

SALTED WITH FIRE
Unitarian Universalist of the Rappahannock
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May 23, 2004 (est)

“Salted with Fire” . . . this is a phrase from the Gospel of Mark and it refers to those who were spreading the good news—the Gospel, --about Jesus and about a new way of being religious. This is our hope—that we can be salted with fire—filled with taste and energy—something others might need and want. This is, in short, a plea to share this faith of ours. People are seeking the kind of faith we profess. It is up to each of us to share it.

And that gets at part of what is true for many Unitarian Universalists—many of us grew up in different faith traditions. We are about 90% come-outers—that is, we have come out of a different faith tradition. We have been Jews and Catholics and Presbyterians and nothings and Mormons and Christian Scientists. We have come from very rigid and very liberal religious backgrounds.

Like everything, there are pluses and minuses to this come-outerness. The great plus is that new blood and new ways of thinking are constantly entering our tradition. It makes for a dynamic mix. That dynamism can also lead to conflict, of course, and so we have always insisted that there is no dogma, no creed to be used as a test for membership. Freedom of belief is our watchword. The authority of the individual is our guideline. Our principle is the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

At times, we have described this by saying that you can believe anything you want. That is not true at all. We, as a movement, have adopted these principles and purposes you have seen on our Order of Service and they really do serve as that larger circle within which our individual expressions of belief reside. They are great beliefs and it is within the unity these principles form that our diversity can flourish. These are the bedrocks of our faith that we can proclaim to the world.

Our roots really fall in two places, though we like to say that our way of believing and thinking has always been alive in religion. Whenever an openness, tolerance, an intellectual curiosity, an opposition to tyranny, a love of learning has been alive, there are the seeds of Unitarian Universalism.

Our name refers to two doctrines. For a non-creedal and non-dogmatic religion, it is an irony that we are named after two doctrines. But, there you are. Unitarianism refers to the belief in the unity of God. Early Unitarians—in Eastern Europe in the 1500’s, and on this continent in the 1700’s—believed that there was nothing in the Bible which supported the doctrine of the trinity. Quite the opposite, they argued, the unity of God is everywhere taught. A second affirmation of early Unitarianism which did not get into the name was a belief in the inherent goodness of humans. The doctrine of original sin was vigorously opposed.

The second part of our name—Universalism—refers to the belief in universal salvation. Ever since Augustine in the fourth century, Christians have believed that some people would go to Hell and others to Heaven. There was, when talking about our ultimate fate, an emphasis on the justice of God. In the 1700's, Universalists challenged that and affirmed that if God were really a God of love, then all would be saved. Salvation was universal and unconditional.

As you can see, our emphasis was much more positive than orthodox Christianity and our belief in progress and in human freedom and liberation stems from these two doctrines and lies at the heart of our faith.

And, from the beginning, it was affirmed that these were universal principles, not sectarian creeds, that these principles were true for all—no matter how any one individual might symbolize them.

That God is one, that God and truth are accessible to all and that there is no damnation built into the scheme of things, that moral living is an imperative—these are the universal principles we began with and which still hold true today.

In Transylvania in the 1500's two men were especially responsible for the rise of Unitarianism. Frances David—one of our great heroes—had been a Catholic priest, then became Lutheran at the time of the Reformation and finally declared himself a Unitarian. He was one of the foremost scholars of his region. This was at a time when the Reformation was taking hold. The King of Transylvania declared a debate about religious truth.

At the end of the weeklong debate, King John Sigismund declared Frances David the winner and pronounced an edict of religious toleration. It, significantly and for the first time in history, said not only were people free to choose their own faith but that congregations were free to choose their own minister.

It is later, in the 1700's, that liberal religion and Unitarianism are established on this continent. Beginning in the English enlightenment with people like the minister and scientist Joseph Priestly and the minister John Murray, liberal thought came to the US and slowly, churches in New England became Unitarian or Universalist.

Harvard Divinity School became Unitarian in 1804. In 1819, William Ellery Channing delivered the ordination sermon for Jared Sparks in Baltimore. The title of the sermon was Unitarian Christianity, and it was, by design, a clarification of what Channing believed Unitarianism to be. It was clearly Christian, for it was Biblically centered and believed that Jesus was, to use the phrase them, the full revelation of God's will to humankind. Channing argued that Jesus was fully human, that the trinity was not Biblical and that we know that because of reason.

Therein lay the conflict—reason was supreme, not revelation. The Bible was true only in so far as it accorded with reason and common sense. Jesus was not divine but fully

human. It was quite a leap in religious consciousness to use our reason and to live a moral life. These became the hallmarks of our faith.

Channing had given the religious liberals an identity and a number of churches and ministers in New England declared themselves Unitarian. They all thought of themselves as Christian still, but there was a curious process set in motion. Channing clearly believed that we needed to bring Jesus back down to Earth and to humanize God.

As soon as an identity was found, there was a challenge—another part of our treasured tradition, the status quo is forever challenged. The challenge came especially from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker—two leading lights of the Transcendentalists. Transcendentalism was known for its emphasis on the individual. It was highly reformist. Parker was an ardent abolitionist and political protest and involvement was keen among the Transcendentalists. Their goal was to both reform the individual and society.

Emerson believed that truth lay in the individual's direct apprehension of the Truth, and his influence was enormous. Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Hawthorne, Parker, Alcott, Dix, Mann—much of the cultural elite was Transcendentalist—and Unitarian.

But, as is our wont, there was a rebellion against the Transcendentalists. Henry Whitney Bellows was minister of All Souls Church in New York City during the Civil War. Melville was a member there. It is now our largest congregation and the president of our Association, John Buehrens, was co-minister there. Bellows learned of the importance of organization during the Civil War as director of the US Sanitary Commission, the forerunner of the Red Cross. Bellows helped create the National Council of Unitarian Churches in 1865.

Until that time, only Unitarian ministers had an organization. But with Bellows, we became a denomination and another attempt to create a clear sense of liberal identity. Just as Emerson had argued that the individual was central, Bellows argued that the community was central. And, of course, there was then a rebellion—mostly from radicals within the movement. Never a dull moment with us, for sure.

From the beginning, there has been a constant dialogue—at times an out and out conflict—between the radicals and the orthodox. Often it has been played out as the tension between the humanists and more spiritual. And we that today. That has been one of the great on-going dialogues in Unitarian Universalism—whether ultimately authority rests in the human world or in the transcendent realm.

But the other tension is every bit as important. Perhaps symbolized by Emerson and Bellows, the dialogue between the individual and the community continues. Which is central? Which has authority?

The whole 19th century was quite a time for us. We entered the century counting some important people as ours—Thomas Jefferson, John and John Quincy Adams, then

Emerson and Thoreau and Horace Mann and Margaret Fuller, Clara Barton and Herman Melville. We were much of the intellectual life in the US.

We were responsible for programs like public education with Horace Mann, humane treatment of both prisoners and the mentally ill with Dorothea Dix, the Red Cross through Henry Bellows and Clara Barton, Women's Suffrage with Susan B. Anthony.

Our faith has always encouraged reform. It is our religious duty to change this world and make it more just, more equitable, more peaceful. Involvement in the social order is part and parcel of our tradition. From the beginning, we have insisted on the imperative of the moral deed. Deeds, not creeds, we say.

And our tradition has always pushed religious and theological boundaries as well. Channing championed reason over revelation. Emerson championed intuition over reason. Bellows championed organization over intuition. Jenkins Lloyd Jones championed ethics over theology. The humanists of this century championed humankind over the transcendent.

We are progressives, liberals in our faith and that means that an openness to the new and to growth, a willingness to change, and constant pushing of our limits and understandings, a desire to learn and be better—all this is at the heart of our faith.

It is different from other religions. I don't know what the religion of your youth was, but it was probably creedal and dogmatic. What was necessary to believe was clear, I would guess. Maybe it was the Apostle's Creed, or the Catechism, or the Law, whatever. We don't have that. We believe the individual can best decide how ultimate values and meaning should be expressed. Whether you believe in God or not, whether you look to Jesus or to the Buddha, or to Martin Luther King, Jr., or to Native Americans or to yourself—all of this is encouraged and done freely.

We are more concerned with how beliefs are arrived at than the specific content. That people think and feel honestly and freely that their heart and their head, their gut and the soul all fully participate—that is the Unitarian Universalist way. To become whole and to live more fully.

And we do that in our congregations. We try to be both individuals and members. We are both our own self and a part of something—individuality and community, together. We make decisions democratically. Our ministers are ordained and called by congregations democratically. Our ministers serve us without being our employees. The freedom of the pulpit is central to us and what we seek is a shared ministry—a partnership in religious life.

Our congregations live by the efforts and gifts of our members. It takes a lot of person power to move a congregation from week to week and that happens in committees and groups and so it is expected that those who become members will work and take responsibility for the life of the community.

You might want to think of us as a spiritual or religious co-op, where you need to contribute in order to gain all of the advantages of membership. The worship service, religious education for young and old, various social programs, social action opportunities, the right to vote—to be part of the co-op means members must give back in time or energy or money. The more gifts we share the richer we all will be.

And, we continue our journey of pushing the edges. In the 1950's neither the Unitarians nor the Universalists were doing very well. But then, along came a baby boom and a revitalization of the laity. This carried us into the 60's when Unitarian Universalist congregations blossomed. We were very involved in issues of justice. Change agents we were. We protested the growing involvement in Viet Nam. We worked for equal rights for African Americans, for women, for gays and lesbians. We affirmed, again, that we are here to reform the world and make it a better place.

Then in the 70's, we turned inward and joined encounter groups and support groups and T-groups. Ministers counseled all over the place, and we learned that the inward journey matters and that our relationships with others are a source of strength and meaning. In the 80's we turned to our institutions and management by objectives. Now, as we face a new millennium, we are searching for a faith to bring all of that together. Our needs for justice and for relationship and for community. We are looking, I believe, for the ways to express the spiritual heart of our faith, the sacred core of our way of being.

It is an exciting time to be a Unitarian Universalist. It is a time to be pioneers in a deeper religious consciousness, to form caring communities and to make this a better world.