

Preaching to the Preacher

The Important Things I Learned Last Year

By

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People often ask how I come up with my sermon topics. The short answer is they come to me as I go about the business of living my life. They reflect where I'm at in my life and what's capturing my attention. In my quest for understanding, my mind sometimes connects a few dots resulting in an "aha moment." When this occurs, I write the thought down on a digital note in my smartphone entitled "Sermon Ideas." If it makes it there, then it's something I want to further explore and flesh out, which I'll do in the form of a sermon. So, my sermons are most often an attempt to process my own thoughts about the things I'm learning and dealing with, which is one reason they are seldom linear. They are usually all over the place for a while, but somehow tie together at the end. This is how we process information, pulling it all together by finding the patterns and connecting the dots until it all makes sense.

This is why, at the end of each year, I like to contemplate all that I've spoken during an annual "Preaching to the Preacher" sermon, as a further means of considering the matters that are currently most meaningful and helpful to me. My sermons are not an attempt to impart my own wisdom to others, but to publicly process the wisdom I'm seeking for myself. But, as a public process, and as your minister, I remain mindful that my interests are largely in response to my most pressing concerns, and that my most pressing concerns are often common among us. In this way, my sermons are in response to our common journey and, I trust, can be meaningful to all of us.

Although I delivered 31 sermons during 2021, for the most part there were only a handful of recurring themes:

- My deepening understanding of and commitment to the humanistic ethic—the idea that all we do ought to be for the purpose of human welfare and individual unfolding—increasingly undergirds everything I say and write.
- I've also become aware that my own ethical perspective has shifted from teleological ethics to virtue ethics—the idea that there are a few values or principles that we ought to adhere to regardless of our circumstances and the impacts on our lives. The virtues I adhere to are those I believe are foundational to our liberal religion and to Liberalism itself—freedom, reason, and tolerance.
- I've also frequently addressed what I consider the insanity of our delusional society, which manifests as an inability and unwillingness to acknowledge empirical reality on both sides of the ideological spectrum—the far Left as well as the far Right—that is leading to civil unrest and incivility, to a lackluster political response to Global Warming, and to the tragic demise of our own liberal religion.

- Throughout it all, I have not had to work hard to remain positive about the future, knowing that there are many good people doing things that can and are making real and meaningful differences in all of these areas. I have, as it were, relied upon my faith in humanity to maintain substantive hope that we will rise above our greatest challenges.

Regarding the first of these themes, I started emphasizing the humanistic ethic in 2018, during which I gave a succession of sermons entitled, *The Measure of All Things* series, based upon the ancient words of the 5th century BCE Greek philosopher, Protagoras, who caused much controversy in his day by saying, “Man is the measure of all things,”—*man* meaning “human,” both male and female humans. But the humanistic ethic is better defined by my favorite thinker, Erich Fromm, who explains, “Materially, it is based on the principle that what is ‘good’ is what is good for [humanity] and ‘evil’ what is detrimental to [humanity].”¹ Hence, the “*sole criterion of ethical value*,” he says, is “[human] welfare,”² and, thus, “the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities.”³

And what exactly is it that is good for human welfare and the unfolding and growth of every person? The most succinct and easiest explanation is provided to us in Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, which include our basic physiological needs (like food, shelter, and clothing), safety (like job security, health insurance, and law and order), love and belonging (like friendship and social inclusion), esteem (like respect, recognition, and appreciation from others), and self-actualization (the freedom and liberal education to achieve our full potential). As I said in my July 4th sermon, *Independence Daze: The Ups and Downs of Freedom*, “Societies that focus mostly on the lower part of his pyramid—providing us with our basic physiological needs, safety and security, and our need to belong—tend to emphasize equality and belonging. Societies that focus the upper portion—our need for esteem and self-actualization—tend to emphasize liberty and freedom.”

The problem is, human wellbeing and individual unfolding require that all these needs be met, not just some. A society that guarantees its citizens food, shelter, clothing, even healthcare, job security, and safe neighborhoods, but forbids them the freedom to speak, to think, and to chart their own destiny, or have a say in by whom and how they are governed, as is so in China and Russia, denies them the ability to fully unfold as genuine individuals. Likewise, a society, like ours, that emphasizes individual freedoms in the face of extreme social and economic inequalities, with too many living on the brink of destitution, or homelessness, or living in poor and unsafe neighborhoods, with inadequate healthcare and underfunded schools, makes it exceedingly difficult for its citizens to achieve their fullest potential because they must concentrate all their energies on just acquiring and maintaining the basics. In either case, such a society is a failure because it does not meet the humanistic ethic’s demand that the “*sole criterion of ethical value*,” is “[human] welfare”

and “the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities.”

Fromm wrote about the humanistic ethic in 1947, but he was influenced by the Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries, especially the great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who believed morality ought to be based on the principle that every person should be free to think and act for themselves. “Free willed beings are the most valuable things in the world,” he said. “They are ‘ends in themselves’ which should never be treated instrumentally as means to other ends.”⁴ This truth, Kant believed, is categorically imperative, meaning it ought to be observed always in all circumstances. Philosopher A.C. Grayling says, “The most famous formulation of the categorical imperative is: ‘Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.’ Kant thinks of the moral community of persons as a ‘kingdom of ends’, a mutual association of free beings, in which every individual seeks to realize freely chosen goals compatible with the freedom of everyone else to do likewise.”⁵

Although Fromm later reworded this categorical imperative in terms of the criterion previously mentioned, he, too, often stated that individuals are ends in themselves, and should never be treated merely a means to someone else’s, which was clearly inspired by his philosophical forbear. Fromm says, “Kant, who, with regard to the idea that man should be an end in himself and never a means only, was perhaps the most influential ethical thinker of the Enlightenment period.”⁶ So, in addition to concentrating a lot on the humanistic ethic over the past months, I have also focused a great deal on its roots in Enlightenment thinking, the same thinking our nation is supposed to be founded upon, and that any genuine liberal or liberal organization, including our liberal religion, ought to be most deeply committed to.

The Enlightenment period, from the late 17th century to the early 19th century, represents the widespread flourishing of the Renaissance thinking of the 15th and 16th centuries. The Renaissance, which means “renewal,” refers to the rediscovery of the presocratic philosophers, the earliest of the Greek philosophers, who lived between 2,400 and 2,600 years ago. These early philosophers are tragically overshadowed by those thinkers who followed afterward, but, as Bertrand Russell says, “The rise of Greek civilization which produced this outburst of intellectual activity is one of the most spectacular events in history. Nothing like it has ever occurred before or since.”⁷

This is so because, for the first time in human history, as far as we know, people attempted to understand and explain human existence in natural, rather than supernatural terms. Whatever else this transformative epoch in human evolution may have brought, it includes a positive view of human reason and agency. I need say no more than this to point out that this period was the birth of a broad humanism and the humanistic ethic, the belief, that is,

in human goodness and potential, and that the purpose of any society ought to be to nourish and foster such potential in every person. Such is the foundational idea that led to the Enlightenment principles, which can be summarized as freedom, reason, and tolerance.

These principles were on the minds of those who drafted our nation's Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights two centuries ago, an outgrowth of which was American Unitarianism. As Earl Wilber Morse wrote in *A History of Unitarianism*, Unitarianism's "fundamental *principles* [are] freedom, reason and tolerance."⁸ Unitarianism, which dates at least as far back as the 16th century, and, in my view, back to the early Christians, is defined by its humanistic theology, the belief that Jesus was a man whose teachings were to be followed, not a god who should be worshipped. This notion was suppressed during the Dark Ages but reemerged in Eastern Europe during the Renaissance and in what would become the United States during the Enlightenment.

These foundational principles, then, are those I consider ought to be the virtues we should strive to promote and live by. Virtue ethics, again, is based on the notion that there are certain values we live by no matter the consequences to our lives. If adhering to them brings us prosperity or pleasure, so be it, but this should never be the reason we do what we believe is right. If, on the other hand, doing so causes us to suffer and sacrifice, so be it. As the stoics taught us, pain and pleasure are indifferent to the matter of ethics.

This is why, even after being excommunicated from the formal order of Unitarian Universalist ministers, I have continued to challenge the illiberal and dogmatic direction the Unitarian Universalist Association is taking our religion. As I wrote in the introduction to my book, *The Gadfly Papers*, "I must say what I believe is true and do what I believe is right, even if I'm wrong, and even if doing so isn't going to be fun. I do so humbly but boldly because that's my job as a UU minister and it's also integral to who I am." It is part of my nature as an Enlightenment thinker who is part of an Enlightenment religion, to, as Kant said is the Enlightenment motto, "Have the courage to use your own understanding,"⁹ and that moral immaturity, often self-imposed immaturity, "is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another."¹⁰ So I shall continue to push back against the Unitarian Universalist Association's dogmatic leadership in order to promote our liberal religion's liberal values—freedom, reason, and tolerance, because this is what our religion is all about, and, so long as I am a minister and claim to be a liberal, it is my job to do so.

It is because I am a liberal and, thus, by definition, one who accepts and must foster a positive view of human nature and human potential, that I also consider it my task to overcome the negative and fearful thinking that is part of our biological and neurological hardwiring. As I have often spoken about, our bodies and brains have not evolved as fast as our knowledge, science, technologies, and societies have. Although we don't need to fear falling victim to predation like we once did, we remain designed to always be on the lookout for danger. As such, we are prone to seeing only what we are looking for, the danger channel that our senses have become attuned to. So, it takes effort and intention to overcome this

by, first, embracing liberalism's positive view of humanity and, secondly, by training ourselves to look for the good in the world and in others. Switching our brains and bodies, if you will, to another channel.

So, in 2021, I also spent a lot of time talking about the good things happening in response to some of our greatest challenges, like Global Warming. In May of this year, I gave a sermon entitled, *Celebrate Good Times, Come On!*, during which I talked about our species' many historic accomplishments. "We live in a truly unprecedented age that will fundamentally transform our species during our own lifetimes," I said:

We live in a period of transcendence. As futurist Ray Kurzweil says, "we won't experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century—it will be more like 20,000 years of progress (at today's rate)."¹¹ At that rate, we're seeing these changes happening right now, the rapid advancement of vaccine science being just one example. Advances this decade will be so extraordinary, they will make the past twenty years seem like the past thousand years and will continue to make the world better than it has ever been. For those who have eyes to see, look. The Positive Ape. The Grateful Ape. The Happy Ape.

Recently I gave two sermons about the many positive technologies being developed to make a meaningful difference in our lives and our futures. *Cool It*, was my sermon about genuine advances in technological solutions to the environmental degradation of our planet, including those already at work cleaning up the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, the potential of iron fertilization to reoxygenate our suffocating coral reefs, lazars that can simulate lightning and cause rain showers in drought-stricken regions, carbon sequestering artificial trees, and lab grown meat. Just a few weeks ago I followed this up with a sermon about some of the most promising technologies of the entire year.

To be clear, however, my appreciation for technology is not because I am a techno-geek or technophile, nor a techno utopian. It is a consequence, again, of having a positive view of human nature. As I began the latter sermon, "Other animals may use natural items like sticks and twigs as tools, but the human species is Nature's toolmaker. We make our way through the world by fashioning tools, innovating them, and using them in innovative ways." So I consider technology part of human nature and, thus, as part of nature itself, not its antithesis. So long as our toolmaking is guided by the humanistic ethic, the sole criterion of which is human welfare and individual unfolding, I'm good with it. Valuing human achievement, including our inventions and innovations, is part of seeing the good in humanity, which happens when we switch the channel we've been attuned to for hundreds of thousands of years, to one with a more positive, and, these days, more accurate picture.

Finally, it is also because of my belief in humanity, and my desire to see a healthy and happy human civilization, where our entire species prospers and every individual is free to achieve their fullest potential, that I have also often spoken of what ails us. *Regaining Sanity in an Insane World, How to Build a Pyramid in the 21st Century, Short Term Historians*,

Vaccination Nation, and, most recently, *Death Wish*, were all sermons addressing the fear-based incivility and delusional thinking now tearing our society apart. The common theme in all of them is, ultimately, about our need to return to those fundamental Enlightenment principles our society is supposed to be founded upon and must strive to achieve—freedom, reason, and tolerance. I concluded the most recent of these, for example, *Death Wish*, by appealing, once again, to the humanistic ethic underpinning these principles. A genuine love of life, I said, “must be manifested in our passion for and preservation of life by assuring human welfare, individual unfolding, and the health of our planet and all creatures upon it.”

That’s a quick retrospective of the journey we’ve taken together on Sunday mornings during the past year and even though my many sermons may seem to be all over the place, I hope you can also recognize the common values within all of them. For this journey proves how potent these values really are—freedom, reason, and tolerance, sustained by the humanistic ethic—in influencing all that we think and do. I’m not sure what I’ll talk about during the months to come, but I am sure these liberal values, in the truest sense of the term, will remain at the heart of all I stive to say and do.

So thanks for listening and have a happy and fulfilling New Year.

¹ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

² Ibid, p. 12.

³ Ibid., p. 229.

⁴ Grayling, A.C., *The History of Philosophy*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 265.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, *ibid.*, p.123.

⁷ Russell, Bertrand, *The Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books, Inc., Rathbone Books Limited, London, 1959, p. 10.

⁸ Morse, Earl Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1945, p. 208.

⁹ Kant, Immanuel, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Konigsberg, Prussia, September 30, 1784.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kurzweil, Ray, “The Law of Accelerating Returns,” March 7, 2001.