

# “What Is Our Good News?”

A Sermon Given at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

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Usually, early on in the church year, often in September, there is a sermon that reminds us – and informs the newcomers among us – what we think we’re up to, what this religion is that we practice together, this Unitarian Universalism.

We didn’t have that kind of a September this year. There were other things to talk about. I like to think that by now, new folk have gotten a pretty good sense of what we’re about by watching us be about it. But I might be more explicit as to the nature of the community we’re trying to be here, the witness we’re trying to offer, and the messages we seek to proclaim, the good news we have to offer the mind and the spirit. (That is the literal meaning of the biblical word “gospel” – good news or good tidings.)

It has been nice to have many new folks here for services this fall. It always is. If you are among the newer of us, I’m glad you’ve made your way back here today, and I hope that soon if not already the rest of us convey how glad we are to have you here, and how much we look forward to getting to know you.

The humorist David Barry once observed that “People who want to share their religious views with you almost never want you to share yours with them.” Well here that’s not the case. Sharing our religious views – and not just telling our own but getting to hear how others think and what their spiritual journeys have been and are – that’s an important part of why we come together and what we value about the community here.

Lest I miss my best chance at some comic relief in this morning’s remarks, let me tell you that Dave Barry’s observation is one of sixteen on a list he made of “Things That Took Me Fifty Years to Learn.” I’ll only share half. They include such contentions as, “There comes a time when you should stop expecting other people to make a big deal about your birthday. That time is age 11.” Or, “There is a fine line between ‘hobby’ and ‘mental illness.’”

Others have a sort of religious connection. “A person who is nice to you, but rude to the waiter, is not a nice person.” “No matter what happens, somebody will find a way to take it too seriously.” “Your friends love you, anyway.”

In a congregation like ours, we are trying to become nice people of the sort that is nice to waiters and everyone else, best as we can; trying to maintain a sense of proportion when it comes to what deserves to be taken seriously, and how much so; trying to live in the sort of love that accepts us all, anyway.

We’re always glad to have new folks join in that effort. One understands that the numbers are higher than usual this fall in part because of the events of September 11 and a heightened interest in spirituality, community, and making meaning of our lives. And this is true across the religious landscape.

But there seems to be some greater than usual draw in our movement, some particular appeal of the news we have to offer here. The December issue of Boston magazine says that our “message is suddenly becoming more appealing to a multicultural America searching for answers in a newly divided world.” Near the end of the lengthy article, it quotes our new UUA president, Bill Sinkford, saying “The reality is that our

society is becoming more diverse very rapidly. We need to have some models that help us know that it is possible to live in a diverse community in a responsible, spiritual, grounded way....”

When we do our thing correctly, UU congregations like ours are just such models, and people are finding us out, coast to coast. Let me hasten to add that there are many other examples of congregations seeking the “tolerance and inclusion” that Boston magazine takes as our message and implies is the cause of our national growth for the last nineteen years, “while increasingly conservative mainstream denominations have hemorrhaged members.”

Even in those denominations there are many examples of congregations that avoid what Boston magazine describes as the divisive agendas pushed by “hard-line Protestant ministers” that were so especially shocking to hear in the aftermath of September 11. There are Protestant congregations of traditional theology that have done better than we have at becoming multi-cultural, and Catholic churches are conspicuously more diverse than we are in some socioeconomic ways.

But a typical UU congregation like ours is one good model at living in diversity – not perfect – but engaged in the effort, and doing pretty well, I like to think. And people are finding out, thanks to word of mouth and Boston magazine.

They are finding out that our points of view on theology may be just their cup of tea as well, thanks again to word of mouth but also to Belief-O-Matic. How many of you have participated in Belief-O-Matic? It is a feature of a website called Beliefnet.com.

Belief-O-Matic invites you to answer a couple dozen questions about your religious beliefs, and then it tells you what religion you might look into as being one that concurs with your answers. I have taken this quiz once before, and it told me I should be a Unitarian Universalist, thank goodness. This week being a UU was a 98% match, finishing a very close second to Secular Humanist. But since there aren’t many Secular Humanist churches around, this would still be my natural home, even if I weren’t employed here.

It wasn’t so close from third (Liberal Quaker) on down to 27<sup>th</sup> and last (Seventh Day Adventist). There were a few surprises. Mormonism finished 9<sup>th</sup>, right behind Baha’I and way ahead of Reform Judaism. Scientology and Jehovah’s Witnesses, low as they were in the rankings, were ahead of Roman Catholicism and Hinduism.

A fun activity is to look at responses people record to their findings. Apparently Mormonism comes in higher than most people expect, and one poor evangelical Christian was appalled to be told that he was really a Mormon in his beliefs. A couple people expressed amazement at their #1 religion being “Orthodox Quaker,” which they’d never heard of.

Apparently lots of people are equally amazed at being told that they are Unitarian Universalist, which they have also never heard of, but they come seeking us out, having discovered that there are people who believe as they do. This is an old story, one that more than a few of you could tell, of how you learned that you were not the only person who believed as you did; there was a whole movement, albeit small. Only these days, people are learning of us via the internet, Belief-O-Matic in particular.

A newcomer here this morning will be forgiven if there seems a contradiction: we say we are tolerant and inclusive, and then we seem equally happy that there are particular viewpoints that we affirm. Well, yes, that is the creative tension that keeps us

alive and engaged and whole, the co-equal parts of our good news. Good news: here you are free to discover and develop and cherish your own personal theology in an accepting, caring community; and the further good news: the community here has some things it cares about, has feelings and attitudes about, ones that it shares with other UU churches across the land and to some degree around the world.

The good news is thus two-fold: you can disagree with any one of the tenets of our current common faith, and even have hope that we'll come around to your point of view; and in the meantime, we are not left speechless nor without some sense of purpose and mission.

I think that's what comes of believing in freedom, believing in love, believing in action, believing in change, believing in core values not one of which we want to leave out, but all of which we have to squeeze and jiggle to try to fit in, and still they don't quite.

We have this good news, that here we find freedom to formulate our personal faith systems, but in a context that carries with it some understandings of its own, some particular items of good news it thinks it has learned over time, or taken on as articles of a common faith.

For example, each of us is free to believe that there is a loving god or goddess, perhaps one who interacts with human history, perhaps one who hears our prayers. We may believe there is no god or goddess. But our tradition, as it lives on in the common life of our congregations, kicks in at some point with good news of its own, beyond just the freedom: in our religion, we don't believe in a god or goddess who is out to do us ill, who demanded the blood sacrifice of his son to atone for some original sin committed by Adam and Eve, who has a hell in wait for most of us.

You can disagree of course, and still be a welcome member of the congregation, but in our religion we don't believe in hell at all as a place souls go after death, as much as we might wish at times that there were for our favorite enemies.

We don't believe that any god or goddess has predetermined what our fate shall be. Since before Unitarians were called Unitarians, we have believed that individuals and societies have the power of choice and change and will. We don't believe that children are born evil, whatever we may feel on certain occasions, hopefully rare. We think people have the potential to be good.

On the other hand, we know that people fall short. We all do. We are in need of encouragement at times, and at other times forgiveness.

We believe in the healing power of community, where people come together in acceptance, forgiveness, and mutual concern.

We know that religion is also what we do in our aloneness, and we seek to find the strength and wisdom to see us through our times apart.

We believe in the mysterious buoyancy of the human spirit, and in the enduring, eternal power of the spirit of life.

We believe that our primary concern should be this world and not the next, that our focus should be living good lives more than any particular doctrine, that the good life includes a caring for others and mercy and justice.

The list could go on. It does go on, it goes on being created by us as we engage in religious community, as we are part of the larger movement. Some articles of belief grow more important, others fade.

Some outlooks have become less crucial as other traditions came to agree with us. To champion the benevolence of the deity and oppose the doctrine of native depravity in the 1820s made us quite distinct from the conservatives, true to the Calvinism of the Puritan past, who pulled out to form the church across the street. But even most Presbyterian churches, heirs of Calvin though they be, have given up both those arguments.

Instead, the Presbyterians, like so many other denominations, are rent over the issue of ordaining homosexuals, and so far in the negative camp. For that and several other reasons, the viewpoint that seems more crucial now to who we are is our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, that and our affirmation of the interconnectedness of all of existence and, of course, that message of tolerance and inclusion.

It goes beyond tolerance, in fact. It involves a celebration, a celebration of difference and diversity in the context of the positive good news we have to offer, too.

I saved one of Dave Barry's lessons after fifty years. He writes that "The one thing that unites all human beings, regardless of age, gender, religion, economic status or ethnic background," – and, we would add, sexual orientation – "is that, deep down inside, we ALL believe that we are above-average drivers."

Maybe. But another thing that unites human beings is our being human, just that, with the potential for company and common care. That can count for a lot, creating communities where we can live out our highest values together, different as we may be in so many other ways, good drivers and bad drivers alike.

Over four hundred years since the first Unitarian congregations gathered in Transylvania under the leadership of Francis David, his words still resound: "We don't have to believe alike to love alike." It remains our very good news.