

September 21, 2008

Religious Truth and Responsible Speech: A Morality Tale
Reverend Eric Meter

Opening Words

We are here

on the last full day of summer

to worship in the spirit of wisdom,

to celebrate life freely and honestly,

to rejoice in the transforming power of love,

and receive the call to deeper compassion.

And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.

Sequence

As we well know, the winds were not still. Hurricane Ike was a man on a mission, from the central Atlantic, on a line straight across Cuba, up the Gulf of Mexico to Texas, continuing north to northeast until Ike blew himself out over Canada.

We were caught off guard, but it could have been much worse. We helped our neighbors and they helped us. We ate by candlelight and strolled our neighborhoods to see the fallen trees and limbs and to see how others were doing.

We stood in awe once more at Mother Nature's majesty: what she gives, what she takes.

And, despite all the cleaning up, we noticed ourselves slowing down, measuring our days not by the television schedule but by the orbit of the sun, the rise and fall of the moon.

Now, here, together let us move forward again into that silence which waits, always, at the center of things. For storms pass, but the silence remains. Let it carry us where it will.

ring bell silence

Once again we reached out to stranger and beloved alike. We saw ourselves afresh in the light of those we know, those we love, highlighting all that sustains us, and what we yearn for still.

In the continuing silence, we pause to remember our larger lives. We remember and lift up all in our lives whom we miss, whom we love, or struggle to love, those who invite our tenderness and sympathy.

naming

9 am At this time of cycling winds and the turning season, wisdom comes on the wings of silence and music, and we are reminded of the beauty of simplicity.

11 am At this time of cycling winds and the turning season, we are reminded how much we rely upon our sense of home. Whether we were born here, or came here by choice, this is our land and we acknowledge its role in forming who we are, and who we may yet be.

Readings

Our first reading today is actually the text of what is printed on the cover of your program. It is the letter Thomas Jefferson, on January 1st of his first year as President, wrote to the Danbury Baptist Association. In it, he uses the phrase “the wall of separation between Church and State” for the first time. You will notice that, as product of his age, Jefferson uses language in an exclusive way. When he speaks of citizens, he is referring to men alone. Also, this version of Jefferson’s letter includes lines that were removed from the final draft at the recommendation of his Attorney General.

The affectionate sentiments of esteem and approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist Association, give me the highest satisfaction. My duties dictate a faithful and zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, and in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more and more pleasing.

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between each citizen and his God, that we owe account to none other for our faith or worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” this building a wall of separation between Church and State. [Congress thus inhibited from acts respecting religion, and the Executive authorized only to execute their acts, I have refrained from prescribing even those occasional performances of devotion, practiced indeed by the Executive of another nation as the legal head of its church, but subject here, as religious exercises only to the voluntary regulations and discipline of each respective sect.] Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to us all our natural rights, convinced we have no natural right in opposition to our social duties.

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection and blessing of the common Father and Creator of humankind, and tender you for yourselves and your religious association, assurances of my high respect and esteem.

Today's second reading is the first three of twelve resolutions from the Women's National Liberal Union Convention for Organization, held in February 1890 in Washington, D.C., which was convened by Matilda Joslyn Gage. Once called the forgotten third of the "triumvirate composed of herself, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony," Gage was an early suffragette and vocal free-thinker. At the time a group of Protestants and Catholics had formed under the banner of the Christian Party in Politics to close the divide between Church and State. These resolutions from the conference are a response to that initiative.

Resolved, That it is essential to the life of the Republic that the purely civil character of the Government be maintained and that the Church and State be forever kept separate; that the legal foundation of our Government is not any creed of Christendom, nor any authority of the Church, nor a divine revelation, but it is simply the consent of the governed; that the State has not grown out of the Church, but should outgrow the need of any Church and be henceforth and forever independent of the Church.

Resolved, That the efforts now made by the Christian Party to bring religion into politics in order to place a religious amendment in the Constitution of the United States, must be resisted, because the success of such efforts would make the Church the arbiter of the legislative functions of the Government and place dangerous irresponsible power in the hands of the priesthood.

Resolved, That according to the principle of the Government of the United States of America, the Church and State are and must be forever kept separate. The State should govern its civil affairs, give its protection to every form of religious belief and secure freedom from molestation to every sect in the exercise of its religious sentiments, and therefore any amendments to the Constitution proposed by the so-called Christian Party in Politics is destructive of existing civil liberty and should be energetically opposed.

Sermon

Well, hello. I am thrilled to be speaking to you for the first time today.

Let me begin by saying to all of you what I've said to some of you. In my twelve years of ministry, I've never been more warmly welcomed by a congregation. Thank you.

When the Transitions Office at the Unitarian Universalist Association let me know my name had been placed into the hopper of those who might work with you here, I had a hard time containing my excitement. You see, some of my dearest friends moved to Columbus five years ago. I'm Uncle Eric to their two young boys. Other friends from college live just over an hour away. As you might imagine, when you're resettling, it makes a world of difference to already have some connections in place.

I also knew Mark from my seminary days in Berkeley. He led the laying on of hands during my ordination, and a few years ago at a General Assembly, he extolled me, rightfully so, on the virtues of Jeni's Ice Cream. And I knew that Joel Miller, a friend of several years and a great neighboring colleague of mine last year in upstate New York, had grown up in this religious community.

So I am feeling lucky, and more than a little grateful, for the chance to serve you for the next two or more years.

This Sunday had been set as my first time to preach to you, and I had just begun to think about what my topic would be, when a call was issued to members of the local Interfaith Community.

We had learned that an evangelical group out of Scottsdale, Arizona was inviting preachers across the nation to set aside next Sunday as "Pulpit Freedom Sunday." To quote the Alliance Defense Fund's Pulpit Initiative's Letter of Intent, on September 28..."

"... participating pastors will preach sermons specifically reclaiming their right to speak Scriptural truth from the pulpit regarding various candidates for office. It is the first step in a concerted effort to reclaim freedom for the pulpit."

In response, other religious leaders were asked to set aside last Friday night's or this morning's service to speak on the importance of the separation between church and state in our nation. Setting the stage, if you will, for what may be an interesting Sunday morning next week.

So I had my topic, and a great opportunity to meet and begin working with Columbus's interfaith community.

There was just one little problem, demonstrating, perhaps, a lack of imagination on my part. The separation of church and state wouldn't have been at the top of the list of topics I would have chosen to introduce myself to you. When our music director, Tony McDonald, asked me about my plans for this morning and how today's music might support my message, I drew a blank at first and said, "Let me get back to you. I have to admit that the separation of church and state isn't striking me as the sexiest topic right now."

The next day, instead of me getting back to Tony, he got back to me. "Eric," he asked by way of greeting, "What's not sexy about patriotism?"

He was right.

From the days of our nation's infancy, tension has always existed between the realms of church and government. From the very beginning our political leaders have called upon God for wisdom, strength and courage.

At his first inauguration, George Washington leaned down and kissed the Bible. Yet he went out of his way to speak as inclusively as he knew how on issues of religion. During his presidency, Washington wrote 16 letters to Christian ecclesiastical groups and only used the word "Christian" three times.

The goal of religious freedom was fresh in the minds of the Founders. And still, today, many claim that this was founded as a Christian nation, missing the important distinction that while the founders were Christian, that does not mean they intended a Christian nation.

Don't get me started with what the Alliance Defense Fund means by "Scriptural truth ... regarding ... candidates for office."

Those promoting Pulpit Freedom Sunday next week argue that the passage of the "Johnson amendment" in 1954 restricted the rights of clergy and congregations by prohibiting them to speak about specific candidates. In fact, it was never lawful for ministers to do so. Our tax laws come from English Common Law of 1601. In 1954 those statutes were clarified, not created. In a case cited many times since then, in 1930 the *Slee v Commissioner* ruling upheld the loss of tax-exempt status when nonprofits stepped over the line.

Two weeks ago, on September 8, Mark and I joined other area clergy in signing a petition to the IRS, asking them to take a good look at the Alliance Defense Fund, a tax-exempt organization encouraging other such organizations to knowingly break the law. In addition to the petition, three former IRS executives wrote a letter urging the same. Of those three, one lead the office regulating tax-exempt organizations, the second was a commissioner and third the man headed the IRS's office of professional responsibility until 2006.

That's not the kind of company I'm used to running with, but I'll take it. If Jesus broke bread with tax collectors, why can't we?

The law is this: the Exclusion Clause of the United States Constitution prohibits the government from sanctioning or favoring one religion over another.

As our government isn't in the church business, the IRS has this great place for us, called 501(c)(3). It says, in effect, that as long as we qualify for doing

something the government won't do, we don't have to pay the same taxes as for-profit organizations.

But the trade off is that by accepting the benefit of doing something the government can't do, religious institutions and other nonprofits agree to tread carefully on matters of politics.

In effect, the government says to us, "We want you to do religion. We don't want to subsidize political speech." In fact, this is a taxation issue more than a freedom of speech issue.

I've been asked what the difference is between BREAD's stand on the payday-lending ballot issue and what the Alliance Defense Fund is promoting next weekend. It's a good question. Namely, as a minister, I can speak on any issue of the day. What I can't do is endorse a particular candidate for any office.

The UUA's Washington Office for Advocacy has published this guide, which our congregation has on file, titled *The Real Rules*. And while it is careful to state that it does not constitute legal advice, it outlines the three basics of what congregations can and cannot do to remain in tax-exempt status. (and I am largely quoting here,...)

1. Congregations and their representatives may engage in issue advocacy through activities such as educating and mobilizing congregants and the general public.
2. Within narrow limits on time, effort and expense, congregations and their representatives may engage in lobbying – defined by the IRS as advocating for or against specific pieces of legislation – as an "unsubstantial" portion of an organization's activities, [which is generally understood as] 5% or less of total activities.
3. There is a total limit on partisan activity, which the IRS calls political campaign intervention. Congregations and their representatives can do nothing that advocates for or against candidates for public office or political parties.

You won't hear Mark or me up here telling you whom to vote for. You won't see bumper stickers on the tables during coffee hour or ushers wearing campaign buttons. This is because we understand that giving up a little freedom serves the greater good. And, yes, our tax-exempt status as well. That's the game, and it's a fair one.

Believe me, I've said things from the pulpit and during coffee hour that have upset congregants I've sworn to serve. It may be hard to believe, but not all Unitarian Universalists are Democrats and Evangelicals don't always vote Republican. I owe it to all of you to respect you enough to leave room for your viewpoints, your truths.

It remains to be seen just how many preachers will take up the Pulpit Initiative next Sunday. I would love to see the whole thing simply fizzle. But even if it does, the issue will come back again, most likely sooner than later.

As Thomas Paine said, "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must undergo the fatigue of supporting it."

Barack Obama and Sarah Palin are not the only sexy things going on in politics today. What is even more stirring is the general awareness of how high the stakes are. What is even more stirring is how engaged we remain despite how unfathomably drawn out this election has been.

As citizens we need to be able to do two paradoxical things: first, to hold up the dreams we have of our nation, to keep its promise alive in our imaginations, and second, to see it as clearly as humanly possible, to cast a cold eye on it, as Yeats would say.

A United States without any religious sentiment would be a poorer place than the nation we call home. Still, a widely shared, more inclusive, loving faith would be more than welcome. Such a faith has always been part of the fabric of this nation. It will not be extinguished easily.

As an example of such faith, and in closing, I'd like to leave you with these words from the Farewell Address of President Eisenhower of January 17, 1961:

"We pray that people of all faiths, all races, all nations may have their great human needs satisfied, that those now denied opportunity shall come to enjoy it to the full; that all who yearn for freedom may experience its spiritual blessings; that those who have freedom will understand, also, its heavy responsibilities; that all who are insensitive to the needs of others will learn charity; that the scourges of poverty, disease and ignorance will be made to disappear from the earth, and that, in the goodness of time, all peoples will come to live together in peace guaranteed by the binding force of mutual respect and love."

Thank you. Thank you.

Offering

A clergywoman was once asked, "Preaching to us every week, doesn't it seem like you're always preaching to the choir?"

"Are you kidding," the woman responded. "Given the forces at work in our society, maintenance is often the name of the game. If our choir remains full of folks with open hearts who work for a just and empathetic world, I sleep content."

In order to maintain our music program as well as the rest of the wide scope

of this religious community, your generosity of time, wisdom and means is necessary.

And of course, we'd rather see the work of this church thrive than just survive.

Our offering will now be taken, and gratefully received.

Returning

When I was in grade school, I remember learning about the democracy we practice as the American Experiment. Call me naive if you will, but I return to that expression again and again. It tempers my disappointment and frames my efforts and my pride in our nation amid a larger perspective. It helps me stay just a little more optimistic about where we might be going and how we might get there.

Perhaps the long arc of the universe does truly bend towards justice.

I just wish I knew how to bring forth that morning, how to speed that plow.

Please join me in singing: #151 I wish I knew how it would feel to be free.

Blessing

The choices we make shape what will come and define us in each others' eyes. Deeper though, we are the stuff of the universe miraculously brought to life, if even for a brief time.

We are rock, wind, river, flame
and people of love,

Providing a place in our world for our spirit,
a place called home.

As we prepare to help the world comes alive in love,
remember to go in peace, my friends.
Go in peace.