

Good morning. It is always an honor to share my thoughts with you. Today we are going to talk about the relationship between Truth and Membership as they relate to WUUC. But before we dive into those deep waters, I wanted to share the genesis of this sermon which turns out to be the radio

As many of you know, NPR has been doing a series called “This I believe...” which features short essays by people - some famous, many not – in which people express their core beliefs. It is based on a series that Edward R. Murrow initiated in 1951. If you go to the NPR website and navigate to the “This I believe...” series, you can actually listen to some of these original essays. You can hear Jackie Robinson, Harry Truman and, my favorite, Helen Keller. Albert Einstein’s is also there, but only in written form. The more modern essays are, if anything, even more moving, and thoughtful and inspiring. Several months ago, I was inspired by that series to write my own essay and thought it might be interesting to ask others in our community to do the same for today. When I wrote mine, I was actually surprised at how much my Unitarian Universalist beliefs infused my statement. Yet that statement was also uniquely my own. No other UU would write quite the same statement or adopt mine as their own. Some would agree with parts of what I said and all would disagree with one part or another. My guess is that as you listened to Chuck and Alaine and Marcia, you heard beliefs you share and those you don’t. All of these raise the question of “Truth” what is true and how do we know it to be so.

There is one statement in our chalice lighting that, to me, is shockingly heretical. On its surface, it seems to betray all we stand for as UUs. Almost every Sunday, we remind ourselves to search for the truth with an open mind. We don’t say, search for “my truth with an open mind” or even “search for truth with an open mind”. We use the definite article – we say “THE truth”. So what’s up with that? It seems to be an acknowledgment that we, as a community believe that there is such a thing as a unified truth and that we – jointly – are on a quest to find it. Until very recently, when I recited those words, I would drop the word “the” and say, “search for truth with an open mind” on the assumption that there is not a knowable “the truth”. I have changed my mind and let me tell you why.

Before I get to that though, let me admit that I am theologically terribly conflicted. I very much like the inward journey reflected in the Eastern traditions of Zen, Taoism and Vipassanya Buddhism. I find the practices they espouse to be very helpful to becoming more centered and calm and mindful. But, for the most part, these philosophies are too solipsistic for me – they seem too focused on self-improvement and self-salvation. From all of my readings, I have not been able to find a profound moral imperative at the center of these philosophies. They are much more about coming to terms with the world than they are about changing it. And, helpful and necessary as these techniques are for my own spiritual development, they are not enough for me.

And so, I took the advice of Shunryu Suzuki, the Zen monk who wrote *Zen Mind, Beginners Mind*. That wise teacher suggested that truth is often more accessible in exploring your in own cultural traditions. So I went back to my Christian roots. Last year I reread Synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke. These are the oldest of the gospels in the orthodox cannon and they contain the stories of Jesus. In particular, I tried to get a handle on the core of his teaching. I tried to figure out what he believed on his own terms -- shorn of doctrine, and of the myths that have grown up around Jesus over the centuries. It is hard work because the meaning of his life began to be mythologized from a very early stage in the church's history.

So what was the central teaching of Jesus? We all know that Jesus preached the "gospel". What many of us don't realize is that the word gospel is the Middle English word for "good news" And the New Testament Greek word for good news is $\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\gamma\epsilon\lambda\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ – from which we get the word evangelism. So Jesus was a going around telling people good news – evangelizing as it were. Now scholars broadly agree that the core of Jesus' message - of this gospel - had to do with the Kingdom of God and in my own readings that leaps off the page. The Kingdom of God was clearly the central motif of his teaching and ministry.

So what was this kingdom? It wasn't fundamentally about moral precepts. In fact, there was little that was new in Jesus' actual teaching – a lot of it comes from the liberal stream of the Pharisaic tradition as articulated by Hillel who slightly predated him – even the golden rule was taken from this tradition.

What separates Jesus is that he believed that these teachings ought actually be practiced in an intentional community that was fully integrated into the broader society. Dominic Crossan, the Catholic Biblical scholar who has focused his career on understanding Jesus in his historical context – describes an important part of Jesus' ministry as "open commensality" by which he means table fellowship. When you boil it all down, Jesus taught that God has set a table for everyone. There are nuances of course, but this was the heart of it. For Jesus, anyone who wanted to come to the table was welcome. Sinners, tax collectors, the religious, the unreligious, but especially the poor. Indeed, the meals with Jesus in the New Testament were a microcosm of the praxis of the Kingdom – they illustrate what real community is to be like in the Kingdom of God – accepting, without judgment, celebratory and loving. It was this radical acceptance of all that the Apostle Paul later morphed into the doctrine of grace – the openness of the Kingdom to any and all who would enter. And it is this tradition that our Univesalist ancestors honored.

The salvation he offered required a very stiff price. Indeed, this piece of Christianity is so difficult that it prompted Gandhi to say in his famous quote "Christianity is a lovely thing. Someone really ought to try it."

While everyone was welcome in this Kingdom, few, it turns out had the stomach for it. This Kingdom means that you have to accept people not like you. It means that you have to love those you despise. It means that you have to give up your fixations on money,

your own opinions, your status in society, your sense of the way things ought to be. You have to let go of labels, of hierarchy. You have to give up your sacred cows. You have to give up your ideas of what makes people good and bad. You have to give up critical pieces of your identity – in short, you have to give up what you are attached to. You see ego is an impediment to community and to spiritual development. This is no different than the central teaching of Buddhism – it is just that the vehicle for getting rid of these attachments in Buddhism is contemplation but for Jesus it was community.

The Kingdom of God was about creating an empire of soul in the political empire that was the heart of Rome. Jesus' spiritual message was radical and transformative then and, I believe, it could be so again today. Forget Republican and Democrat – that political activity may be important on the margins, but it amounts to rearranging deck chairs of society - it is a choice between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. The kingdom Jesus taught is about radical transformation of powers and principalities, peoples and orders and sacred cows. The parable of the mustard seed that was our call to celebration touch on this - mustard was a weed and birds destroyed the crops. The kingdom of God is corrosive to the order of the society as a whole.

So why am I taking about this empire of soul? It is because I think this idea of the kingdom God is akin to what we are looking for when we say that we search for THE truth with an open mind. We are not talking about a set of doctrines or an intellectual construct. We all know that we will not agree on the intellectual stuff – some of us are theists, some aren't, some are spiritualists, some aren't, some are humanists, some aren't. We know we won't agree and we all believe that that any such agreement would be pretty superficial and inconsequential anyway. Instead, I think it may be that when we say we are searching for THE truth with an open mind, we are talking about something like the kingdom of God – we are looking to build an empire of soul. We are looking to build truly authentic community. We are talking about creating the kind of place where all find refuge, a place where the broken are healed, the strong become humble, and the broader world is made a better place. And I think we are looking for a community that will reverse the natural order of things – a subversive community. From this perspective, I have two things to say:

The first is not easy. I was struck by what Bill Graves said when he came to preach to us in July. When they founded this church, they ran the demographics and concluded that, in 1991, this area could support a UU church of 450. Yet our numbers are about the same as they were when we opened the doors in 1991. Why is that – I think it because we don't love each other enough. The knock on UUs is that we live too much in our heads. That may well be a justified criticism – we honor our Unitarian heritage at the expense of our Universalist one. Perhaps this community needs a less criticism and more compassion. Perhaps we need to give each other the benefit of the doubt more often. Perhaps we need to be more kind to each other. Maybe... in short, we could be a lot more loving. So the next time you are irked with someone or vexed with something about the church, perhaps it would be good to see it as an opportunity to practice non-attachment to self and love for the other. Love is what makes a community authentic and it is what will allow us individually and collectively to reach our potential.

The second point is perhaps more profound. Our world is not so different from ancient Rome. Our society is bleak. On the surface it is shiny and nice, but if you scratch the surface, it is fundamentally rotten. We live by exploiting third world workers as Rome did by exploiting slave labor – it is the way of empires. When you go to work, 10-15% of your time is spent supporting the US military domination of the world and supplying arms to other countries which are being used to kill and maim innocent people, including children. You might as well be making the bombs – you are certainly paying for them. There are people in the world who are living in abject poverty while we consume vast amounts – far more than we need - in comparison. We are killing our planet. Vast hoards of our youth are imprisoned. The rest of our youth are alienated. Our seniors are warehoused and ignored. Most everyone else is self-absorbed and running fast just so they don't have face this shit [Note to reader: I copped out and used the word “crap” in the actual sermon]. In the meantime, they buy stuff to assuage their ennui in a vain pursuit of a bit of retail happiness. Parents have few clues as to how to raise their kids. The village is gone and replaced by the TV. We all support and live in a system that is fundamentally corrupt and rotten. *We are all, everyone of us, complicit.*

In short, our world is much like ancient Rome – and those of us in this room are in the belly of the beast. BUT, in this small corner of the world, in some liberal religious communities and other small bastions, there is some dim light of hope. Of all of the places I have been, the ideals of the kingdom of god – of transformative community - are at least professed here. Sure, we all have a long way to go to become a truly loving community, but at least we are headed in the right direction. We have a long way to go before we can change society – but we are a mustard seed.

I would submit to you that we have “good news” for the culture around us. We have a gospel to share. Now, I don't give a tinkers damn about growing a large church – there is no virtue I find in being big for the sake of being big. What I do care about is that there are people who are tired of chasing the American Dream and watching it turn to dust, whose relationships are shallow and without meaning and they know it, who are desperate to find a place to raise children with values that make sense, who want their lives to stand for something beyond self-interest.

We have a *profound* message for these folks. We have good news for them. We can then invite them to the table to sup with us. We can welcome them, one and all, without blame or judgment – as an open-minded, open-hearted spiritual community. We can provide an real alternative – a *democracy of soul in the belly of the beast*.

And, as we share that good news, we will become, dare I say it, evangelists. That, I believe, is part of what we mean when we say that we are “searching for the THE truth with an open-mind”. Like Jesus, perhaps we should consider ourselves sent into the world to heal the sick, to cast out demons and to share good news with the poor. God knows there are a lot of poor souls who hunger for what have to offer. We simply have to find ways to invite them to the table. So in the coming weeks I would encourage you to think about who, in your world, would welcome this good news. Perhaps, just

perhaps, you can find a way to invite them in. Perhaps you can bring them to this community. Perhaps you can reach out to people who are desperate to find a way through the morass to a place of intellectual integrity and genuine love. Not for the sake of growing a church, but in the interests of salvaging lives that are adrift and transforming a society that needs to find a different way.

Namaste.