment, even if one doesn't want it to do so. It is possible that they truly got that wrong as well. It could happen to any of us. I think it happens frequently when it comes to religious questions.

About two months ago there were some news reports about finding fragments of Noah's Ark on one of the mountains in Turkey. I thought the story obviously false for several reason. First, for a host of reasons I don't think the biblical stories are believable. There are multiple stories and they contradict each other. And none of them are, on their face, believable. Simple arithmetic demonstrates that the ark as described would not come close to holding samples of all the animals of the world. And even if they were to be believed, the mountains in question where the artifacts are alleged to have been found are covered with glaciers that thousands of years ago would have swept away remnants of any boats landing atop them. And last, but not least, I understand the man who claims – for money – to have led a group of Ark searcher to this most recently discovered set of remains is a well known con man who has a history of planting such evidence and collecting money from the gullible. That last bit of information comes not from Ark debunkers, but a religious group that believes there really was an Ark.

I feel the same way about belief the earth is no more than ten thousand years old, faith healing, speaking in tongues and the literal resurrection of the body. I have numerous reasons for not believing any of those. But make no mistake about it, there are people who do believe. They believe with heart and mind and soul. They know they have the truth.

Last week I mentioned it is easy to see the faults of other religions and that wisdom and good manners requires one to first examine the shortcomings of one's own religious tradition. It is easy to see the wrong beliefs of others. Seeing my own is a more difficult task. I believe what I believe. As a general principle I think you are wrong if you disagree with me, just as you undoubtedly think I am wrong for disagreeing with you. But consider a story told by Abraham Lincoln:

[H]e used to liken the case to that of the boy who, when asked how many legs his calf would have if he called its **tail** a leg, replied, " Five," to which the prompt response was made that **calling** the **tail** a leg would not **make** it a leg.<sup>1</sup>

What a person believes – be it right or wrong – does not affect the truth of the matter. If the universe is but ten thousand years old and I believe the universe is fourteen billion years old, it is still ten thousand years old. If there was not a Noah's Ark, believing it is so will not change the fact that it never existed. As Lincoln said, calling a tail a leg will not make it a leg and believing something is true will not make it true. Truth is what it is.

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<sup>1</sup> *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by distinguished men of his time / collected and edited by Allen Thorndike Rice* (1853-1889). New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1909. Page 241-2.

What we believe matters. To believe wrongly can be a prison for the mind. As Sophia Fahs said,

Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged. Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.

That's why I continue to believe we need to be looking for the truth. I also think – for reasons that aren't clear to me – that the desire to find the truth and to believe it are part of being human. But I am increasingly aware of how difficult it is to know the truth. So much of what people firmly believe to be true just isn't so.

I think people do some silly things in response to the problems with truth. I believe one of the worst is the idea that everybody can have different truths and that all those different truths are equally valid. Belief in Noah's Ark or the Flying Spaghetti Monster is, to my mind, a more attractive idea. As Lincoln said, calling a tail a leg will not make it a leg and declaring everything to be true is nonsense. Truth is what it is. So what should we do?

I believe we should keep looking for truth. But I believe it should not be our first concern. That's because one of the oldest principles of our faith tradition is the rejection of creeds. The glue that connects us is not intellectual consent. As Frances David said, "We need not think alike to love alike." I suspect that is better translated as, "We need not believe alike to love alike." If we are to take his words seriously then the vision of our church should not put truth first. It should put love first. Not Seeking Truth and Sharing Love, but Sharing Love and Seeking Truth. That, I believe, would be more in mind with the wisdom of Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the best know Jewish theologians of the last century. Heschel said,

When I was young I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people.

Truth and knowledge are wonderful. Use them and you can, as Twain said, "amaze your friends and confound your enemies." But you can do much the same with card tricks and other forms of sleight of hand. As a culture it has become popular to do it to ourselves by our obsession with the latest cell phones and 3-D movies. We have what seems to be an insatiable desire to be amused and astounded. It's not all bad. I will not pretend that I don't enjoy much of what I am describing. But I do believe this to be true: There's more to life. To paraphrase Heschel, life begins with an appreciation for cleverness, but maturity brings respect for kindness. That is what I believe religion should do.

I believe we should be less concerned – not unconcerned, but less concerned – with whether Noah built his Ark, the true age of the Universe and whether Jesus was really resurrected and more concerned with kindness to others. When Jesus was asked what was the most important of the commandments, he did not answer with an argument for the literal truth of the bible or a creed people were supposed to believe. He said,

'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup>you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with

all your mind, and with all your strength.”<sup>31</sup>The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’

I believe too many people spend far too much time worrying about Arks and the age of the universe and how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. The truth does matter. But of far more importance is how we treat our neighbors. That’s the most important of all truths. To once again paraphrase Heschel, the worship of the search for truth can become arrogance and the rejection of that search cowardice. When religion is only about the authority of truth instead of being the demand for compassion and love its message becomes dull and meaningless. A meaningful religion will never ignore the truth, but it will always know that love, compassion and kindness are more important. The best religion is the one that can combine the two without doing injury to either.

Amen.