"Religious Freedom: 450 Years"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
January 14, 2018

As you undoubtedly know, tomorrow is the Martin Luther King Day. This year it falls on his actual birthday, January 15. Had he lived, he would have been 89 tomorrow. Of course, Dr. King did not live, but was assassinated on April 4, 1968 . . . fifty years ago later this spring. In some ways, fifty years is a substantively long amount of time. Some of us here today were not alive fifty years ago. Yet, in other ways, fifty years is not that far away. Many of us here *do* remember as news of King's assassination spread and protests erupted. And, even if we do not have personal memories, I suspect that we all know people who do remember and perhaps even participated in the fight for civil rights in which Dr. King was so critically important.

Now consider another span of fifty years and another Martin Luther. Last fall we recognized the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther posting his 95 Theses on a door in Wittenburg, Germany. While the catalysts for the Reformation are multifold, for many Luther's bold and public action marks the start of this era of change. His actions joined with those of many others as the religious, political, and civil fabric of Europe fractured into divisive conflicts. Perhaps like me, when you've learned about the Reformation you have thought of *Western* Europe . . . of Germany with its Lutheran princes warring with each other, Spain asserting the power of the Catholic church, and England with King Henry's convenient religious change of heart to support his desire for a different wife.

But, if you look again at a map of sixteenth century Europe, you may also notice the states of Hungary and Transylvania there to the south and east of Germany. Today we would not easily spot Transylvania on a map—after centuries of political dynamics it exists primarily as a region within Romania. However, in the 16th century, fifty years after Luther's posting on the door in Wittenburg, Transylvania was a kingdom led by John Sigismund.

Like so much of Europe, Transylvania and its neighboring Hungary were embroiled in conflicts over religious differences. *Unlike* many places in Europe, the religious mix of Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists also included a group of Unitarians. In fact, the king himself identified as a Unitarian. And, his court preacher, Francis David*, was a Unitarian. [*pronounced Dah-veed]

Before becoming a Unitarian and royal preacher, however, David had a remarkable religious journey. As a boy in Transylvania, his intellectual capacities were evident and patrons supported his studies in Wittenberg for four years. Yes, *that* Wittenberg. Although David was born in about 1520, Luther did not die until 1546. And so, David was a young contemporary to an older Luther. 50 years between Luther's door at Wittenberg and the Edict of Torda start to feel closer.

But, David did not leave Wittenberg a Protestant Reformer. Oh no! Raised a Catholic, he studied Catholic theology at Wittenberg and became a Catholic priest. Back in Transylvania, David then became a Lutheran pastor . . . and then a Calvinist bishop . . . and *then* a Unitarian royal preacher.

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Rather than dismiss David as restlessly uncertain, I think it is more accurate to understand David as relentlessly attentive. Through study and discussion, David did not shy away from questions, but followed his shifting understanding from religious framework to religious framework.

While a shifting spiritual journey may seem pretty normal to us in 2018, in the 16th century religious conversions were political acts. Religion was not yet seen primarily as a private matter of internal belief. What we today understand as religious was not so cleanly separated from civil, social, and political identities. Put differently, the concept of "religion" is itself a modern development. I want to try and unpack this development of the concept of religion, because I think it gives us clues both to the significance of the Edict of Torda and of the ongoing importance of religious freedom today.

If you can, imagine a world in which religious belief is not an *option*, but simply a way of life. There is only one church. And that church is deeply entwined with political power, which is in turn entwined with the economics of trade and taxes. In your daily life, there is no sense of a sacred and secular divide. If it storms or a child falls sick, then God must have a reason. Everything was imbued with a Christian framework of how the world worked. It's not that some things were "religious" and other things were not. There was simply "life."

Which is why the emergence of significant debate about the nature of God, the teachings of Christ, and the source of authority for answering ultimate questions so transformed *life* in Europe. What began as an effort to restore the Church to a correct practice and interpretation of Christianity led to a fractured landscape of differing opinions about who was right about how to live. In many places the differences led, at best, to debate and, at worst, erupted into violent war to suppress the other, *wrong* understanding. But this was not a debate simply about *religious* ideas; this was a conflict about what was true, how we know what is true, and who has the power to decide what is true.

The concept of religion emerged only as people began to make an effort to categorize and objectively analyze the differences among these points of view. Scholars today point to the 18th century Enlightenment with its efforts to rationally understand and categorize as the impetus for the concept of religion to emerge. In other words, religion is a concept to help us understand and organize different systems of belief and practice about the ultimate nature of the universe.

But in 1568 Transylvania, this understanding was far in the future. In 1568, King John Sigismund was keenly aware of divisiveness in his realm. In many states, the government decided what people would believe. Unity could be enforced violently. Dissidents left or went underground. Aware of the threats that circulated between differing groups, King Sigismund issued an Edict:

> [P]reachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them...but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion

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> by anyone, ... and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching.

With these words, King Sigismund allowed, nay insisted, that congregations be able to choose their own preachers and that preachers be able to teach without fear of imprisonment, violence, or expulsion.

However, it's also notable to point out what is *not* in this Edict. The word freedom is not used. And yet, the Edict does something new by allowing differences, even strongly held differences, to coexist. It creates an alternative to the insistence of unity by force.

As much as I love studying the Reformation, I am so glad to not have lived through it with all of its tumult and violence. Living as we do today, it can be easy to take for granted that we are not legally obligated to attend a particular religious organization. Nor do we face the threat of imprisonment if we fail to affirm a certain belief in God or worry that belonging to a "heretical" community must be hidden. Instead, we live within a nation that affirms religious freedom in two ways—restricting the government from establishing a required religion and protecting the right of individuals to practice the religion of their choice.

It would feel good to simply stop there with a celebratory and proud note. However, it's just not that simple. Religious freedom has *not* been as equitable in practice as it is proclaimed in ideal. This is the core argument in a new book by Yale historian (and Unitarian Universalist) Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal.* Wenger lays out multiple examples in U.S. history when language of religious freedom combined with dynamics of racial identity and imperialism to reinforce inequalities.

For example, in the early 20th century when the U.S. took control of the Philippines from Spain, part of the supporting rhetoric in the press was the importance of bringing religious freedom. The predominantly Protestant Christian U.S. perceived Catholicism with its institutional hierarchy as a "slavish" religion. And so, U.S. imperial ambition was justified, in part, by an appeal to the promotion of religious freedom, which was understood as freeing the Catholics from Spanish and popish control. Upon winning control of the Philippines, the U.S. sent Protestant Christian missionaries to help "civilize" the "Malay" population—a conflation of whiteness and Protestant Christianity.

While I cannot do justice to Wenger's text, I will say that her argument disrupted my intentions to deliver a simple, celebratory sermon today. She made me wonder who gets to define what is and is not "religion"—and what this has to do with race, whiteness, and political control. For example, she explores the early 20th century Native American ghost dance. By conveying Native cultural traditions as *religious* in nature, they sought to appeal to the ideal of religious freedom as a protection for their dances. Similarly, Wenger shows how Jews sought to convey their perceived difference as a *religious* difference rather than as a *racial* difference. This framing both protected

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their religious difference and framed their identity as "white" rather than as a disparaged racial "other."

The dynamics of religion, race, and politics were also evident to Dr. King. Days before Dr. King died fifty years ago, he commented, "We must face the sad fact that at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing 'In Christ there is no East or West,' we stand in the most segregated hour of America." (Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution, March 31, 1968) How is it that religious freedom to worship as one pleases so often leads to *racial* segregation? Or, to ask the converse, how is it that non-white, non-Christian persons are so often treated as inferior in the U.S.? Or, that U.S. leadership depicts non-white, non-Christian places as unequal partners in global relations? As nations whose people are undesirable as immigrants or citizens of our nation? Could it be that the full promise of religious freedom in the U.S. is reserved only for white Christians?

And yet, in our courts today conservative, white Christians are claiming religious persecution. Who will get to define religious freedom in the U.S. in 2018? For decades now, conservative Christian voices have dominated the public voice of religion—trying to define what is and is not "religious." For example, sexual morality becomes defined as religious, but poverty is not?! I wonder what role we as liberal religious persons might play in this ongoing fight to define religion and religious freedom in the U.S.?

In a 1967 speech, Dr. King said,

> "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority." (*A Knock at Midnight, June 11, 1967*)

Dr. King's words make me wonder what we are doing with our religious freedom? When we see wrong, are we speaking out as *religious* persons against the state? I do not want us to be an irrelevant social club. There is too much at stake in our own divisive world. 450 years may seem like a very long time, and yet, from the Edict of Torda until today we are engaged in an ongoing struggle for how we will live together in our religious, racial, and national differences. As Unitarian Universalists, we have an opportunity today to bring our own moral commitments of dignity for all persons, equity in human relations, and interdependence with the natural world to the public debates about the world we want to live in. Thankfully, we are free to do so.

So may it be.
Amen.

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