

## Summer Session Sermon by Preston Wilson, July 17, 2022

### *Hard Questions for UUs*

#### **Opening words**

*(Show book)* Referencing the UUA's *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, here is bit of history to start off exploring one of the themes of our service today: [quote] "In her study of the history of covenant in UU tradition, lay theologian and minister Alice Blair Wesley ....shows, for example, how church records in Dedham, Massachusetts, describe in detail the house meetings the founders held *in 1637* to develop the foundation of the covenant. Each one could as they chose, speak to the question, or raise a closely related question, and speak to that, or state any objection or doubts concerning what any other had said and - now quoting directly from the records –"so it were [done] humbly & with a teachable hart, not with a mind of cavilling or contradicting." [end quote]

To me this sounds like very right and commendable behavior for UUs. Except that on the same page, UU historian David Parke confirmed *in 1989*, [quote]"Our concern begins and ends in direct experience. While valuing the insight of others, we give highest priority to what we ourselves have seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled.... we demand an original engagement with the world, *and we are impatient with lifeless truth and borrowed authority.*" [end quote]

We can draw from this that Unitarianism throughout the centuries has been – and I must say continues to be - one very hard religion to get right.

Good morning. It is a privilege to present a sermon to my fellow UU church members. Given my religious background, I never envisioned I would ever be doing such a thing. I was raised from the age of around nine to eighteen as an Episcopalian at St. John's Church in Auburn, NY, ministered first by Father Reed and later by Father Shaw. My *real* father for seventeen years was the choir master and organist, my sisters sang in the choir, and I was an acolyte trying hard not to mix up the wine and water during Communion. After attending the requisite catechism classes, I was confirmed by the bishop in 1957 at age 12. I did not question any of its rituals, stories or theology (as far as I understood them). Church had the same appeal as did going to school: sometimes fun but mostly tedious and boring. But I prayed at night to God,

said grace with my family at evening meals, and never worried about any aspects of *my own* religion, though I lived in a mixed neighborhood of Protestants of many different denominations, Catholics, and Jews. Then I went to Hobart College, an ostensibly Episcopal school, where I received a solid liberal education. I stopped going to church, and except in a pragmatically nominal sense, stopped considering myself a Christian. In 1985, my wife, Beverly Hammons, raised a Methodist, searched around for a church where our two little children could learn about religion without being indoctrinated *into* one. She dragged me to a service being conducted by Jack Taylor, and I was immediately enchanted by the joy and freedom of UUism. My reemergence as an active member of FUSIT traces back to that happy time from around 1986 to 1996. So here is my very first sermon that I dedicate to Reverend Taylor. It is titled “ Hard Questions for UUs,” a daunting subject since there appears to be a deluge of answers to any substantial question concerning our hybridized and anxious religion.

I will discuss two sets of questions for those present here today to at least try to answer for themselves, though you’ll notice I don’t shy away from giving my own opinions on them. After all, I am a UU *too!*

The first set of questions is : **Should we more strongly “affirm and promote” our Seven Principles as a foundational pledge of publicly professed belief? Should we take them out of hiding in throwaway brochures, so to speak, and set them center stage, confront their thunderous implications and interpretations? They have always seemed to me to be an aspirational and quite overwhelming wish list of good intentions and behaviors that explain beautiful wide-ranging goals, but notably silent on how to achieve them.**

In answering these questions, perhaps we can learn from Christianity, which, as most of you know, was the basis of first Universalists’ and then Unitarians’ original rebellion before *they* joined together in 1961 when the divisive issue of salvation was shelved if not completely ignored, and supernaturalism through God’s intervention likewise sidelined. This combined and confused faith then set about writing what we have come to call a list of Principles while others think of them as a creed. The early Christians in AD 381 came up against this challenge of what to believe and how to profess it when they wrote what has come to be called The Nicene Creed (in its shortened form, The Apostles Creed). In one potent unifying statement for Christians of many different denominations throughout the millenia, this creed has invited people to confess their belief in the nature and origin of their trinitarian god. Right at this moment in Ithaca, and generally around the world, hundreds of millions of people recite in unison this captivating statement, every word, phrase, and sentence intentionally infused with poetic and magisterial authority. Listen, if you will, to this 2000 year old statement of what most Christians today still state as their *absolutely true belief*:

*I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible: And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God; Begotten of his Father*

*before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God; Begotten not made; Being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made: Who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man: And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures; And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father: And he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end. And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceeded from the Father and the Son; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spake by the Prophets: And I believe one Catholic and Apostolic Church: I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins: And I look for the Resurrection of the dead: And the life of the world to come. Amen.*

Along with the imposing adults in the pews, I recited this as a child every Sunday during my formative years. In fact, I memorized it, quite unconsciously, and it still sounds comforting, like a lullaby I might sing to soothe myself. Who wouldn't want to believe it? Eternal life in heaven with God and Jesus just by saying this creed and (*here's the hard part for true Christians*) believing it.

We Unitarian-Universalists, generally reject this Christian belief system and narrative on one or more of the following grounds: direct experience; reason; and intuition or sentiment. It somehow *feels* wrong. (The dead stay dead no matter how much they might have believed otherwise while alive.) So to us the Nicene Creed is simply not true and we cannot believe in it.

The Nicene Creed does, however, satisfy the three requirements of most all mainstream religions. They are: one, an origin story explaining where we come from; two, our purposes on earth which explain why we are here: and, three, an afterlife story which explains where we are going when we die. In place of such an encompassing statement, however, we UUs have settled on Seven Principles that don't pretend to answer these requirements in such a narrativized and absolute way. Though we often give credit for our existence to "the spirit of life" or a random and indifferent act of evolution, or other natural and even mystical sources, for the most part, we have really not the foggiest idea of how we came to be here. Even science is hard pressed to find an acceptable answer, though not for lack of trying. Even as we speak, the James Webb Space Telescope is allowing us to see back in time 13.5 billion years almost to the Big Bang to find out once and for all how we came to be. On the question of the afterlife, UUs try out naturalistic ideas of our indestructible atoms resurrected in the organic world of trees and plants, or we rationalize our vanishing by believing in a legacy of children, memories, and, most satisfyingly, the effects of our good works. But, again, for the most part, we really have not the foggiest what happens to us, or to our soul (if we are inclined to believe we have one) when we die. Most of us, I would guess, imagine oblivion.

However, UUs are much better with the third required answer to the question of why we are here at all? UUism unequivocally instructs us practitioners to follow Seven Principles as articulated by the Unitarian-Universalist Association and ratified in a democratic manner in the 1984 and 1985 General Assemblies and further amended in 1995. Like the Nicene Creed is for Christians, The Seven Principles are the center of our official belief system. Many UUs have come to find them somehow dated or boring or, even self-evident – as if to say, “Why, of course, who wouldn’t agree with those things? No need to belabor the obvious, is there? Who could argue with those? Let’s move on to more interesting stuff” - as if their promotion belongs only in the pamphlets in the narthex we make available to the curious newcomers. But, boring and altogether obvious or not, for better or worse, they are our religious commandments on *how* to live our individual and collective lives *now* – in *this* world - ethically, morally, and with driving purpose. Looked at closely, they are overpowering and revolutionary. (And without sounding too lawyerly, the FUSIT’s Constitution states boldly that our valid membership partly depends upon our *belief* in these Principles.) *But to believe and follow all of them is very very hard!* As a refresher, might I ask you to recite with me together the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, the theological heart of our church.

“We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant **to affirm and promote:**

*The inherent worth and dignity of every person.*

*Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.*

*Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.*

*A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*

*The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.*

*The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.*

*Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”*

As a side note, I have often wondered why as a part of our Sunday celebration service, we do not take the couple minutes required to proudly recite in unison these seven principles, as a way to keep them foremost in our minds and as a reminder that we are about serious matters in our faith which is often derided as “believing in anything” which some would argue amounts to believing in nothing.

These are definitely commandments to believe, sacred pledges to strive to live by. And, I would argue, just as hard to interpret and follow as were the Ten Commandment of Moses. All killing? (What about self-defense or to protect loved ones or other innocents? What about animals?) Any graven Image? (Hard to avoid them in this visual, flesh besotted culture) Honor thy father and mother (What? When they abuse and desert you?) And so on. Now, the

Abrahamic religions have rabbis, priests, and mullahs, and more naturalistic religions have shamans to sort things out for their believers. We, however, have only ourselves and our beleaguered ministers to carry the burden of understanding and explaining, for example, what happens when our beliefs and actions go against one or more of our demanding principles. Since we do not acknowledge sin and hell as punishment for our bad thoughts and behavior, what do our ministers offer *instead of* absolution of our sins? Maybe the best answer is in the Fifth Principle -the exercise of our right of conscience. That voice of empathy which asserts itself and says, "You know what's right. You know what to do." UUism in its sternness expects us to be exceptionally good people with our only reward a conscience at peace with itself. **But it is hard.** I, for one, do not believe the first principle applies *for every person* since I have come to believe there are people who are irredeemable in their character and are basically evil; whether by nurture or nature or a combination of both makes no difference to me. I only know they relish in destroying others' lives and happiness. To me they have no worth or dignity. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence? Almost impossible in our materialistic, capitalist society that feeds on consumption of unneeded stuff. And so on throughout the list. Still, we are expected to unequivocally support and promote all the Seven Principles as if they all were inviolable commandments. Ultimately, just accepting this confounding contradiction between authority of belief -what we are supposed to believe and do - and authenticity of thought and action – what we actually do believe and do - appears to be our only way to square the circle of our puzzling religion.

**The second set of questions concern whether a religion based squarely on our Seven Principles provides enough hope and generates enough faith among religious seekers and unattached wanderers to at least start to swell our ranks and heal the wounds of recent setbacks, and at the same time work to bring peace and justice to our troubled world?**

It is an old debate: Is our primary mission to care about each other, to at least *like* if not *love* one another, to show the compassion and encouragement in others' search for truth and meaning, and to recognize each other's worth and dignity? Or is our primary mission to make the world community a better place, with "peace, liberty, and justice for all?" Some would argue that they are not mutually exclusive, but doing both can be very taxing. Though they are both worthy goals, should we give them equal weight? Maybe it is *impossible* to apply all those principles all at once, especially for UUism in general and especially for our church especially.

UUs are .03 percent of the adult population in this country and are at the moment not growing in numbers. So, even if we become *much* more evangelical in promoting UUism through the Seven Principles (even bending the definition of a principle to include the recently locally approved "Eighth Principle"), do UUs think that, quoting the sixth principle, "a world community with peace, justice, and liberty for all" is a realistic and achievable goal. Isn't it

really the secular equivalent to the conventional Christian pie-in-the-sky promise of heaven and eternal life with God and Jesus? Doesn't it show not a little hubris and a basic lack of humility in its reaching way beyond our grasp? Wouldn't it be best to lower our sights to a more manageable and achievable level? We certainly have more than our fair share of problems. Our staff is operating with many committees suspended, and on those committees many volunteer positions unfilled. We have seen our dynamic settled minister Margaret leave after only three years of active ministry, and, soon after, have seen the succeeding interim minister also leave after only a few months. In the course of the past twenty-five years, we have seen three settled ministers and six interim ministers leave our pulpit. The UUA has informed us that the few available ministers now looking for full-time positions are far above our ability to pay the average of 150,000 per year (including benefits), and interims are just as scarce and pricey. (Some have said they do not like the weather here.) But through the stalwart work of our very able staff and the Governance Committee led by volunteer John Gaines, and our board of trustees led by volunteer and elected Don Barber, and the Sunday Service Celebrations team led by volunteer Magdalen Lindeberg, we are restructuring to become, when and if necessary, an entirely lay-led church. The pandemic has caused our numbers attending Sunday Celebrations to shrink dramatically, especially among the parents who once eagerly filled our classrooms with their children, and, of course, the more vulnerable elderly. Though many good people have stepped forward to stem this erosion of participation and enthusiasm (and here I might mention Walt Peck who over thirty years has been a virtual copilot to our ministers and an infallible institutional memory), we find ourselves in a near existential crisis.

So, what *can* our neglected theology offer people that is competitive with the promises of Jesus, Allah, and the God of the Jews? Where *is* our center now that we have been so hollowed out? What do we do to breathe life back into our exhausted church? Who will stand at the center of our church as spiritual leaders and spokespeople and deliver thoughtful, heartfelt sermons which reflect the history, beauty and depth of our UU faith and encourage us to try to follow our Principles and Sources?... Can we really do it all ourselves?

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But I am now through with the hard questions and musings. Here are some hard answers. For a while we might *have to* let the world outside these walls take care of itself, and instead reach toward each other. We can show we're a church of good fellowship, a beloved community, if you like, by first **showing up** and then **slowing down** - to extend one friendly act after another, have one quiet conversation after another, offer one warm handshake after another, give one pat on the back after another, one gesture of appreciation after another, one greeting after another, one compliment after another, one welcome hug after another, all along with a willingness to listen, to empathize, to validate the emotions and thoughts others

entrust to us. To call out to others when we ourselves are in need. And if not to be exactly the exalted Church of Eternal Love and Kindness, maybe to try to be simply... the Church of the Golden Rule. Small, yes, but powerful in our caring for one another. It is unfair to foist the entire world's mighty problems on our shoulders as our primary mission. We do not live in the entire world. In this church our energy should be extended, first and foremost, to the ones worshipping next to us – our neighbors.

To end this sermon, I offer a popular benediction from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer that I have altered to be more compatible with the theology of Unitarian-Universalism. To me it illustrates how the rhythm and poetry of shared language has the power to comfort people in the common belief of our shared gifts and needs.

May we bless each other and keep ourselves close;

May we make our faces to shine upon each other

And be gracious unto each other,

May we lift up our countenances upon each other

And grant ourselves peace -

This day, and until we are no more.

Amen

Thank you for listening,

Preston Wilson, July 17, 2022

