

UUCA  
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Summer Minister  
July 18, 2013

**So What DO you Believe?**

So, I asked him:  
What do you believe?  
It was youth group,  
And I was the leader.

“Well, I sure don’t believe  
in some supernatural God,”  
the teen answered.

“And I sure as heck  
don’t believe Jesus  
was the Son of God, either.”

“OK, I said. Fair enough.  
But you are telling me  
what you DON’T believe.  
Tell me what you DO believe.  
For instance,  
is there anything  
you DO believe about Jesus?”

“Well, ya, what he said about  
loving thy neighbor,  
and about helping the poor,  
that stuff was OK,” the boy said.

“But all of that miracle stuff in the Bible?  
That supernatural stuff like walking on water,  
bringing people back from the dead –  
THAT defies the laws of nature –  
give me a break.  
That’s a bunch of crock.”

Ah....I say.  
Now we’re getting somewhere.  
You just mentioned something you DO believe.  
You have faith in the laws of nature.  
Faith in Science  
And what it can teach you about  
The way the world works.

“Well, ya, sure,” he said.  
“Science tells us everything  
we need to know.  
The rest is just superstition.”

I nod my head.  
“Like you, I believe  
science is always shedding light  
on new truths --  
truths that shift our understanding  
of life and the larger world.

But even science has its limits,  
I warn.

NASA has said  
that every planet, every star, every galaxy,  
Every bit of matter that has  
Ever been observed and measured –  
All of what we currently know –  
Makes up only 4% of the Universe.

Only four percent.  
That means 96%  
Of everything in the Universe  
is currently unknown,  
And unknowable –  
Dark matter, other possible dimensions.....  
Astronomers admit  
They can't see, can't detect,  
Let alone comprehend the rest  
Of what's out there.  
At least, not at this time,  
With our current level of technology.

96% unknown  
and unknowable –  
That's a lot of ultimate mystery.  
Stop and think about that.

He didn't know what to say.  
I think I left him a little speechless.

(PAUSE)  
So, let's stop and think about it  
This morning.  
What do YOU believe  
In the face of so much unknown,  
And unknowable mystery?

Sometimes it's easier  
To articulate what we DON'T believe  
Than what we DO believe,  
Perhaps that's because  
We are a non-creedal faith.  
We don't share a set of  
Traditional or orthodox religious answers  
To the big questions of life.

Rather, this faith tradition says  
It is up to each of us  
To conduct our own search  
for ultimate truth and meaning.  
We are encouraged to explore,  
To question and to conclude  
Our own beliefs in the face of ultimate mystery,  
And to respect and support others  
To do the same.

Our history is filled  
with faith ancestors  
Who broke away  
From orthodox traditions --  
Who questioned and pushed back against  
what was no longer true for them.  
As a result, our denomination  
Became known as much  
For what we DO NOT believe  
As for what we actually DO believe.

For instance, our earliest faith forebears  
Pushed back hard against the Trinity.  
They did NOT believe  
There was any evidence in the Bible  
To support the idea of God as "three persons,"  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Instead, they believed in the unity of God,  
And questioned how Jesus  
could be considered divine  
In the same way  
And at the quite the same level  
that God is divine.

The word, "Unitarian"  
Was initially a derisive term,  
An insult people hurled at our faith ancestors  
Because they did NOT believe  
In the Trinity.  
They were Unitarians,  
Not Trinitarians.

Then there were  
Our Puritan ancestors.  
Some of them pushed back against Calvinism.  
They did NOT believe humans  
Were depraved and born into original sin.  
Instead, they believed  
humans are born  
With inherent goodness,  
born with the capacity  
To do both good and evil,  
with the free will to choose.

Some of our faith ancestors also  
pushed back against the Calvinist  
notion that God  
had already pre-selected a few people –  
known as the “elected” –  
who would get to go to heaven  
while most were condemned to hell.  
According to Calvin,  
nobody knew who was predestined  
to end up where.  
How we lived our lives didn’t matter–  
Being an ethical person,  
doing “good works”  
didn’t tip the scales in your favor.  
You were either elected,  
And got to go to heaven,  
Or not.....

William Ellery Channing,  
preached his famous  
Unitarian Christianity sermon in 1819.  
Lashing out against Calvin,  
He embraced the term “Unitarian,”  
And professed belief in a God  
Who is infinitely good, kind,  
Benevolent and just.  
Good, not to a few, but to all.



Many of our Unitarian forebears  
believed we are “saved” by character –  
We are called to live ethical lives  
Because it is the right thing to do.  
We have the power to create  
Heaven and hell right here on earth  
Through the choices we make  
In our everyday living.

Our Universalist forebears  
Rejected the notion of hell outright.  
They believed in an all-loving,  
All-forgiving God,  
Who would not condemn  
Any one of us to eternal damnation.  
All were eventually saved.  
No exceptions.

As religious humanism  
Began to take shape  
In the late 1800s and early 1900s,  
Some of our faith ancestors  
Pushed back against  
Not only traditional Christianity,  
But against a belief in God.  
Instead, they declared faith  
In the power of human reason,  
In the promise of science  
and in ongoing human progress.

As you can see,  
our faith history  
Has evolved over time –  
Through the uncommon courage  
Of the many brave men and women  
who pushed up against  
traditional religious beliefs,  
who pushed back  
and broke away to create  
new religious truths.

Some of them paid dearly –  
For daring NOT to believe.  
Over the past 1700 years,  
countless numbers  
Were labeled heretics.  
They were tortured,  
They were stoned.  
Many were burned at the stake.

(PAUSE)

We owe a great deal  
To these courageous heretics.  
We are a faith born of heresy.  
Did you know the original meaning  
Of the Greek word “heretic”  
is “choice”?  
It originally referred to  
The process  
Of studying a variety of philosophies  
To determine and choose for oneself  
the best, most ethical way to live.

Given that definition,  
it sure sounds like we  
Proudly encourage heresy  
Here, at this church.  
Heresy is embodied  
in our third and fourth principles:  
Which encourage  
a free and responsible search  
For truth and meaning.  
And acceptance of one another  
And encouragement to spiritual growth  
In our congregations.

So, my fellow heretics,  
Let's try a little experiment this morning,

In just a moment,  
And I'm going to ask you to get up and move  
As you are willing and able  
To a different part of the room,  
That represents your core belief.

For those of you who choose  
To sit this experiment out and  
Wish to remain seated, no worries.  
Stay where you are and enjoy  
What's about to unfold.

Here's what I want you to do –  
Let me get through all the instructions,  
Then we'll move.  
I'd like to ask the atheists among us  
To come stand up here near the piano.  
Atheists up here on the left.

I'd like the theists –  
People who believe in some notion of God,  
To gather over by the hand bell tables.

Those who identify as UU Christians,  
And Jewish UUs,  
I invite you to gather over by the right wall there,  
Close to the theists.

Humanists, I'm thinking you should gather  
Over by the left wall here  
On the side by the atheists.

Agnostics, and all of you  
Who may believe in something  
larger than yourself,  
But you just aren't sure what --  
Go ahead and gather at the center back of the room.

UU Buddhists, why don't you gather in the back corner  
On the left near the doorway.  
Naturalists, Mystics, Pagans, and Earth-Centered folks,  
How about you gather near the sound booth.

Now, maybe I haven't called out your belief –  
And, if so, please forgive me –  
or maybe you find yourself in between  
several categories.

This isn't an exact science,  
Be honest, and go with your first gut instinct  
and find your place to stand.

OK, everyone, find your spot  
and face inward to form a big circle.

(PAUSE AND WAIT)

Wow. Take a look  
around the room.

Pretty amazing, isn't it?

Look at the diversity,  
The richness of the many beliefs  
represented here this morning.

How can a single church  
Hold this much diversity of faith?

I am reminded of

Our nation's motto:

Eh Pluribus Unem –

“Out of many, one.”

Now, as you look around the room,

I want you to appreciate

The challenge

your new called minister will face –

Any minister in our denomination faces

Every Sunday, really –

When we do our best

to preach meaningful messages

to such a huge circle of difference.

We often don't speak  
The same religious language.  
Different words mean different things  
Around the room.  
Some of us may use a language of reverence,  
Others of us do not.  
The word "God" is especially tricky,  
And being good heretics,  
Some of us push back against it,  
Until someone defines  
exactly what they mean by that word.

We are called to remember  
No single one of the beliefs around this room  
Has the corner on "The Truth."  
No one person or belief is right  
and everybody else is wrong.  
Our beliefs are true for each one of us,  
And that makes them all true.  
We are called to journey together  
With respect for our many differences.



As we look around the room,  
Let us be reminded of the words  
Of Francis David,  
A Unitarian minister  
From the 1500s,  
Who died a martyr in Transylvania,  
for his refusal to accept the Trinity.  
HE was the one who said,  
“We need not think alike,  
To love alike.”  
We need not think alike,  
To love alike.

OK, everyone, go ahead  
And return to your seats.

That was interesting,  
Wasn't it?  
We may not be united  
In our theological beliefs,  
But aren't most of us here,  
United in our love, appreciation  
And gratitude for the gift of life?

Haven't most of us  
Experienced some form of wonder and awe  
In the face of that 96% ultimate mystery?  
Haven't most of us experienced  
moments of grace in our lives?

Aren't most of us united  
In our belief in the importance  
Of ethical living?  
Belief that we are called to be our best, highest selves?  
Called to make a difference in this world?

Ah, beloved heretics.  
It doesn't matter  
What grounds your sense of being in the world.  
Here, revelation is not sealed.  
This is your invitation  
To move beyond  
What you do NOT believe,  
to explore further, to discuss,  
To define and refine  
your sense of the sacred,  
To honor your still, small voice within,  
And allow it to call you to  
your beliefs of higher purpose and service.  
May you continue to grow  
In your deepest understandings  
Of what makes you uniquely human.

In the face of so much uncertainty and mystery,  
may you find comfort here,  
in this community of like-minded heretics,  
may you find support for the journey.  
We need not think alike,  
To love alike.  
Blessed be.

Word Count: 2057

I am reminded  
Of something  
The theologian Paul Tillich  
once said:  
"Tell me about  
the God you don't believe in,  
and, chances are,  
I probably don't believe  
in that God, either."

Tillich defines faith, and indirectly religion, as "ultimate concern." Religion is direction or movement toward the ultimate or the unconditional. And God rightly defined might be called the Unconditional. God, in the true sense, is indefinable. Since the Unconditional precedes our minds and precedes all created things, God cannot be confined by the mind or by words. Tillich sees God as Being-Itself, or the "Ground of all Being." For this reason there cannot be *a* God. There cannot even be a "highest God," for even that concept is limiting. We cannot make an object out of God. And the moment we say he is the highest God or anything else, we have made him an object. Thus, beyond the God of the Christian or the God of the Jews, there is the "God beyond God." This God cannot be said to exist or not to exist in the sense that we exist. Either statement is limiting. We cannot make a *thing* out of God, no matter how holy this thing may be, because there still remains something behind the holy thing which is its ground or basis, the "ground of being."

Since we are finite creatures, we are separated from this infinite ground or foundation of our being. And feeling this estrangement, we experience anxiety. We may consult a psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist may attempt to solve our problem. But Tillich insists that while the psychiatrist can cure many anxieties — particularly the unnecessary exaggerated, or unreasonable ones — he can never cure this basic anxiety. Psychiatry deals with the finite, whereas this anxious estrangement results from our separation as finite beings from what is infinite or unconditional.

What overcomes this separation and brings us into communion with the ultimate ground of being, and into awareness of the meaning of our life, is love. Love is thus the most powerful and important aspect of religion. To define it in another way: Love is the drive to bring together that which has been separated.