

PERSONAL BUT NEVER PRIVATE:
A REFLECTION ON FAITH

A sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey Barz-Snell

The First Parish Church in Weston
Unitarian Universalist
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THE FIRST PARISH CHURCH IN WESTON
Unitarian Universalist
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Opening Meditation:

“Love cannot remain by itself – it has no meaning.
Love has to be put into action and that action is service.”
~ Mother Theresa

Lessons: Matthew 6: 19–24 Concerning Treasures

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The Sound Eye

“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

Serving Two Masters

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Sermon:

Many years ago, when I was serving as the minister of the Unitarian church in Salem, we had an unusual note appear in the bottom of the collection basket after a service one Sunday morning. One of our ushers brought it to my attention. Amongst the typical assortment of cash and checks and envelopes, there was a small handwritten note, neatly printed on a nice piece of paper and folded crisply in half. Someone had clearly brought it with them that morning. There was no signature or indication of who had written it. It simply read:

“It’s not easy to contribute to a politically oriented church that claims tax-exempt status...even a liberal one. Sorry.”

When I was first given the note, I must admit I gulped. I then did what most of us would do – I went back and looked at my sermon for that morning, and my sermons from the last several weeks. What had I said that elicited such a response? The sermon that day was about communion and the history and significance of it – not exactly radical stuff, politically speaking. I set this little note on the side of my desk and kept it there for many months, as I ruminated over its message and assertion.

And ever since then, I periodically will ask myself, IS the church where I am serving too politically oriented? I am guessing some would say yes to that question. And I am guessing some would say no. I actually believe it is more important to ask that question now than when I first received that note years ago. Admittedly, I have commented more on political developments from the pulpit over the last two years than at any time over my 21 years as a UU minister.

More importantly, does what this church stand for undermine or take away from its rightfully claiming tax-exempt status? What would it look like if a church like this one entirely avoided any issue or topic or concern that could be construed as political? Is that what was intended by the Framers of the Constitution and the principle of the separation of church and state? Are the assumptions that the writer of this anonymous note is making about religion correct? And if not, why? These are the sorts of questions I have periodically asked myself over the years.

Well, my goal here this morning is to address some of these questions and offer a few thoughts on why I believe that while faith is personal, it can never be entirely private. While we must engage one another with respect and with humility, at certain times churches like this one are obligated to speak and respond to some of the major issues of the day – prayerfully, thoughtfully and in such a way that encourages people to bring their religious faith to bear on a sometimes difficult and endlessly needful world.

As a way of beginning to address some of these questions and offer some insight into the eternal struggle between religion and politics, allow me to state the obvious: you are sitting in a Unitarian church, one that is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Not only that, you are sitting in a Unitarian church that is still grounded in the biblical tradition and proudly uses traditional God language in our services and liturgy. While we may pull from different traditions and elements from time to time, we here at First Parish find it meaningful and important for our faith journey together to be grounded in the larger Christian tradition.

Now within that tradition, it is certainly accurate to state that we represent a liberal (with a lower case “l”) perspective in the larger world of Western religion and Christianity – one that asserts that the life of faith is made clearer and better through the use of reason and critical scholarship. Our study of the history of Christianity has taught us that while beliefs and theologies change over time, having compassion for those in our midst never does.

A few moments ago, we heard about one of the great 19th- century proponents of this idea. In 1840, the Rev. Theodore Parker argued passionately in a now famous sermon that religious ideas and theological conceptions change over time and are therefore transient. What is *permanent* in Christianity is the presence of Jesus and the ideals of love, compassion and service. Parker was one of several religious thinkers making such an argument in the 19th century, and his ideas have influenced how we seek to be in community and the ways we try to serve and make a difference.

For make no mistake: this is a church that has over the decades been a place that stimulates the mind, inspires the soul, encourages the heart, and revitalizes the community. We are a people who have dared to consider how to make our community and region and world a better place and then have gotten to work on that vision. As a result, this is a church and a pulpit that has not shied away from addressing some of the pressing social topics of the day. I’d like to think that I have continued this long tradition here. I know over the years I have found myself inspired to preach about various social, moral and – dare I say – political issues.

For example, last night major monuments around the world turned off their lights at exactly 10 p.m. local time to raise awareness about the climate crisis....

From gay marriage to the death penalty, from the tax system to abortion, from the federal deficit to corporate corruption and greed, from the insidious influence that special interest lobbying has on our government to the looming threat of climate change, I have not shied away from certain controversial or topical subjects. Each time, I have endeavored to engage the topic in a way that does not denounce and divide but rather invites people into a dialogue and conversation, knowing full well that I am speaking to bright and capable people.

While I might be labeled as liberal at times, I certainly have taken stands on some social issues that, every once in a while, make me sound conservative. If I am doing my job, I am holding up various

salient issues and finding different ways to apply biblical and religious principles to the problems and challenges of our day. In each instance, my purpose is to hold them up in such a way that invites dialogue and consideration – that invites all of us to think and to consider and to dream and then respond in ways that are healing, hopeful and life-affirming, in ways where we can bring to light the story of the Gospel.

That is the point of all this: to connect to a sacred mystery beyond ourselves and within ourselves, all with the hope of fostering peace and goodwill among ourselves; to find ways for all of us to consider anew the teachings of the Hebrew Prophets and Jesus – and occasionally the other great religious traditions of the world – and to be inspired to live our lives accordingly. In a very real way, that is why our religious faith is personal but never entirely private. A faith that is based on the professions of the Hebrew Prophets and the teachings of Jesus most certainly has a personal element to it. We should leave time for reading scripture, for study, for prayer and meditation, for singing and worshipping. But all of these activities are for a larger purpose. Our faith should be working in our lives. There should be visible signs in who we are, in the choices we make and the causes we support.

In a sense, the real question in any religious tradition is not whether or not your faith is political but how your beliefs and practice influence the rest of your life. To put it in traditional terms, where is God working in your life? What are the areas that you are wrestling with and how does your faith inform and influence them? How is the spirit or your higher power or God or Jesus Christ or whatever name you use – how is this presence influencing your life? And how does your life and faith help or hinder the coming Kingdom of God?

It's funny: I remember many years ago, I was asked to guest preach here in Weston. It may have been during Tom Wintle's first sabbatical. The sermon I preached dealt with markets and corporate ethics and responsibility. Does anyone here remember Enron? That was the single worst corporate bankruptcy in American history, at least up until 2008. I talked about the completely unethical trading practices and false financial reporting that senior executives at Enron used to cover up their malfeasance. Well, you could have heard a pin drop that morning here in church. This place seemed to be full of financial executives, mutual fund managers and investment advisors. I certainly would not have been accused of shying away from a difficult topic.

The largest corporate bankruptcy in American history had just occurred, and there was a growing consensus that more than a few corporations had committed outright fraud by taking liberties with their financial reporting. After the service that morning, I had many people greet me warmly and a few who nervously shook my hand as they passed by quickly. Then I had a very large man in a fine suit walk up to me and say with a big smile on his face, "I find that when ministers comment on social and political topics, it takes away from their spiritual message, don't you?"

I responded with a smile, "It depends on how they do it, I suppose." We then both smiled, shook hands, and he walked away. I remember thinking to myself that if the prophet Micah had been there that morning, he would not have been so nice. That's the danger of going to seminary, I suppose: it changes and broadens one's perspective.

We read out loud the well-known words of Micah in our Call to Worship this morning. Micah lived during the 8th century BCE in Judah, in the region of what is now southern Israel. He is famous for declaring that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and for denouncing the practices of the wealthy, corrupt elite he saw thriving around him. In a fit of frustration and despair, he wrote the words we said, words in which he declares what the one true God truly wants from us – which is not wealth, not correct rituals, not self-righteous grandstanding but rather justice, kindness and humility. We forget that this rather well-known passage is actually a social critique of ancient Judean society, one that would have, no doubt, had political implications.

Churches and synagogues, then, stand in this ancient tradition that comments and preaches about social issues. In fact, a lot of the Jewish Torah, the first five books of the Bible, deal with social matters and right behavior. As does Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In that one sermon, Jesus talks about dealing with the poor, about paying taxes, about adultery, about forgiving your enemies. Does he talk about prayer and worship exclusively? Hardly. He preaches about money, power, sexuality, faith and the law, true and false religion, the way we treat our neighbor and the way we treat our enemy. Jesus preaches about these issues because he knew that we all struggle with our various material concerns. We heard him say this morning in the reading from the Gospel of Matthew:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jesus knew that our lives comprise more than just religion. All of us must answer basic questions about what truly matters to us and what we will center our lives around. Hence, he talked about how the all-too-real world influences and affects our lives.

In some ways, we can interpret the overall arch of the Jewish and Christian traditions as one that involves constantly inspiring and reminding people to find ways to let their faith influence their lives. It is an all-too-tempting proposition in human life to do one thing on the Sabbath day and quite another the rest of the week. The goal of any faith tradition is to inspire people to live out their most deeply felt principles and values in their everyday lives. And if they do this, and enough of them do it, there will inevitably be social and political implications.

So, churches like this one not only can but from time to time are obligated to address major issues of the day, and sometimes this will be construed as political by some. Separation between church and state has to do with ensuring that there is not a state-sponsored religious tradition or practice here in the United States. It does not mean that religious organizations cannot speak to or comment about larger social-political issues.

That being said, I want to offer a point of clarification: I don't think churches and other tax-exempt organizations should be involved in formal political campaigns and endorsing political candidates. They should eschew hosting and sponsoring events explicitly connected to a particular political campaign. You will never, ever hear from this pulpit an endorsement for a candidate running for office or be told that you can only vote one way as a person of faith.

Interestingly enough, there are other churches in this country doing just that. In the 2016 election, evangelical churches, primarily in key battleground states, were directly involved in the Trump campaign and getting out the vote. The Trump campaign actually went so far as to provide closed circuit television programs for folks in those churches. As a result, 80% of evangelicals in this country voted for Mr. Trump, (a man who has been married three times, declared bankruptcy four times, has little or no knowledge of the Bible, and was captured on video admitting to grabbing and sexually assaulting women). Given Jesus' clear statements about divorce and excessive wealth, you would not think that Mr. Trump would be their man. While it is these churches' right to express their religious views about various social issues, I think many of them crossed the line when they began to coordinate their efforts with a major political party. That is just one example.

But make no mistake: these churches have at least one thing right – namely, that their religious faith can and should have social effects on our society, as should ours. Too often those of us on the mainline and progressive end of American religion have let others control and frame the religious agenda in this country. I think this may have been a reasonable position to stake out in the middle part of the 20th century just after World War II, when our country was experiencing widespread prosperity. That said, we no longer live in that society and time. Here in the 21st century, we do a disservice to ourselves and to the larger society when we concede the Bible to more conservative, more mean-spirited and more literal interpretations.

I have said this before and I will say it again: we believe that the true purpose of religion is NOT necessarily to get humanity into heaven per se, but rather to get heaven into humanity. We believe that the Kingdom of God, as Jesus proclaimed it and as the Prophets foretold, involves those of us in the here and now working and striving for a fairer and more compassionate society. And the larger movement of which we are a part has a very rich history of doing just that.

Name any social reform movement in the last two hundred years in this country, and you will find Unitarians and Universalists involved and often leading the charge. Who were some of the early opponents of slavery in this country? People like us. Who started the United States Sanitary Commission, which turned into the American Red Cross? People like us. Who organized and fought for the right for women to vote in this country? People like us. Who introduced early childhood education to this country? Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. Who advocated for universal elementary education in this country? Horace Mann. Our larger tradition inspired a variety of free-thinking reformers who took seriously the teachings of Jesus and the implications of the biblical tradition.

This church itself has a long track record of engaging the major issues of the day and then responding actively and thoughtfully. I think of the folks here in the 1960's who responded to the racial segregation of our communities and founded the METCO program and the Roxbury Weston Preschool. I think of people like Ken Fish and Bob Brown and others who got frustrated with the lack of affordable housing around here and took the lead in developing the Brook School Apartments and creating the Weston Affordable Housing Foundation. I think of those I worked with as an intern here in the 90's who created and volunteered at an after-school tutoring program for disadvantaged youth in Roxbury under the auspices of the UU Urban Ministry. I think of our work with Partakers and the Bristol Lodge. We have been a congregation that has engaged the major issues of the day and then brought our sizable skill set to bear on making a difference. Were we being political or religious? The answer is yes.

It is important to remember that we are part of a very rich and very long tradition of religious practice and expression in this country, one that has been here since its founding. Like the Puritans who founded this church, we believe we are all on a journey, a pilgrimage, if you will, one that calls us to reach out and find ways to make our world more peaceful and just. Here at First Parish, we are invited to take our best thoughts, our highest aspirations and deepest values and dare to try to improve our world and the lives of those around us. Sometimes this involves being defined as political, but that is never the ultimate purpose or goal. It is the necessary price we pay for our faith. And this is supported by the one prayer that Jesus taught his followers:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
THY *kingdom* come, THY will be done,
ON earth as it is in heaven.

It was not a club. It was not a private society or association. It was a kingdom. The word Jesus used in the ancient Greek had both political and social implications that his listeners would have immediately understood.

I believe that each generation is invited to test our beliefs, and then work to make them real in the here and now, in the blood and sweat and tears of our lives. This must be done humbly, prayerfully and with an eye towards reason and compassion. This is how the coming Kingdom of God works – as we find ways to serve, we find peace in our own souls and a vision for the world transformed by helping those around us. I pray that each of us consider anew the many ways that our faith can inform our lives. Amen.