

Sunday, January 13, 2008

Thanks to the kind invitation of the folks from St. Paul's Cathedral, I was invited to represent Unitarian Universalism in the First Night celebration, an interfaith service which was later written up in the Boston Globe. It was an amazing experience to share their worship space on such an auspicious and sacred night; and to share it with Sikhs, Jews, Muslims. The range of people representing the religions of the world was astonishing. And to be part of it was very moving.

The only tough part was, I only had four minutes. And as you know, that's excruciating--so I thought to myself, as I had so much more to say, that I'd like to say it to you this morning (actually I think four of you were there, so you're going to hear echoes of words that you've already heard before. But much expanded I assure you...) I wanted to find out much more about what is called "A Common Word Among Us and You". You probably haven't heard about this important movement, and that's why I'm going to share it in the sermon with you today.

Now, during that service I recognized that Boston is an interesting, special and highly parochial place in some respects. It certainly is for Unitarian Universalists. By the turn of the century, it was said that Unitarians believed "in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of Jesus and the neighborhood of Boston." But, Boston has changed. Represented in that service were many of the some sixty world religions in the growing population of Boston. So something interesting is developing and it exemplified what's going on in the world itself, because of all kinds of reasons, the world is shrinking; we're in each others' back pockets, we're in each other's face. The nations of the world cannot insulate themselves any longer from one another; and whether that's in terms of race and whether that's true in terms of terms of national boundaries, and certainly that is true in terms of the religions of the world.

And I remember, in the process of sitting there that evening, having seen the Catholic theologian, Hans Kung some years ago, speaking at my sister-in-law's synagogue in L.A. (What an unusual place to see probably one of the great theologians alive in the world today.) And he surprised me. He just stared at us and said, "There will be no world peace unless the religions of the world have peace. There will be no peace among the religions until the religions of the world learn to listen to one another." It was very moving. But, little did I know we would soon be moving into the era of 9/11.

Now I don't need to tell how dangerous the world is. We live in a time when extremists, on all sides, can take the power of religious faith and use it as a tool to move peoples' feelings, and move them around almost like pieces on a chess board. This religious motivation is fervent, and it is, I believe at times, quite cynical as well. Because religion, as I have said many times, is one of the most powerful instincts in the human soul. It's like dynamite; you can use dynamite to create a bridge or a road, and you can use it for vast, destructive purposes. It's very powerful stuff.

We live in a world where sociologists used to say the world is becoming more secular. I don't think that's true. The world in some sense is becoming even more fermented, even more fervent, in its religious ideology. Added to this is a growing sense of faiths crowding into one another, producing in the religions of the world having an even greater sensibility of protecting their interests, protecting their core, their essence, so they don't become swallowed up.

I remember thinking at that New Year's evening service how much I needed to hear the songs and the chants, and the languages and prayers of other people. The world needs it. We all need it. We need that feeling of ecumenical spirit, like a sacred opening into a possible new life. But that wasn't all that was on my mind that night.

Earlier in the day, I had encountered something that I had earlier missed, and I suspect many of you missed it as well. It was a letter written to Christian leaders from a hundred and thirty-eight Muslim clerics from all branches of Islam. It was called "The Common Word Among Us and You". It was a very powerful statement. Essentially a theological, spiritual olive branch, reaching out to the West and to the religions of the West and to all world religions, but principally to Christianity (who they know is the greatest religion in the world). It sidesteps all the old arguments and all the old pain-- no discussion of the Crusades, no discussion of Jihad, no discussion of torture at Abu Graihb. None of that; they do a rather beautiful and I'll also add, ingenious, thing. They basically elucidate two points of common interest and common tradition and, as I note, "the common word." It's so simple; they simply say, "Our religions have so much to say to one another because we share **love of God** and **love of neighbor**. With these two things, we can remake the world, because these are things that are at the very heart of our shared tradition."

And strangely, although this process has been going on for more than a year, and that this particular olive branch was released right before Thanksgiving, except for a reply crafted by Yale Divinity School that was later published with some additional names in the November 18th edition of the New York Times, the reality **is there's been almost no response**. No coverage in the Boston Globe, no coverage on CNN, no coverage on ABC, NBC and what a surprise, Fox.

We've ignored it, because it doesn't fit the narrative, does it? How many times have you heard people say, "Well, you know, **we** want to live in a more peaceful world, but basically Islam is just a violent religion." I've heard that a hundred times in the last five years. And, it doesn't fit the narrative. What this outreach is about is radical and revolutionary. And you know how revolutionary it really is? We in the West are having a tough time answering it. Prime Minister of England, Gordon Brown has answered; the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem have answered--But there's been nothing, nothing from our government. (**Note: as of the beginning of March, a response from Unitarian Universalism is now posted on the Common Word website...**)

I asked the people there that night to raise their hand if their priest, rabbi, or minister, or imam, had mentioned "The Common Word among Us and You" any time in the period

before the holiday. Not one hand went up. Not one. How strange, how mysterious, how sad. And I'd like to change that, and I hope you do, too, because this is one of those rare sermons that isn't just a harangue. This is the one issue where politics and faith and a true pastoral interaction come to one place. This is not abstract. This is not intellectual. This is not even theological.

There are people who would love to take the intensity and power of religious faith and turn it into a violent tool. **On both sides.** After 9/11, and after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, this division between Islam and the West affects every single one of us. It affects our children. It is a story that is still playing out. I don't know where it's heading and what the outcome could possibly be. All I know is that somehow the spiritual essence of these religions are bound up in whatever answer will come, in time and in history, in the fabric of our everyday life. This is real stuff. You are living in the midst of one of the most powerful turns in history. So something like outreach comes out, from a hundred and thirty-eight Muslim clerics of every spectrum of Islam, and it's met, it's met with what?

I want to make certain that our denomination is on record. I want our response on the website of The Common Word. I want you to write letters to the Boston Globe. I would like you to pick up a telephone or send an email to say, I really care that this is covered in the nation's media. I don't care whether it fits our narrative or not. It's important. We can't miss this. We can't ignore this. We can't sidestep it. And you might say, "But Stephen, we're just one little congregation. This is just one city." But it seems to me that Boston has started a revolution before and there's no reason in the world that we should think small now. And if you think, "Goodness gracious, Stephen, you're asking a lot of us," trust me, the heavy lifting's already been done. All we have to do is to say that we care. All we have to do is recognize that something powerful is stirring. We may find our voice.

Theodore Parker, one of the great religious figures of our movement, a figure so radical that no other Unitarian minister would exchange pulpits with him, said at the end of his ministry that "The arc of the universe bends towards justice." And it does. But the arc of the universe bends towards justice because you put your shoulders to it. And the weight of your heart. I'm asking you to make your voice be heard. Don't just let your leaders do it, although we, too, have our responsibility. We, too, have our responsibilities-- to begin reaching past of the parochialisms and the weird, strange ways in which we segment ourselves from each other. This artificial separation is not appropriate, and it's not right. The world can't stand that kind of dangerous isolation; certainly not among the religions of the world, which have at their basis and at their core the ability to recognize love of God and love of neighbor.

That may be in fact the most radical idea of all. But you know what? In listening, we have to also learn to speak, to find our voices, to get past passivity, complicity. The world needs us to begin talking to one another. We need, in fact, a true revolution. Now, maybe religious people are just lost in their own little world, their own traditions, their own rituals, their own way of doing things. Maybe so. But it's time to change. It's time

to wake up, to get real, and to stop being passive. To love **and** to confront are not, in fact, contradictions. They are bound up in one another. They always have been. Harry Meserve, one of our great ministers, said, “From arrogance, pompousness and from thinking ourselves more important than we are, may some saving sense of humor liberate us; and for allowing ourselves to ridicule the faith of others, may we be forgiven. For making war and calling it peace, special privilege and calling it justice, indifference and calling it tolerance, pollution and calling it progress, may we all be cured. For telling ourselves and others that evil was inevitable, or good was impossible, may we stand corrected. God of our messed up, tragic, aspiring, daring and insurgent lives, help us to be as good in our hearts as we have always wanted to be.”

Can there be common ground? There are people who say that **they** know the essence of Islam and Christianity... And they say they are fundamentalist literalists. Well, guess what? They're not. They're not. Because if you truly were a literalist, you could never use violence to advance or defend your faith. To kill in the name of God is simple blasphemy. It has nothing to do with the core of either religion. It never has been. It never will. And if we admit that each religion has advanced its cause by the sword, it is true. It is true. But only by betrayal of its essence. We can do better, and our children's lives ask that we do better.

“A Common Word Among Us”. I think it's time. The Pope is going to meet with signers of this document sometime in the spring. It's important that anyone who believes in the concept of Holy War stand corrected. Love of God, love of neighbor. There's only one response and only one hope. It has been said, “The problem is that most people only have enough religion to hate, but not quite enough to love.”

“A Common Word Among Us” is one the most important things that's happened in our lifetime. It is time we answered.

Amen