

A LITANY AND A SERMON - THE STRENGTH OF OUR FAITH

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LITANY - FAITH OF THE LARGER LIBERTY

Today as we celebrate and seek to understand the strength of our Unitarian Universalist faith, we reach deep into our history to discover roots that have been firmly planted and fed and watered by centuries of sacrifice and commitment and love.

The values of freedom, reason and tolerance that we celebrate and hold dear, are not new to this age or to this continent. They are as ancient as the beginning of time. And yet, we look to the time of the Reformation in Europe during the 16th century to find the budding flower of what we now know in America as Unitarian Universalism.

Today we remember and affirm the gift of

- Free religious community
- Willingness to grow and change
- A commitment to live according to the highest ideals
- Our continuing search for wisdom in all religions
- Freedom of conscience in religious matters

The Reformation was a time in Europe when clergy began to question the practices of the Roman church. Once that door was open, others began to question not only the practices, but the theology of the church. New Christian sects formed and Protestantism was born. The left wing of the Reformation included those who:

- Denied the divinity of Jesus,
- Shared a commitment to living according to the model of Jesus life
- Who believed that baptism should be offered in adulthood not infancy
- Who saw salvation not in the death of Christ, but in human right action

For these views and more, the early Unitarians were:

- Put to death
- Beaten
- Banished
- Forced to convert to Catholicism, or Calvinism
- Their property was destroyed

- Their churches were desecrated
- Their schools and universities were stolen

Whole cities forced to evacuate, sick, injured, and penniless with no means of support.

In their memory we affirm and celebrate a Faith of the Free!

Over and over the anti-Trinitarian faith, eventually known as Unitarian, rose and prospered and was beaten down again. The strength of that faith could not be murdered along with the martyrs of the day. We often think that the days of being forced to die for ones faith are long gone, but even into this present day, Unitarian Universalists must make the choice to stand for their faith in the face of death and cruelty. Today we remember and honor those known and unknown who have died or suffered abuse defending their Unitarian, Universalist, or Unitarian Universalist faith.¹

- Michael Servetus
- Faustus Socinus
- Ivan Tesaywitz
- Francis David
- Joseph Priestly
- Norbert Capek
- James Reeb
- Viola Liuzzo
- Dr. David Gunn
- Greg McKendry
- Linda Kraeger

Today we celebrate our participation in a larger faith community of Unitarian Universalists that stretches across this great American continent. We celebrate our links to congregations scattered around the world who are true to the commitment to continue in the search for religious truth, to tolerance and acceptance of those who differ, to the use of reason in religion and to the guidance of love.

SERMON – THE STRENGTH OF OUR FAITH –

A few years ago this congregation adopted a mission/vision statement that reflects who we

¹ The American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church in America consolidated in 1961.

are and how we see ourselves operating in the world.

We identify ourselves as “A diverse group of committed religious individuals seeking knowledge, spiritual sustenance, fellowship and service to others.”

Our mission is:

“To live and to spread the Unitarian Universalist values of religious freedom, personal religious responsibility, interdependence and openness.”

And

“We envision a growing, liberal faith community that challenges people in their search for spiritual fulfillment.”

These words reflect the understandings of a deep history of religious thought, of struggle, of vision and revision. Every generation of Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists has questioned the religion they inherited. The freedom to question not only others but ourselves is one of the great strengths of our religious way. It keeps us on our toes, keeps us from sinking into unexamined rhetoric and traditions based on nothing more than habit.

At one point in the history of our religious way, a form of Unitarian faith was very popular in Transylvania. These Unitarians were definitely Christian, but their understanding of the nature of Jesus and God and their religious practices were very different from other Christian sects. In 1568, King John Sigismund, a Unitarian, decreed an edict of toleration, which stated in part “*no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone... and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for teaching for faith is the gift of God...*”

This edict allowed those anti-Trinitarians later known as Unitarians to discuss, debate and refine their doctrinal position and agreed-upon beliefs. They had many questions to resolve among themselves.

- Could Christ, since he was not called God by the apostles, positively be called God?
- Could Christ properly be invoked in prayer?
- Were the doctrines of predestination and justification as taught by Luther and Calvin believable?
- Could Jesus still have been Christ had he not died?

Unfortunately, King John Sigismund soon died and was succeeded by his son, who affirmed a new law forbidding any innovation in religion; any changes in doctrine or practice were, it was felt, likely to cause civil unrest. (For Faith and Freedom, Charles Howe p. 102)

That was the beginning of the end for the Transylvanian Unitarians. What an incredible handicap!! To be outlawed from asking questions! How very UN-Unitarian Universalist. If we could not ask questions or change our minds or learn new things or develop our spiritual perspective individually or collectively, this religious way of ours would surely falter and die.

Ours is an ever-evolving religion, which looks and acts very differently from that of our forebears. We no longer consider ourselves to be specifically Christian. Tolerance has evolved into acceptance, and difference of opinion on the nature of God has moved on to true pluralism, enfolding a wide variety of theologies into one Unitarian Universalist movement.

Frederick May Eliot, president of the American Unitarian Association from 1937-1958 said, "one of the most interesting aspects of our history is the process by which one generation have come to be regarded as 100% Unitarians by succeeding generations. The truth of the matter is that we are a church in which growth is not only permitted but encouraged, growth in thought, growth in sensitiveness to moral values, growth in courage to put religion to work in the world."

We change and expect to be changed, we are all different, And yet we are held together by the same values we inherited from our forebears, Freedom of conscience, the use of reason, tolerance and acceptance of diverse beliefs, and the power of LOVE to help us overcome our differences.

The power of those values has given us strength as we live and spread those values. That power has given us strength when we have taken unpopular or controversial stands. And that power has held us together in times of struggle, defeat and tragedy. It has given strength to those who stand by their faith to the point of death and has given strength to those of us who remain to carry forward the work yet to be done.

On Sunday July 27, 2008, a man opened fire on the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation at worship. It matters not whether we attribute that act of violence to economic hard times, anti-gay or anti-liberal sentiments, the breakdown of a marriage or mental illness. The fact remains that at least one individual, Greg McKendry, sacrificed his life in order to protect others. The strength of his faith allowed him to do that.

Our faith demands that we live it and bring it into public consciousness. Each time we make a public statement, make public witness, invite others into dialogue, we risk the ire of someone who disagrees. Putting ourselves in uncomfortable and even dangerous positions gives us opportunities to test our faith, to learn and to grow and to change. We know not what the ire of others will bring, and yet we remain firm, rising again and again to say, in the words of current UUA President, Bill Sinkford, "We will not give in to fear. We will meet hatred with love. We will continue to work for justice. Our heart and the doors of our more than 1,000 Unitarian Universalist congregations nationwide will remain open. Unitarian Universalists stand on the side of LOVE. We invite you to stand with us."