



The Most Important Question
a sermon by Rev. Alan Taylor
delivered April 25, 2010

Reading from The House for Hope by John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker

It is often forgotten that religion in America has more often than not been liberal in its spirit and progressive in its social impact. The United States was born in an era of Enlightenment religion and increasing concern about human rights. During the early nineteenth century, religious people were at the center of efforts to redress the wrongs of slavery and establish equal rights for women. After the Civil War, and in reaction to the Gilded Age of economic inequality created by rapid industrialization, the reforms of the Progressive Era were inspired in no small part by the Christian Social Gospel movement. Franklin Roosevelt's development of a social safety net in the midst of fighting the Depression, while opposing totalitarianism, found broad religious support in public theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr. In the 1950's and '60s, Martin Luther King Jr., a progressive Baptist, drew on, critiqued, and applied the liberal theological heritage to galvanize the civil rights movement, which found its strongest support among religious people, both people of color and whites, both Christians and Jews. And there has long been far more religious support in America for peacemaking, for lesbian and gay rights, for environmental stewardship, and for women's rights than is often recognized. Few remember, for example, that *Roe v. Wade*, which established abortion as a legal option for women, came to the Supreme Court through the activism of liberal churchwomen.

Sermon

Joan was eighty-six. She had both cancer and heart disease. The moment her minister walked into her hospital room, she had the church newsletter in her hand and she blurted out "You, I've got a bone to pick with you. Why is there nothing, nothing at all in the newsletter about the most urgent issue of our time--global warming. What kind of religious leader are you? This kind of haranguing went on for nearly a half hour until this minister with 35 years of experience raised his voice for the first time to someone lying sick in a hospital bed. "Darn it Joan." He sputtered. "You know it's very hard to be a good minister to you when all you do is tell me what a terrible minister I am." She stared at him and said, "I don't think you're a terrible minister at all. I think you're the best one we've ever had. Which is why I'm so disappointed that you aren't saying more about

what is so urgent!" Now Joan was not particularly gifted in the arts of persuasion. She expected others to do the persuasive work--while she provided her minister, friends, and family a steady stream of news clippings, recipes for a small planet, recycling tips, warnings, and admonitions. Towards the end of her life, she spoke with the passion of the Jewish prophets of old but often those she spoke to never felt particularly heard.

Joan's is the first of three people I want to share with you, the first two of which I take from *The House for Hope* from which today's reading comes. Joan's minister was John Buehrens, former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association who co-wrote *The House For Hope* with Rebecca Parker.

The second person that I want to share with you is Amy, age 24. Amy attended a protest rally in Fort Benning, Georgia, at the School of the Americas. For decades, graduates of this U.S. Army school have been implicated in human rights violations in many parts of Latin America, including torture, assassination, and mass murder. At age 24, Amy became overwhelmed with emotion as she participated in the solemn procession of protesters. Some were shrouded in black, shouldering symbolic coffins, large ones for adults, small ones for children. Most others, including Amy, carried crosses with names of individuals who had been killed soldiers trained at Fort Benning. As the procession of several thousand people moved up and down the street, the names of victims were read aloud. Myrna Chicas, the speaker called. *Presente*, meaning she is here, the chorus of protesters responded. *Ignacio Ellacuria, presente! Oscar Romero, Presente!* As the list went on for hours, Amy was touched so deeply she knew she wanted to devote her life to promoting her ideals of justice and resisting evil but had no idea how to proceed. Amy began to realize that her liberal religious upbringing had taught her the value of social justice but it hadn't connected activism to theology, to spiritual practice, or to ritual. The ache of a strange absence disturbs Amy as she longs to make a difference in the world but has no spiritual or theological grounding to support her in this effort.

And then there is Josh. Josh is a middle aged man, a father, with a stable job, a loving partner, healthy children. Despite his successful career and his love for his family, he suffers from something he cannot easily name. A void has been growing within him, gnawing at him. He has a knowing in his soul that there is more meaning in life than what he is currently living. He longs for deeper connection with others but doesn't know quite what this looks like. Maybe in volunteering, maybe being more active in his church, maybe contributing to some kind of community service project. He is aware at some not entirely conscious level that he feels for those who suffer, and he knows intellectually there are children and adults who have it rough, especially in this economy. Every time he thinks that he should be finding some way, some little way, to live out his deeply cherished value of service, he feels trapped by the significant responsibilities of job and family. It's not like he hasn't thought about it and tried giving volunteering a go, but the couple times he began to pursue an idea or try out a volunteer opportunity, it almost instantly felt like one more burden.

Joan, Amy, and Josh may be at different places in their lives, but they share many things in common. They are all truly human. They share some sense of calling to make a difference in the lives of others or the world, but don't know how best to go about it. Each of them is aware of brokenness or injustice in the world but they are ill equipped religiously, theologically, spiritually. Each of them suffers from times of feeling isolated, and what each longs to do can't be done alone or separate from others. They all are in need of being a part of a vital liberal religious community--a religious community that holds up the heritage of liberal religion of this country that has literally transformed lives and American society throughout the history of the United States, that has kept faith that the arc of the universe bends towards justice. Now Joan, Amy, and Josh all are suspicious of organized religion thanks to the kind of religion that has dominated the media the past thirty years, and they all have little understanding that progressive religion has a transforming heritage and constant invitations to participate in fostering religious communities that answer their deepest longings. What is possible in authentic religious community where we bring our most human of struggles?

Today, the theme of this service is the most important question. Joan, Amy, and Josh are all very close to it. Now, I wanted to know what other preachers have said about the most important question, so I googled sermons the most important question. A bunch came up and all claim the same most important question and then give the same answer to that question. The most important question, according to so many clergy, is that posed by Jesus to the pharisees: Who do you say that I am? Who do you believe that I am? The most important question for them is about belief--and they give their answer, that Jesus is the Lord and Savior who died for our sins. As your minister, I must acknowledge that I believe Jesus' question is an important one, but it is not the most important question for a theologically diverse community like Unity Temple, especially in the way it gets interpreted.

A transforming religious community does not ask the question "What do you believe?" but instead "How shall we live?" A transforming religious community does not proscribe pat answers to what you should believe but invites wholehearted participation in discerning what is truly important. The basic problem, it seems to me, is that we tend to think of religion as a set of beliefs. This is a huge mistake. As recently elected president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Peter Morales, notes, Real religion is much more about what we love than about what we think. This emphasis on belief, especially on "true religion" being about correct belief, is a modern aberration. He writes, If we look at religions historically and across cultures, we discover that in fact belief has very little to do with authentic religion. Some religious traditions, like Buddhism, have virtually no beliefs. Consider the Hebrew tradition that gave rise to Christianity. The prophets in the scriptures show no interest in correct belief. They show a lot of interest in how people behave and whether they are faithful to their covenant. And even Paul, in his letter to the Phillipians, in today's reading, makes clear that if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, it is to act in accordance with whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report. That the God of Peace dwells among and within us when we are living rightly in community rather than insisting on believing rightly. The very word "religion" comes from a Latin root that means to tie, to bind. Ultimately what ties us together,

what makes us a religion, a united people, is actively sharing what we love, what binds us together is how we collectively answer the question how shall we live, and answering that question through our example.

Peter Morales has it just right: “The questions we ask one another are so critically important. If you and I ask each other what we believe, we will get into talking about very heady stuff. We will put forth our beliefs and then support them with evidence and argument. All too often we will end up arguing.” However, when we ask one another what we truly love, what we truly value, what we care about more than anything else in life, something amazing happens. As Morales says, “We don’t argue. We listen. We connect. We discover that we love and want the same things. We care about one another. We want honesty, depth, and intimacy in our relationships. We want enduring friendships. We also discover that we realize that we are all in this life together. We want to help heal the world. We want compassion, understanding, and justice to guide our actions and our governments.” We want to work together, hand in hand, to build a world beyond exploitation and violence.

When you and I, along with Joan, Amy, and Josh, focus on what we love and what we long to create, something almost miraculous happens. We are energized. We form lasting bonds. We become eager to commit ourselves and to work together. We become more generous. We come to care more about “us” and less about “me.”

Recently we Unitarian Universalists were urged to develop our own elevator speeches about what we believe. Such statements can be helpful, but I find when I actually am in an elevator and happen to have a nametag that says Rev. Alan Taylor and underneath Unitarian Universalist on it and someone asks me, so what does your church believe, I'm gonna have just enough time for a one liner, and there just isn't any one-liner that captures our faith tradition, so instead of trying to say what we believe in one convoluted, haphazard run on sentence, I try to provoke a conversation so that when the elevator opens the person will ask me something more. And that one bite-sized sentence I would say is this. “Our faith tradition believes in life before death.” That's not to say that we all don't believe in life after death, because a bunch of us do, but a belief in the after-life is not central to our tradition, answers to that question do not bind us together. Instead our tradition focuses on this life, on this life we share, on this world in which we find ourselves. Our collective mission is to bring forth heaven here on earth, and on another level to recognize that paradise is already here and now. Everything we need for a vibrant, engaged life awaits our participation.

Theology, for us, orients our lives by collectively addressing the questions: How shall we live? What do we most deeply love? Where is God calling us? or for the non-theistic among us, Where is the spirit of life or our core values calling us? For not even a belief in God binds us together. For we agree to disagree on traditional theological concepts. But we still have and cultivate a vibrant theology none the less. And for the individual, our liberal religious community extends a significant challenge: what will you do with your gifts? To what or where are you being called? What larger purpose drives your life? These questions are variations on the most important question.

John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker teach that theology has three dimensions. First it is architectural, it provides a framework for human life. It is ecological--it creates an interactive system in response to a specific environment. And it is archeological--it unearths artifacts from the past that can inspire our imagination and understanding now.

For those of us like Joan who recognize profound brokenness in the world, our theology offers a framework for human life. As the Unity Temple singers expressed so beautifully, this sanctuary is a house of peace.

*Let this be a house of prophesy,
May vision for our children
Be our common theme
Let this be our house
Our trove of ancient story
And cradle of our tender dreams*

And this sanctuary is not just our house. It is the house of generations before us and we are here to ensure it is the house of peace and prophecy for generations to come.

For those of us like Amy who bear witness to evil and injustice, who are compelled to resist the worst of human activity for the sake of affirming life, our theology recognizes the unity of all people, to see that in solidarity, we can affirm the divine within human beings and resist the forces driven by human greed, pride, and ignorance. As we sang this morning,

*We would be one in building for tomorrow a nobler world than we have known today.
We would be one in searching for that meaning which binds our hearts and points us on our way.
As one, we pledge ourselves to greater service, with love and justice, strive to make us free.*

For those of us like Josh whose lives are so busy and we wonder how we might discover deeper meaning in authentic community, our theology is a theology of hope, calling us to the transforming power of love and does so by bringing forth teachings and stories ancient and contemporary. As we sang in our first hymn: *Come Spirit come, our hearts control, our spirits long to be made whole. Let inward love guide every deed, by this we worship and are freed.* This hymn comes directly from the book of Corinthians credited to the apostle Paul. Ours is a theology that engages ancient scriptures, contemporary poetry, and stories of new and old that get at the truth of our lives.

The time has come for vibrant progressive religious communities like ours to serve our wider community, to provide a spiritual grounding for a truly democratic society. The time has come to engage the most important question. How shall we live? What do we most deeply love? Where are you being called by the transforming power of love? May the living into the most important question bring you great joy.

Blessed be. Amen.