

“The Courage of Heretics”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Reading

selection from “Is This Your Religion?” A. Powell Davies found in Without Apology: Collected Meditations on Liberal Religion edited by Forrest Church

Sermon

500 years ago, the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany was like a modern day bulletin board, perhaps similar to the one we have here in our School Street vestibule. I imagine it would have been littered with announcements of upcoming university lectures or special masses - most of them handwritten, or perhaps, in 1517, some of these announcements would have been made using the new printing press technology of the day.

It was 500 years ago on October 31st that Martin Luther, a monk and priest and professor of biblical theology at the local university, strode up to these doors and amidst the fliers for department openings and people in need of prayer, pinned a printed folio sheet calling for a “disputation on the power and efficacy of indulgences out of love and zeal for truth and the desire to bring it to light.”¹

¹ Eric W. Gritsch, “1517 Luther Posts the 95 Theses,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-28/1517-luther-posts-95-theses.html>.

Martin Luther was concerned that the Catholic Church's recent practice of selling indulgences - essentially a pardon for sins - was getting out of hand. He wanted the Church to return to what he saw as two central tenets - that God intends for believers to seek repentance and that faith in God, and not deeds, would lead to salvation.

Luther's "95 Theses," as they came to be known, was truly a spark for the Protestant Reformation which then took many forms.

In the New UU class offered here twice a year, I often share an image of a tree that shows the many branches of Christianity all stemming from the "trunk" of Catholicism which has its roots in Judaism.

Unitarianism and Universalism can be found on some fairly remote branches of that tree. Indeed, Unitarian Universalism as it exists today has traveled a long and winding path from that moment in 1517 at the doors of the Wittenberg Castle.

Both our Unitarian and our Universalist branches emerged from distinctive and particular heresies in their time. To understand these heretical roots, we have to fast forward about 250 years to the late 18th century.

William Ellery Channing was one of the foremost leaders of what came to be known as "Unitarianism." As a child growing up in the late 18th century in Rhode Island, Channing grew up hearing the fire and brimstone preaching of the Great Awakening. Humanity was depraved, and Jesus Christ had paid the ultimate price at the hands of a vindicate and wrathful God for our sins.

As minister of Boston's Federal Street Church, Channing preached "practical religion" with an emphasis on "the renewal of the spirit, intellectual integrity, and the application

of one's moral insights and aspirations to daily living and social existence."² He and other liberal ministers in old Puritan congregations had stopped requiring creedal affirmations or evidence of personal conversion from those seeking to join the church which was customary at the time. The practice was denounced as heresy and referred to demeaningly as "unitarianism," a name that came to be embraced by Channing and other liberal congregationalists.

Around this same time and in the same spirit of questioning the dominant Calvinist theology of the era, Universalism began to emerge on our shores. The main challenge to orthodox views that universalism proposed was that God is loving by nature and so none of us would be subject to eternal damnation in the after life.

The Universalist movement was propelled in large part by the arrival of John Murray from England. There, as an English Methodist, he had converted to universalism and then was largely rejected as a preacher. After suffering through the death of his wife and baby and a stay in debtors' prison, Murray set sail across the Atlantic in search of a new life and with no intention of ever preaching again.

In rather dramatic and ironic fashion, Murray ended up shipwrecked on the shores of a town called Good Luck in what is now New Jersey and met a man named Thomas Potter. Potter, who shared Murray's views on universal salvation, had built a chapel and had been hopeful that someone would arrive to preach this message. He convinced Murray to take the pulpit and share his message of God's eternal love. Murray went on spread the good news of universalism as a pastor in Gloucester, Massachusetts and eventually in Boston. Murray also dedicated himself to nurturing the growing Universalist movement — forming Universalist congregations throughout New England

² John A. Buehrens, "Experience," in *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* by John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church (Beacon Press: 1998), p. 28.

and bringing together the many preachers who were emerging out of other Christian traditions and adopting universalist beliefs.³

Hosea Ballou is a Universalist ancestor that some of you may be more familiar with. Ballou converted to universalism from his Calvinistic Baptist upbringing in southwestern New Hampshire. During Ballou's early career, he traveled as an itinerant preacher throughout Massachusetts and Vermont.

There are many others in our religious history whose commitment to speaking their truth despite the risk of alienation and even expulsion from their religious communities have led us to who we are today.

As A. Powell Davies states in our reading, "We are indeed the consummation of something." Unitarian Universalism as it exists today, and right here in this congregation, is the consummation of a history of challenging accepted beliefs for the sake of what experience, reason, and personal faith have led us to believe is true.

Those in our religious lineage who took on heretical views must have had courage - spiritual courage and intellectual courage.⁴ The courage to probe questions of purpose and meaning. And, the courage to grapple with difficult concepts, to ask questions, and to come to new understandings.

This kind of courage is needed in all ages and times and feels especially needed today. These times of disruption and disorder, of unraveling, require unconventional thinking and believing. Our times require the spiritual and intellectual courage to ask big questions and to be willing to be surprised by the answers.

³ For more on Universalist history, see [Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith](#) edited by Ernest Cassara (Skinner House, 1971).

⁴ More on the "Six Types of Courage" at <http://www.lionswhiskers.com/p/six-types-of-courage.html>.

We can start by asking these big questions right within our own religious tradition as did our religious ancestors in theirs. Indeed, our ancestors loved their religion enough to challenge it and to ask it to change.

In honor of the 500th anniversary of Luther's "95 Theses," my colleague the Rev. Christian Schmidt reached out to our clergy community to ask us to share "95 theses that speak to where we are and where we are going as a faith -- theses that offer a corrective to the current norm in the same way that Luther's did to his church."

I thought I would share a few of the responses with you:

"Unitarian Universalists must learn to see past the literal meanings of words to symbol, story, and wisdom."

"If Unitarian Universalism is to remain relevant and theologically grounded, we must reclaim the language of Sin and Grace."

"The captivity of Unitarian Universalism to upper class culture prevents it from a prophetic engagement with systemic injustice; economic, racial, and ecological."

"We are not a 'movement' -- we are a religion. Let's start acting like one."

And, here's one final one:

"The purpose of our faith is not to perpetuate itself but to urge us to grow beyond the small self into authentic relationship with other human beings - especially those we view as 'other.' Our faith's purpose is to support us as we de-center ourselves and join with others to build a different way of living."

Each of these statements would take a bit of time to unpack, so let me just say that the continual internal reform of Unitarian Universalism is an inherent part of our tradition. It

is in our roots and has continued to be a part of our living tradition right up to the present moment.

And, it's a part of living our faith that we must do in our own particular contexts. In some cases, UU congregations exist in places where it is truly outside the cultural and religious norm to be a Unitarian Universalist. One of our largest congregations, for example, is in Tulsa, Oklahoma, an environment of strongly rooted conservative Christianity.

A challenge I believe we face here as a Unitarian Universalist congregation in one of the most progressive cities in one of the most progressive states in the country is that in many ways we are actually the mainstream.

We are a religious community that that promotes inclusion, diversity of opinions and beliefs, a democratic process of governance, free and independent thinking, that embraces diverse cultures, that is community-minded and that seeks equity within our congregation and in the broader world. For the most part, these values are strongly supported and widely embraced in our particular context here in Montpelier and Central Vermont.

On the one hand, there is a lot of power in that. Power that I believe we have to own and use for good.

There is a danger, however, in remaining conventional. Conventional religion is a static religion. The speaking of truth becomes too inconvenient and too uncomfortable.

Instead, I believe that we are continually called to revisit our heretical roots - to ask ourselves, in what ways do we need to be counter-cultural to truly live our faith?

Now, I don't expect anyone here to go drafting 95 theses and nailing them to the big white doors on Main Street anytime soon, though that would be a rather exciting event. I'm also not encouraging any of us to be unconventional simply for the novelty of it.

I also know that being viewed as unconventional can be uncomfortable. I'll admit that it isn't easy for me to be unorthodox or unconventional. There's a strong part of me that just wants to fit in and not to rock the boat. There is a sense of comfort and belonging that comes from being part of the mainstream, of fitting in, of going along with accepted norms and beliefs. And, I know that some of you here were initially drawn to this congregation because of a desire to be with "like-minded" people, which I take to mean, to feel a sense of belonging with those who share your values.

I don't want any of us to give that up because I know how much that sense of belonging can truly be a life line.

I also believe that part of what we share here and what we belong to is that calling to courageously ask the big questions and to be willing to challenge norms whatever shape they may take.

So, I encourage you to wonder with me today and in the days to come what those unconventional ways of believing and living might be that we are called to adopt to more courageously embrace the truth as we know it in our hearts.

Here are a few possibilities:

Perhaps it would feel a bit "heretical" to claim Unitarian Universalism as a religion, or to admit to friends and loved ones that you go to "church" on Sundays.

Perhaps it would feel "heretical" for you to accept the inherent worth and dignity of your greatest political foe.

Perhaps the unconventional practice in your own life is to claim a life of simplicity rather than succumbing to the pressures to do more, make more, and be more.

These aren't heresies in the sense of conflicting with religious doctrines but heresies that express opinions and embrace ways of living that are at odds with what is generally accepted in our cultural and communal context and that bring you closer to something you know to be true.

In 1944, with the end of World War II still a year away, A. Powell Davies preached these words:

"We are indeed the consummation of something. Yet in this world of blood and sorrow it is scarcely important, hardly worth mentioning, unless in addition we are the beginning of something, unless our religion is new... Stop long enough to recollect the miseries of the world you live in: the fearful cruelties, the enmities, the hate, the bitter prejudices, the need of such a world for such a faith."

May ours be a faith that is seeking ever to be new.

May we embrace those ways we can be heretics in our own time.

May we find the courage to claim what is true and to live from this place of truth.

So may it be.