

“THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF RIGHT RELATIONS”

A Sermon given by the Rev. Ken Sawyer
at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts
on November 17, 2002

Religion has been much in the news of late, and little of that news has been good. Around the world, as usual, people are finding cause in their faiths for all manner of mayhem. Our leading local story continues to be the turmoil in the Catholic church over the abuse of young parishioners by members of the clergy, and the awful way that behavior was handled by higher-ups in the church.

I'm sure I don't need to elaborate on that situation, as the press accounts have been extensive, understandably. The church is going through a period of painful self-examination, and it will be surprising if the process ends soon.

It can't be my place to pile on at this point by adding to the criticism. Suffice it to say that some terrible, terrible mistakes were made, both individually and institutionally.

I mention the matter at all because, with the stories in the news every day, I have been asked repeatedly what the situation is in our own denomination; and I thought I would answer that, putting it into a larger context of how people relate to each in general in the most healthy ways. So my sermon will end up being about “The Theology and Practice of Right Relations,” but to get there, I'm going to be factual and practical for a while and talk about clergy misconduct and how it is handled in UU circles.

We have a detailed process for handling complaints, of which there are thankfully few. I used to be on the denominational body that dealt with all such cases (the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, or MFC), and there would be about one case a year, out of 1300 ministers. The process was developed in 1991 by four of us and adopted by the full MFC. It assures that all complaints will be taken seriously except the most patently absurd (I mean, like “My minister is having an affair with the ghost of Queen Victoria.” Now, “My minister's been telling people that he's having an affair with the ghost of Queen Victoria,” that would deserve some attention, but of a different sort.).

At the same time the MFC was refining its procedures, the continental UU Ministers' Association was reworking its own set of professional guidelines to deal more rigorously with the issue of clergy misconduct. Those guidelines help inform the MFC's decisions.

I think it's important to know that there are people in the UUA who try to respond thoughtfully and responsibly to the kind of problems that can arise. One of those problems is the sort that the Catholic Church handled so poorly, although actually I don't know of any case of a UU minister becoming involved in that way with an underage parishioner. I do know of three cases in the last thirty years where a colleague did become inappropriately involved with a teenager, and in every case, the offender was removed from our ministry. By the way, to challenge the stereotype that the Catholic experience threatens to create, in every case, it was a male minister with a female.

The important point, though, is that whatever the alleged offense, for over a decade we have had structures in place to try to make sure that the matter is dealt with

effectively. Of course, even before that, the UUA and the MFC dealt with these problems, trying to resolve them well. We had our one case a year in my first six years on the MFC, before we regularized a process for dealing with them.

A number of denominations were developing similar procedures at about the same time. The protection offered some abusive Catholic priests until recently would have been unlikely in most Protestant circles, especially regarding offenses committed against minors. In the same period, increasing attention has been paid to the need to be mindful of the potential for misconduct on the part of laity, too. For instance, most congregations (including our own) adopted policies that constrain the church activity of convicted pedophiles and such practices as always having two teachers in classrooms, and both a male and female adult presence at teen activities.

One of the people who have been working on this issue within a variety of denominations is the Rev. Deborah Pope-Lance, a member and an affiliate minister of this congregation. This year she is also serving as interim minister of our congregation in Sherborn, but in her role as a community minister she consults, leads workshops, and works with congregations that have suffered an episode of clergy misconduct.

In dealing with all these difficult, unpleasant subjects, the positive phrase that has become widely used in UU circles is “right relations.” It’s not a phrase unique to us. In fact, if you do a web search, a goodly number of the 3660 sites involve the effort between tribal Canadians and other Canadians to get along. But many of the sites are our own, including the resolution passed by the General Assembly of the UUA in 1995 regarding “Safe Congregations and Right Relations.”

I won’t read it all, but it does say that we want our congregations “to be places safe from interpersonal violence or abuse.” Therefore (and I quote again) “both laity and clergy need to accept active responsibility for the prevention of interpersonal violence and abuse within our congregations and for healing where such violence or abuse has occurred ... so that there is a restitution of community....” It encourages us all to reflect “on what it means to be persons in right relationships.”

The impetus for such a statement may have originally been a concern about sexual misconduct, especially against the young, and this remains a most important application. But as written the resolution relates to behavior toward others in general, and to the hope for right relations between all people of all ages, laity and clergy alike, for relations that are considerate, respectful, non-exploitative, trustworthy, and proper. (Yes, proper.)

Our kids should have reason to feel safe here partly because we have introduced wise protective policies, and partly because we all seek to be in right relations with each other, including us with them. We all should have that same hope, whatever our age, that here we will be treated in the same good way that we will do our best to treat others.

My colleague in Annapolis, Fred Muir, puts it this way, after quoting the Talmudic story in which Hillel is asked to summarize all of Judaism quickly, and he replies, “What you don’t like, don’t do to others. That’s it; the rest is commentary.”

Fred writes, “If we expect to enter into relationships that are going to make more kindness in our lives, if we wish to be treated well, if we want out of the hells we may live in, if we seek to create a better place for us to live and worship in – then we must understand and practice what we want, what has come to be called right relations. Right relations is all about putting people first, not rules and regulations, not all the commonly

accepted ideas that might come from doctrine and tradition. Right relations means not doing to others what you wouldn't want done to you." ["Getting It Right"]

And, of course, Jesus said the same: "Always treat others as you would like them to treat you: that is the law and the prophets." [Mt. 7:12] You may have seen the poster that finds a similar sentiment in every major religious tradition.

I think it's a good starting point, welcome in its simplicity. In practice, though, things can be more complicated in at least a couple ways. The question of who the other people are isn't always obvious, and in fact there may be competing claims on your decision. To treat your aunt in the way that you'd like to be treated may mean treating your uncle in a way you'd prefer to avoid yourself.

And then there's the problem of people being so different. We don't all like being treated the same way. Picture the scene at a party in which an extrovert is treating the guest of honor just as he, the extrovert, would want to be treated, with lots of attention, while the introverted guest of honor is being put through hell as she is fussed over and called upon to make the kind of response that the extrovert would love to make. [Or picture that situation in reverse.]

So the truth is a little more subtle than simply the Golden Rule. But Fred Muir has it right, I think, when he says, "Right relations is all about putting people first..." assuming he means, putting each other first, as beings to be honored and cared about. The rule might better be, Do unto each other person as you would wish to be treated if you were that person, as nearly as you can make out who that is.

Or maybe there isn't any one rule that will do, even if many can help in a pinch. Maybe it's just a matter of trying to do the right thing, to treat other people decently, to accomplish as much goodness as you can, best as you can figure.

One person whose take on this still resonates for some of us is Martin Buber, the Jewish writer who back in 1923 distinguished between "direct, mutual relations (called by him the "I-Thou" relationship, or dialogue), in which each person confirms the other as of unique value; and indirect, utilitarian relations (designated the "I-It" relationship, or monologue), in which each person knows and uses others but does not really see or value them for themselves. In the former (I-Thou relations), dialogue exists because the I interrelates totally with the Thou, creating a union, a bonding, between the two." [Anon.] An I-Thou relationship was recently described as "one of mutuality, openness, equality, and directness -- a true dialogue." [Anon.]

On the other hand, "According to Buber, frequently we view both objects and people by their functions. Doing this is sometimes good: ... Scientists can learn a great deal about our world by observing, measuring, and examining.

"Unfortunately, we frequently view people in the same way. Rather than truly making ourselves completely available to them, understanding them, sharing totally with them, really talking with them, we observe them or keep part of ourselves outside the moment of relationship. We do so either to protect our vulnerabilities or to get them to respond in some preconceived way, to get something from them. Buber calls such an interaction I-It." [Anon.]

Much of the time we need to relate to things and even people as "its," but Buber calls us toward a different relationship with nature, with other people, and with God, in which the other is appreciated as having an existence apart from us to be honored by us. In such relationships we are called beyond our usual interactions, in others can be means

or objects, and into mutual engagement, learning, and appreciation. We are called, if you will, into right relations.

This is a complicated business. But healthy relationships – right relations -- are a crucial achievement in almost every aspect of our lives: in our dealings in our families (as may become a more urgent matter for many as the holidays approach); in our neighborhoods; in our communities; at work; as citizens; in the effort for peace and justice worldwide; even in our personal relationships with God or the universe or the ultimate or life itself.

Achieving right relations is a complicated but crucial matter here in church as well, where we have a chance to practice an openness and mutuality that is harder to accomplish in the everyday commerce of life.

Not that we shouldn't try there, too. I like to think we take the healthy attitudes we can feel in us in the midst of this community out into a world in need of greater caring, compassion, and courtesy. But I don't want to pretend that it's an easy transition for all of us. Some of us are going to have to deal this week with people whose sense of right relations is, "Relations are right just as long as I win, if I can get away with whatever benefits me."

The symbol of Transylvanian Unitarianism comes to mind: a bird and a snake, recalling the words of Jesus to his disciples, "Look, I send you out like sheep among wolves; be wary as serpents, innocent as doves." [Mt. 10:16] Our religious witness there has not lasted over four centuries only because they achieved I-Thou relations with the Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Communists who vastly outnumbered them and controlled the power of the state.

Much of our own society is organized around the goal of companies' maximizing their profits, which has proven to be a successful idea in many ways, but also requires a wariness lest we be exploited in the process. Right relations don't require a loss of good sense. As Emerson famously wrote of a dinner guest, "The louder he talked of his honor, the faster we counted the spoons." In the words of Camus, we would hope to be neither executioners nor victims, neither wolves nor their prey.

But insofar as one can manage under the circumstances out in the world, and especially here, in our community of caring, we can try for right relations, for I-Thou relationships, for openness and consideration toward others, for decency and empathy and upright behavior, for kindness and love. So may it be. Amen.