

Preaching to the Preacher

The Sermons that Have Most Inspired Me

By

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I was recently reminded of something that's often said among Unitarian ministers, that most of us have just one or two good sermons we must figure out different ways to keep repeating. Some seminary students are even taught this and that they need to figure out what their one or two good sermons are. This might be true if preaching is about a preacher's expertise and dispensing whatever expert knowledge is in his or her head. Expertise takes a long time to develop and maintain; and is usually limited to just one or two areas because there's only so much one individual can devote that much of one's time and life to. Even then, there is usually lots of disagreement among experts. So, none of us can know for sure which if any of the experts truly knows what they are talking about.

If, on the other hand, preaching is about the preacher's own questions—one's quest for truth and understanding rather than one's expertise or just their one or two favorite beliefs—then the potential variety is almost endless because our questions are infinite. This is my approach to preaching. As I go about my life learning new things and pondering life's problems, I sometimes get an idea for a sermon and jot it down. When it comes time to determine what I'll talk about for the coming month, I open my notes and plan from there. So, my sermons aren't about the things I know but the things I'm wondering and learning about. They are not the work of one with a great wealth of knowledge, but one with a great wealth of curiosity; a Jack of all ideas and a master of none; a life-long learner and perpetual student.

I do often return to similar themes, but only because these themes reflect a phase I'm going through in my life. So, when I prepare a sermon, it isn't about what I want to clarify for others as much as what I want to better clarify for myself by giving form to my thoughts. I use the opportunity of writing a sermon to create order out of the disjointed ideas amassing in my head. Because all of us are on a journey, my way of sermonizing seems to be of interest to others who also like to ponder life's questions and challenges, as well as current issues that pertain to us all. This appears to work well for most and is better than me repeating the same one or two themes all the time, which would be boring for all of us, especially me!

Yet there are certain subjects I do frequently return to, especially when I'm in a lengthy phase of my intellectual and philosophical journey, but always to look at the topic from a new and different angle in a continuing conversation. Still, I sometimes hear people say, "That's all he ever talks about." I usually take this to mean there is a particular topic some don't want me talking about at all. For, upon reviewing the many topics I've spoken about over the course of a year, I can assure you there is nothing that is "all" I ever talk about. I'm not a "one-or-two-sermons" preacher and never have been. I suppose such complaints may be fair to say of preachers from other traditions who are expected to always focus on their

religion's particular theology, but Unitarian ministers are supposed to be free to ponder and discuss all sorts of ideas, not just one or two. So, if I were to teach a preaching class to any minister, Unitarian or otherwise, I'd begin by saying, *don't preach about what you know or think you know; preach about what you wonder*. This is so even if what you wonder about is also what you're worried about, because others often share the same worries and would appreciate hearing them addressed, even if it means the only thing they learn is that they are not alone.

Recently, upon reading the memoirs of Moritz Kundig, our longtime and beloved church member who recently passed away, I was reminded of our minister here during the tumultuous 1960's, Rev. Rudy Gilbert. Moritz wrote, "Our minister, Rudy Gilbert, was one of the very early objectors to the Vietnam War, which created a severe split in the congregation. Eventually, of course, the supporters of the war looked foolish, but hurt feelings remained, and Rudy resigned before long." I was then further reminded of something I heard about Rev. Gilbert when I first came to Spokane, that some members complained the Vietnam War was "all he ever talked about," which I'm guessing meant there were some who didn't want him talking about it all.

I should also say that over the years I've heard that my sermons are "too intellectual" and "not spiritual enough." I was once even asked if I would "dumb my sermons down," in those precise words. But when asked to change what I speak about or how I speak, I'm quick to reply, "My sermons are an expression of who I am, and I am the preacher that I am. I believe I was called to this church partly because of the quality of my sermons. However, I realize my style isn't right for everyone, and I'm okay with that. But if this is ever so for most our members, it will be time for me to go." A preacher should not be in the business of saying what others want to hear, especially not what everyone wants to hear. Trying to please everyone ends up not pleasing anyone. It is the job of the preacher, rather, especially a Unitarian preacher, to have the kind of courage Rudy Gilbert did, to say what he believed was right, true, and most important, no matter the consequences.

Obviously, in recent years I've been extremely troubled by the takeover of the Unitarian Universalist Association by illiberal dogmatic authoritarians, and I continue working to better understand how this could have happened, which has led me to dive more deeply into Unitarian history, the tenants of and roots of liberalism, and the nature of authoritarian thinking. It's become a matter I speak of often because I happen to believe the takeover of our liberal religion is something a Unitarian minister ought to frequently talk about. But the need to go deeper into our history, tradition, and values has also been extremely enriching, and no more so than by inviting our famous minister from the past, John H. Dietrich, to occasionally return to our pulpit to remind us of who we are and where we come from.

As a reminder, Dietrich was the minister of our Spokane congregation from 1911 to 1916 and went on to spend the rest of his long career as a Unitarian minister in Minneapolis. He came to our church and to Unitarianism after being convicted of heresy by the Dutch Reform Church in Pennsylvania, discovered his humanistic beliefs here, became a signer of the original *Humanist Manifesto*, and is remembered as the Father of Religious Humanism. The first of the six of his sermons I've presented so far is entitled, "What is a Liberal?," which I presented January 8th, 2023, but was originally delivered in 1926. In it, Dietrich says that sane liberalism, "leaning decisively to the side of hope, tempers that hope with a recognition of the fact that humankind, instead of having fallen away from some high estate, has been moving upward, working out the brute, and is slowly but surely coming by its deserts." His optimism toward humanity and the future was inspired by all the progress of the 19th century resulting from the Enlightenment. "It is no doubt; because the world has come to recognize this fact that we honor the term and like to be called liberals," he said. "There is an occasional person who glories in his conservatism; but the majority of people are proudest when they are recognized as liberals." Imagine living at a time in this nation when "liberal" wasn't a bad word and that everyone, even those who weren't, preferred to be considered liberal. Today, sadly, we live in a time when the term "liberal" is treated as a slur, so much so that even those who are prefer not to say so.

In April of 2023, I offered another of Dietrich's sermons, "The Kind of Salvation Man Needs," which contains a couple of unforgettable statements. "As for sin," he says, "the humanist says, 'If a person sins it is not because one is depraved, it is because one is not yet wholly a human.'" I especially appreciate this because it coincides so well with the humanistic ethic I often mention in my sermons, centered on achieving human welfare and individual unfolding. Dietrich's idea that the wrongs we commit are because we have not achieved our full potential—not yet wholly human—is a profound explanation of human evil and points us in the direction we need to go as a society to address it. This leads to the second memorable statement, "Christianity has but one savior—the son of God, who suffered and died to atone for the sins of all; but humanism has many saviors, for every man and woman who helps to do the work necessary for humanity's salvation is a savior." In short, the kind of world we want is up to us, and it's up to us to create a world in which everyone has an opportunity to achieve their full potential, to become wholly human.

Next came my August delivery of "Liberal Religion at a Cross-Roads," first offered by Dietrich in 1924. It's about the struggle of Unitarianism at that time to fully let go of established religious ideas and jargon to embrace the findings of science more fully. "With the result," he says, "that she stands wavering before two roads—one leading on to a full and free acceptance of scientific results, the other to a strange admixture of science with tradition and sentiment." Without going further into it here, I was so moved by this sermon that the very next week I offered my own sermon entitled, "Liberal Religion at Another Crossroads."

After giving many historic examples of how human society has routinely rejected its moments of sound reasoning, I end this sermon saying, “the crossroads we face today is not new. Nor does it belong exclusively to Unitarian Universalism. It is the same crossroads humanity has been striving to reach throughout our existence; only to reach it, take a few steps in the right direction before, out of fear and ignorance, we second guess ourselves and turn around to go backwards ... which is why our liberal religion must not only survive but thrive, so that we can again help our fellow human beings transform their hostilities into hope, their fears into awe and wonder, and their ignorance into curiosity and courage.”

In November of 2023, I gave Dietrich’s 1922 sermon, “Do We Need a New Moral Outlook?” It is profound because he argues that morality itself, rather than God or a particular belief about God, ought to be the basis of religion. “All other religions,” he says, “all that seek to make something else sacred, that cause us to put our trust in a church or a creed, in Christ or in God, divert us from the real issue—obedience to the natural conditions of life. And so do we need this new moral outlook—promoting human welfare and happiness—which enthrones the moral ideal as the supreme object of religious worship and makes devotion to this moral law the supreme object of our religious practice.”

The following March, I delivered his 1918 sermon, “The Terrible Choice: The Philosophy of Either-Or,” which was akin to his “Crossroads” sermon, because it similarly calls for humanity to make a choice between ancient and disproven religious ideas or the truths established by science and reason. “There are two methods of attempting to ascertain the truth; one is the traditional and theological, the other is the scientific and historical. We cannot forever halt between these two methods. The terrible choice must be made.” It is a choice, sadly, that is still before us, more than a century later.

Then, earlier this month, I offered what I consider his most important sermon, at least for us Unitarians today—his 1918 sermon, “Unitarianism and Free Thought.” It is a reminder of who we are based upon our roots and historical values, which, also sadly, have been severed and abandoned by the Unitarian Universalist Association. “For Unitarianism is an attitude of mind,” Dietrich said, “rather than a form of doctrine. It is that receptive attitude of mind which throws itself open to all progress in human thought, with only one aim—the discovery of that which is real and true. Therefore no one becomes or ceases to be a Unitarian because of any belief or opinion he may hold. He only becomes a Unitarian when he has the proper attitude of mind toward truth, and ceases to be one when he loses this attitude, no matter how much he believes or disbelieves.”

As you can tell, Dietrich has become an important figure and mentor during this phase of my ministry, and, I hope, by reintroducing him, he might become a guide for Unitarianism today. But another source of hope and inspiration for me has been my study and enthusiasm for technology. Unlike many, I believe technology has and will continue to make life better in the near and far future, and I’ve given a handful of sermons about why I believe this is so. When I’m feeling down about the illiberal forces that have overtaken the UUA and

are now working to demean and destroy Unitarianism in particular, I turn to my belief in the coming technological singularity, and I'm uplifted. I've spoken increasingly on this topic for years, usually with mixed reviews and a few who are outright hostile toward the idea. But I think I finally helped most in my reach to better understand where I'm coming from and why in my recent June 23 sermon, "The Future is Here: Today's Most Promising Technology." By speaking about current technologies that are already improving our lives and are poised to make even greater improvements, I was, for the first time, met by a few people who said, "I didn't realize we were that far along," and, "It made me feel hopeful."

This was not necessarily the response to a couple of other sermons I gave on the topic of technological advances, including my January 7 sermon, "A Whole New World," and my January 14 sermon, "Why Things are Better than Ever: And Why We Still Don't Realize It." I won't go into the contents of these sermons again now but will mention a couple of sermons in which I recognize the pitfalls of technology, especially those involving social media. On April 14 I gave a sermon entitled, "The Eyes Have It: The Crucial Importance of Looking at Another's Face and Eyes," about how our devices are causing us to look down instead of into each other's eyes and faces, which is an important part of how we have evolved to understand each other and what it means to be human. This is so because it engages our mirror neurons, which enable us to imitate and empathize with others.

Then, only a couple of weeks ago, I offered my review of Jonathan Haidt's new book, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness.* Even so, after acknowledging and agreeing with his concerns, I also offered technological solutions for bringing us back to our humanity. "Instead of facing either a perfect utopian future, or a horrifying dystopian future," I said, "we can simply work to steadily make the future better for all of us. That's what protopia means, moving forward. And that's what I hope for our anxious and depressed kids, for our paranoid and delusional adults, and for the whole of humanity, that we can keep improving, keep moving forward, becoming our best, making the world better; as, together, we continue taking small steps and making giant leaps."

I think my January sermon, "Unspeakable Things: Addressing the War Between Israel and Hamas," was also a big sermon last year. It's a topic I've discussed a few times over the years, always with trepidation because I'm always met with at least some hostility. Today many in the local Jewish community have labeled me antisemitic for expressing any sympathy whatsoever for Palestinian people. But I think the current, so-called, "War" with Hamas, which has indiscriminately left tens of thousands of innocent Palestinian people, mostly women and their children, dead, cries out for a better and permanent solution to the three-quarters-of-a-century old conflict in the Middle East.

My June 9th sermon, "Heterodoxy: Reflections on the Recent Heterodox Academy Conference," was also a highlight of the year for me, not necessarily because of its content but because this principle, that we should all entertain different ideas and live and work together as a community of people with many differences, lies at the heart of what Unitarianism is supposed to be about. Sadly, it is a principle our religion and our society have gotten away from. In order to begin advancing toward our full potential, in order to become more wholly human, it is a principle we must recommit to as a society. I gave this

sermon the morning after returning from the Heterodox Academy's conference in Chicago, and ended by saying, "I now have hope that liberal values, those I have been preaching about for years, those that are supposed to be central to our Unitarian religion, have a real chance of becoming Humanity's core values again so that we might live peacefully together and advance together as one human family across the globe." I hope I'm right.

There were many other topics I discussed last year, but I'll begin to wrap up now by briefly mentioning just two others that were especially meaningful to me. The first was my December 3rd sermon, "Spiritual?", in which I argue this word, which everyone who uses it seems to take its meaning for granted, is so nebulous as to be meaningless. I gave 22 different definitions of the term found in common dictionaries. It's a sermon worth reading and watching in its entirety, but here's a couple of lines I'll recite now, "If the word spiritual is subterfuge for emotionalism, anti-intellectualism, and anti-individualism, I personally want no part of it. On the contrary, I consider the problem with our society today in general, and with Unitarian Universalism in particular to be emotionalism and irrationalism. The problem is not that there is too much reason and science, but not enough. The problem is not that we need more people leaping over the pews shouting nonsensical words, but fewer."

I conclude, then, by mentioning another December sermon, "The Discovery of Humanity," in which I point out that it was in the aftermath of the extreme violence following the Protestant Reformation that humanity first discovered its humanity, just as today's violence is causing more of us to recognize the humanity of our Palestinian neighbors. Among those cited in this sermon is Philosopher Susan Neiman, who writes, "the Enlightenment emerged from a blasted landscape, on a continent soaked with blood ... It was a history of waves of plague without cure, and ever-returning religious wars in which countless people died ... Women were regularly burned alive as suspected witches, men thrown chained into dungeons for writing a pamphlet ... Small wonder that no era in history wrote more, or more passionately, about the problem of evil. Into this landscape the Enlightenment introduced the very idea of humanity."¹

It's an important message because it gets at the heart of all my sermons and at the heart of Unitarianism. We must value tolerance for and the dignity of others above all if we want to avoid hostility in our world and make real progress toward a peaceful and positive future. This is why Unitarianism exists and why I am a Unitarian preacher. No matter what I've said in the past or what I'll say in the future, this is the message the world still needs to hear, that, no matter where we are from, no matter what we look like or what we believe, we are all brothers and sisters. This has been the Unitarian message since its formal beginning during the tumultuous Reformation, that "We need not think alike to love alike." If I only had one sermon to give, I suppose that would be the one.

¹ Neiman, Susan. *Left Is Not Woke* (pp. 33-34). Polity Press. Kindle Edition.