

## **“But They’re Wrong!”**

*A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

*November 15, 2015*

Let me start by saying that this sermon is different. It’s not polished or complete in it’s ideas. Rather, it’s just a beginning. I invite you to walk with me through my questions, through disjointed concerns that I’m struggling to reconcile.

On Friday, the Parish Committee (our governing board) sent an email that included proposed vision, mission, and covenant statements. Part of the proposed mission statement describes how we search for meaning by creating “opportunities for education, discussion, and experiences that deepen our understanding of values, ethics, and issues of our time.”

Today is one of those moments when we grapple with making meaning in response to an “issue of our time.” Hours after Friday’s e-blast was sent, news of coordinated acts of mass violence and death exploded out of Paris. In the days before, bombs in Baghdad and Beirut killed dozens more. Such are the moments when we catch our breath, hold a loved one a little tighter, and shudder at the reminder that life is indeed mortal.

Sometimes Unitarian Universalism is described as a religion where you can believe anything. I don’t believe this. Not on days when scores of people assembling for a [funeral](#), shopping at [street markets](#), enjoying a concert, or eating in restaurant end up dead. I believe such violent killing of innocents is wrong. The killers are simply *wrong*.

Yet, I don’t think that saying that the killers are wrong is the same thing as saying they do not have reasons for what they did. Such a coordinated attack relied on innumerable people and ongoing processes of support and coordination—something ISIS has shown again and again that they capable of managing. Such planning requires a shared vision to enact their mission...a mission that ISIS leaders convey as grounded in Islamic principles. And so, I have no doubt that the killers and those abetting the killers thought they were *right* to do what they did. But, I do not think that because *they* believe they were right that *we* have to believe they were right. I believe they are wrong.

Such definitive judgments feel easy in such cases. And yet, to be honest, still I hesitate when making absolute moral statements. Because too often moral absolutism becomes more than conviction; it becomes a weapon. It becomes a sense of righteousness that justifies violence against others—whoever ‘the other’ is determined to be.

When the week began, the sermon title had a different emphasis in my head. I intended the title—“But They’re *Wrong!*”—to point to the justifications we give for dismissing, demeaning, or otherwise shutting down people with whom we disagree. But, in light of Beirut, Baghdad, and Paris, I *want* to denounce the killers, “but they’re wrong!” Is there a difference between these two different inflections of the same statement? When do we need to take a moral stand and when do we need to respectfully honor difference?

Disagreements, even divisions, between people are commonplace. From what music to play in the car to whether now is the right time to have a child or move to a new home or risk arrest at a protest, we continuously find ourselves confronted with choices from the mundane to the life-changing in which we may disagree with another. Such conflicts evoke a range of responses from us. Our heartbeats may quicken and our voices rise. Or, our hearts might sink as we grow very quiet. Or, maybe you roll your eyes or share a warm, familiar smile—“oh, *this* ole argument again?!?”

Over the last week, both Republican and Democratic candidates for president have debated on national T.V. Debates are not just televised, however. If they were, I suspect that we might all be stars in several shows of our own. Shows like: “What’s for dinner: her favorite or mine?” or “Limited Budget: Charitable Giving or Home Renovation?” Our lives are full of choices about how to use our time and our money, our energy and our attention. Making choices on one’s own can be difficult enough. But, often, they are others involved. We find ourselves sitting around the conference table or the dining room table with co-workers, friends, or family discussing and debating a course of action, a point of view, or what *really* happened. We differ, we disagree, and we might even get angry. Sputtering to ourselves or to whoever will listen, we find ourselves declaring, “But they’re *wrong!*”

“But they’re *wrong,*” we want to say—insisting upon our version of events or vision for the future. They’re making a mistake, we want to say, when a friend, or a child, or a boss makes a choice with which we disagree. Don’t marry that man. Don’t hire that person. Listen to me, to my point of view, to what I have to say and you’ll see that *I* am right.

Sometimes maybe we are right. Sometimes maybe we’re wrong. Sometimes maybe it’s not even about who is right or wrong; sometimes maybe it’s only about being different. Like the song the choir sang, [“You say tomato, I say tomato.”](#) sometimes the differences don’t really seem to matter.

Sometime the differences and the disagreements do *not* really matter. Does it really matter whether or not we all agree on whether we like the hymn we just sang? Does it matter whether or not you agree with your spouse or your best friend about the merits of a

particular musician or where to eat for dinner? There are many such differences that simply reflect the diversity of life with personal preferences or idiosyncratic tastes.

Yet, there are other disagreements where it's not so clear whether the differences matter. Does it matter if your child doesn't get into their first-choice college . . . or decides not to attend college at all? Does it matter whom you choose to date, to marry, to divorce? Does it matter if you work longer hours for that promotion or take on that additional volunteer job? Does it matter if you don't? Such choices certainly shape our lives in small and large ways—and in this way such choices *definitely* matter. But, I question whether such decisions can be characterized as morally "right" or "wrong." Rather, many of these choices of education, employment, volunteer engagement, or close relationships are choices that simply reflect our diversity of passions, interests, and capacities. We like different things; we are good at different activities; and we are attracted to different people. We are diverse . . . and this is a good and beautiful thing.

By seeking to intentionally create spaces that welcome diversity, I believe Unitarian Universalism is not only doing something good, but creating the possibility for something radical. For too long, our culture has defined differences not in terms of diversity, but in terms of hierarchies. We all "know" the logic of this hierarchy: men are better than women, straight is better than gay, rich is better than poor, white is better than black, Christian is better than Muslim. Often these hierarchies are tackled as separate issues—sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, or religious freedom. Yet, beneath them all lies the fundamental idea that differences need to be arranged in hierarchal ways with one better than the other.

This logic of "us" and "them", of "we" who are better and "the other" who is lesser, permeates our history, and I would argue, our present. Historically, the hierarchies of us and them justified not only slavery, but also colonial relationships in which European powers ruled over vast amounts of humanity and geography—extracting wealth and resources from colonized countries to flow to European economies. Among other reasons, our own U.S. Revolution was a revolt against the resources of this emergent nation flowing to England. Although we must not forget, that the wealth of this nation emerged from the colonization of indigenous people and the land they already inhabited—as well as the enslavement of African peoples.

The logic of colonization presumes the right of one group of people to rule over another. This inequality is rooted in perceptions of difference that presume one is better than the other. We are better because we are white—a more evolved race. We are better because

we are men—the superior sex. We are better because we are Christian—the true religion. Because we are better, we can tell you—the other, inferior group—what to do.

Such patterns of thinking are *not* all in the past. I believe they are at work when we respond immediately when Paris is bombed, but barely register the bombs in Beirut or Baghdad in the days before. I admit that this was my initial reaction . . . until a powerful Facebook post by my friend, Sarah Eltantawi reminded me of the *multiple* sites of violence struck by ISIS this week. A scholar who studies modern Islam, Sarah wrote,

ISIS is a black hole of evil. They avenge nothing, they make nothing better, they stand for no one but themselves. They have slaughtered people in Beirut, Baghdad and Paris this week for no reason other than to slaughter them. Their aim is for horror to beget more horror so that they may rule over others with a puritanical and deeply diseased form of fascism they call "Islam". We Muslims should all be insulted and furious and we should denounce them without any theological or political hesitation.

Aware of her role as a public figure within Islamic thought, Sarah did not hesitate to speak out against the killing of innocent lives and against those who would use Islam to justify such violence. Yet, Sarah also continued her post with a preemptive response to those who might suggest the former colonial powers of the west have begot such violence. She writes,

Yes, ISIS to an extent – perhaps a large one – is a symptom of our western-dominated geo-politics, specifically the west's war of aggression in Iraq which killed tens of thousands of innocent people and left a gaping political vacuum. Yes, the west is a reckless hegemon that propagates racist policies onto "the other". Maybe this is the biggest problem in the world. But I suspect it might share the stage with another problem – the catastrophic banditry of the Islamic tradition by a hyper patriarchal, violent, inhumane, ignorant, selfish, chauvinistic, and ugly cabal of people. That kidnapping started decades before this moment, and it has made every single Muslim majority country worse, from Algeria to Pakistan and beyond. Let's be very clear about that.

For Sarah, geo-political powers undoubtedly have contributed to substantive unrest and violence in the region—but this is not the only problem. The other problem, she suggests, is that Islam has been “kidnapped” by a group of people, by ISIS, in ways that has left Muslim majority countries *worse* off. For Sarah, there *is* a political problem, but there is also a *theological* problem. She concludes,

Let us attain clarity about ugly and exclusionary and violent theology. Islam should stand for peace and love. If it doesn't, do not stand with it, for it is not Islam. We can be the agent, the solution, we can refuse to be condemned to the apologist. With love for my brothers and sisters in Paris, Baghdad and Beirut. We are all one. The human family mourns for all innocent deaths. As the Qur'an says, [when] one person dies, it is as if all of humanity has died. The Qur'an also says that when one person heals, it is as if all of humanity has healed. I stand against anyone who would use theological and/or physical violence to separate us. I stand with love and with humanity, with no distinctions between anyone.

With these powerful words, Sarah makes a theological call for an Islam that promotes love and peace, an Islam that sees oneness, not divisions.

What about a Unitarian Universalist theology? Is such an idea an anathema? Can we take a theological stand? Or, does the free search for meaning suggest that we cannot? If we don't take a stand, does this mean we are saying all choices are the same? Are all differences simply "to-may-to" or "to-mah-to"?

There are differences among us that I would not want to squelch. In fact, I would love to see greater recognition of the differences that *do* exist among us here at First Parish. Some of us *do* believe in God. Some do not. Some of us would love to see more political action on certain *issues*. Others do not. Some of us will love the new vision, mission, and covenant statements. Others will not. I believe respectful recognition of such diversity can enliven us as a community. I believe that we need to learn to live with diversity in ways that do not always presume hierarchies of us and them, better and worse, right and wrong.

What does it mean to dwell together in a community of diverse people with different ideas, convictions, and priorities? This is the question we face here at First Parish. This is the question we face in town politics and in national politics. This is the question we face as a global community.

I do not know all the answers. I do not know all of what such dwelling together might look like. When do we need to respectfully honor difference? And, when do we need to take a moral stand? What I do know is that in response to the violent killings in Beirut, Baghdad, and Paris, I will stand with Sarah and say: "I stand against anyone who would use theological and/or physical violence to separate us. I stand with love and with humanity, with no distinctions between anyone."

So may it be. Amen.