

Tolerance – Just the First Step
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Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

from the writing of the Unitarian Universalist minister, Rev. Harry Meserve (1914-2000)

From arrogance, pompousness, and from thinking ourselves more important than we are, may some saving sense of humor liberate us. For allowing ourselves to ridicule the faith of others, may we be forgiven.

From making war and calling it peace, special privilege and calling it justice, indifference and calling it tolerance, pollution and calling it progress, may we be cured.

For telling ourselves and others that evil is inevitable while good is impossible, may we stand corrected.

God of our mixed up, tragic, aspiring, doubting, and insurgent lives, help us to be as good as in our hearts we have always wanted to be. Amen.

from *The Edict of Torda* (1568)

Our second reading is taken from the conclusion of the “Edict of Torda”, a proclamation issued exactly 450 years ago last month by the Unitarian King Sigismund of Transylvania (part of the present day country of Romania):

In every place the preachers 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 for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve . . . no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone . . . and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment. . . . For faith is the gift of God. . . .

Sermon

We’ve just heard some of the concluding words of this great edict of toleration, promulgated 450 years ago.

Here, now, are the words of a more recent proclamation:

Because men and women are made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he or she should be respected and served, not exploited.

Can you guess where this one came from? I wouldn't have known. It was composed in 1974, part of a manifesto drafted by a number of evangelical Christian leaders, including Rev. Billy Graham, who as you know died a few days ago at the age of 99. The next sentence of that manifesto read:

Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive.

I have to say, this adds nuance to my opinion of Billy Graham. He preached, after all, that accepting Jesus Christ was the only way to salvation – which on the face of it doesn't sound like it would lend itself to religious tolerance or much tolerance of any kind. Further, back in 1960 Graham had expressed concern about the election of a Catholic to the presidency, and a decade or so later he was caught on tape in conversation with Richard Nixon sharing anti-Semitic sentiments.

But people can grow and change. Graham became friends with Kennedy and he went on to engage respectfully with popes. And later he apologized – genuine apology – for his anti-Semitic comments.

All, in the spirit of that affirmation, “because men and women are made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity...”

More than tolerated, in other words, more than put up with... respected – and only a short step from there to “appreciated” or even “celebrated”.

At the risk of trivializing the point, it would be like me going a step beyond tolerating lima beans or peas to learning to appreciate and even enjoy them!

These are sometimes fine distinctions. Think back again to the Edict of Torda.

The Edict affirmed that congregations ought to be permitted to listen to preachers of various persuasions and be free to choose the one they agree with... and at the same time not revile or threaten others who have different views or expressions of faith.

This at least suggests genuine respect, and maybe even appreciation of views not shared. It begins to move in the direction of the words often attributed to King Sigismund's court preacher, the Unitarian Francis David: “We need not think alike to love alike.”

It doesn't matter, by the way, to the sentiment of those words that they may actually have been written or spoken by John Wesley some centuries later; they in any case reflect the spirit of David's life and preaching, a life that inspired Sigismund to promulgate the Edict of Torda, this landmark of the paired values of religious freedom and religious tolerance – values which of course continue to be one of the central threads of our Unitarian Universalist faith.

Not incidentally, our Coming of Age youth (youth so often leading the way), when they share their personal faith statements in the culminating Coming of Age ceremony right here in

our Meeting House, are consistently very clear about all this. (Like the clarity we've been hearing from youth across the country this past week in relation to gun violence.) We hear our own youth name from this lectern, one way or another, that Unitarian Universalists are free to believe as we choose – but not on a whim at a spiritual smorgasbord – rather as a result of careful and deep consideration. And we hear them name at the same time their tolerance and respect for others who have different beliefs, including their willingness to learn from those who have different beliefs as well as their willingness to work together with anyone of any faith who is striving to bring more love and understanding into our world.

May be as simple as that.

Which certainly echoes those words, whomever said them: “We need not think alike to love alike.”

David himself, by the way, had been on his own spiritual journey, arriving at his Unitarian theology as a result of his own careful consideration. For he had been a Catholic priest, then a Lutheran, then a Calvinist, and finally came to his Unitarian views through his own study and reflection.

Sigismund, for his part, though Unitarian, had observed the diversity of religious views within his own small kingdom, and rather than demanding everyone agree to his Unitarianism decided that all should be free to believe and worship as they chose. Freedom and toleration a natural pairing.

Sadly, though, it must be reported, the Edict of Torda lasted only as long as Sigismund. When he died three years later, the edict of toleration died too. Not long afterwards, David was arrested for his views, and himself died in prison.

Which is a reminder of something all too easy to forget, that religious freedom and tolerance of views not our own – based on the affirmation that we need not think alike to love alike – is a fragile thing; all too easy to take the hard won values of freedom and tolerance for granted.

So... back to us then. How ought we, 21st century Unitarian Universalists, 450 years after the short-lived Edict of Torda... how ought we tend the flame of religious tolerance, indeed tolerance in all of its positive forms, tolerance leading to respect, appreciation, and even celebration? To put it another way, how ought we *use* our religious freedom to promote religious tolerance – and other forms of tolerance as well?

To begin with, we use our religious freedom to be as welcoming as we can be. As I often say: Everyone welcome here, regardless of belief, color, gender, sexual orientation... as long as you are willing to leave the door open for the next person and the next.

In other words, welcoming not only by letting our voices speak words of welcome, but by letting our lives speak that welcome. Not just talking a good game, but *living* in the spirit of many steps beyond tolerance in the direction of understanding, acceptance, even (or especially) love.

Next, we learn to speak and live in this spirit by continually seeking to discover our own spiritual depths – through reading, reflection, conversation, spiritual practice of whatever kind, including weekly worship here in this ancient house; and then seeking to live from those depths in relation to our daily lives, to one another, and to the issues of our time.

In the end, you see, it seems to me that some of this, when we take it to a more personal level, is about Harry Meserve's little prayer we heard earlier, which ends, “...help us to be as good as in our hearts as we have always wanted to be.”

And what sort of person do we want to be? Would we be happy and content as a person with a mind and heart closed to the views and opinions of others, closed to learning from other cultures and religions? Or are we happier and more content – because more fully human – when we allow ourselves to be open to views we don't share, open to learning from others... open maybe to being changed by the views and perspectives and traditions of others. Like Francis David in his journey from Catholic priest to Unitarian preacher. Or like Billy Graham's journey from narrow-minded fundamentalist evangelical to, if not liberal, certainly a more generously open-hearted evangelical.

Now, it must be said that none of this is to say that all opinions on all issues or all religious beliefs are of equal worth or truth – not at all. Sometimes we are led to a place where we can only honor the inherent worth and dignity of another person, but not honor their odious opinions (white supremacist, racist, Islamophobic, and so on) or find that we cannot honor religious beliefs that sanction such views, and that condemn some of God's children, children of the universe, as lesser than others simply by virtue of such things as the color of their skin or who they choose to love, and so on.

In this spirit, then, and remembering as Harry Meserve affirmed that tolerance is *not* the same as indifference, by no means not the same, we can and must certainly lift our voices and speak up as we are so moved with clear opinion on all manner of social issues: racial justice, climate change, immigration, and these days in particular on the place of guns in our society... even as we keep our hearts open with compassion to those with whom we differ – whether within our own community as well as beyond these walls.

In this spirit, then, the way I understand humanity's various religious traditions is that for all their outward differences, from their depths they invite us to experience the depth of our interconnected interdependently woven lives:

The Muslim poet Rumi, who said:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

Jesus, who spoke of the kingdom of heaven spread before us, if only we had eyes to see – the “kingdom”: in my understanding that way of being in which we *experience* our connection to one another and to the creation, and can then only behave accordingly.

Or again, Francis David or whomever: We need not think alike to love alike.

Of course, none of this is as easy in the saying as it is in the living.

And this is why we have a place like this Old Ship Church, this precious community in which we have the opportunity to learn, through worship, through conversation, through our shared efforts and shared lives, to *live from* our spiritual depths... so that we will learn to speak more often with care and respect, while not forsaking the passion of our beliefs and the passion of our desire to create a more loving world of greater peace and justice... all of which helping us to grow in the direction of being as good in our hearts as we have always wanted to be, and therefore to be more deeply happy and content because more fully human.

I conclude, then, this morning, with a simple hope:

May we, each of us and all of us together be worthy of our heritage of freedom and tolerance... and the universal love which has given us birth and which sustains us.

So may it be.