

TOLERANCE

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, January 25, 2009
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Modern Reading “Democracy and Tolerance” Christopher Lasch
from *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, 1994

Democracy . . . requires a more invigorating ethic than tolerance. Tolerance is a fine thing, but it is only the beginning of democracy, not its destination. In our time democracy is more seriously threatened by indifference than by intolerance or superstition . . . We seldom say what we think, for fear of giving offense. We are determined to respect everyone, but we have forgotten that respect has to be earned. . . This is a tourist’s approach to morality. Respect is what we experience in the presence of admirable achievements, admirably formed characters, natural gifts put to good use. It entails the exercise of discriminating judgment, not indiscriminate acceptance.

It is our reluctance to make demands on each other, much more than our reluctance to help those in need, that is sapping the strength of democracy today. We have become far too accommodating and tolerant for our own good. In the name of sympathetic understanding we tolerate second-rate workmanship, second-rate habits of thought, and second-rate standards of personal conduct. We put up with bad manners and with many kinds of bad language . . . We seldom bother to correct a mistake or to argue with opponents in the hope of changing their minds. Instead we either shout them down or agree to disagree, saying that we all have a right to our opinions. Democracy in our time is more likely to die of indifference than of intolerance. Tolerance and understanding are important virtues, but they must not become an excuse for apathy.

Ancient Reading *These Spiritual Windowshoppers* Rumi
trans. Coleman Barks

These spiritual windowshoppers,
who idly ask, *How much is that? Oh, I’m just looking!*
They handle a hundred items and put them down,
shadows with no capital.//
What is spent is love and two eyes wet with weeping.
But these walk into a shop,
and their whole lives pass suddenly in that moment,/ in that shop.//
Where did you go? “Nowhere.”
What did you have to eat? “Nothing much.”//
Even if you don’t know what you want,
Buy *something*, to be part of the exchanging flow.//
Start a huge, foolish project,/ like Noah.//
It makes absolutely no difference/ what people think of you.

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This sermon today is brought to you by . . . No, no, before I reveal who is responsible for me preaching on this theme, first let me tell you a story:

My good friend, John Gibbons, Minister of First Parish in Bedford, was whizzing through a Turnpike FastLane, brought to all of us by Citizen's Bank, when he had an inspiration, born of his perverse sense of humor. A few weeks later, every element on the Sunday order of service at his church was labeled as being provided by a local sponsor who had paid for the privilege. "This prelude is brought to you by the Three Diamonds Coffee Shoppe. . . and this prayer by the Blatt Insurance Agency. . ."

Now a confession: at our Parish Auction, I sold a chance to pick a sermon theme. So this sermon on "Tolerance" is brought to you by our member Brian Pitt – high bidder! Who also called my attention to a recent cartoon in the *Globe*, in which the Rev. Rick Warren, the evangelical pastor chosen by Barack Obama to deliver the invocation at his inauguration, says, "And bless this presidency for its tolerance of my intolerance. . ."

Which puts us at the very heart of the issues I think Brian paid for me to explore.

In case you don't recall, our forebears in our religious tradition fought, even died, for basic religious toleration. Which is not yet that old, nor that widely practiced. This fall, John Gibbons went on behalf of us American UUs to help our Hungarian-speaking co-religionists of the Unitarian churches in Eastern Europe in celebrating the 440th anniversary of the Edict of Torda, a declaration of religious toleration promulgated by the only Unitarian king in history, John Sigismund, back in the year 1568. Here's the story:

A local religious leader named David Ferencz, or Francis David, had started out as a Franciscan priest. When Luther's program of church reform came to his area, he became a Lutheran, and was elected the Lutheran bishop. When the even greater reform and simplification of ritual promoted by Calvin came along, he then became a Calvinist – and was chosen as head of the new Reformed church. And when Unitarian ideas arrived, he became the first Unitarian bishop!

All this religious change provoked the new young king to convene a debate on all the points of theological difference. The Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist spokesmen all said, in one way or another, “Your majesty, if you agree with me, you will get rid of my misguided opponents. Either treat them as heretics worthy of a painful death or ban them from your lands.” Francis David arose at Torda and argued, in essence, “Your majesty, whether you agree with me on all points of theology or not, I hope you’ll join me in defending to the death the right of my worthy opponents here simply to be wrong!”

The John Sigismund chose Francis as his court preacher. The he issued an edict: “*that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them . . . but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore [no one] shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone. . . and it is not permitted anyone to threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his convictions.. For faith is the gift of God and comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God.*”

Historically, toleration has been a contentious issue within religious communities as well as *between* one religion and another. It wasn’t long before Francis was debating with other Unitarians (big surprise!) – over how much Jesus should still to be revered, and whether to pray to him. As usual, David was the radical. Then John Sigismund died. His successor was a Catholic. The more conservative Unitarians turned Francis David over to the new king for promoting too many radical “innovations.” He died in prison.

In time, of course, we Unitarian Universalists developed the principle that the ultimate authority in matters of faith for each of us should be the individual conscience. Not whatever one *wants* to believe, but rather what, after serious examination with others of all the issues, you find you simply *must* believe. It’s easy for us to think of tolerance as something that we invented, and as an unmixed virtue. We heirs of the Enlightenment are also often think ourselves superior to other culture when it comes to tolerance. *Well . . .*

In fact, the Unitarians John Gibbons visited only survived because the successors to John Sigismund were subject to the Ottoman Empire and its Muslim Sultans! Catholics and Protestants alike would have gladly driven the Unitarian movement out of existence. They did that in Poland and elsewhere in Europe. But in Islam, all groups among other

‘people of the book’ were and are protected groups, called “dhimmi.” So long before this, in Muslim Spain, Christians and Jews weren’t just tolerated, but respected. Christians and Jews and Muslims joined in preserving and reviving ancient Greek science and learning. Creative writers like the Jewish scholar Maimonides benefited. So Muslims, from the Caliphs of Baghdad in the 800s, down to the David’s contemporary, the Emperor Akhbar in Northern India, were pioneers in protecting religious minorities and promoting inter-religious effort to promote common flourishing.

Let’s not kid ourselves, however. “Tolerance” is at best a starting point; a kind of negative virtue. One dictionary definition makes this startlingly clear: “To tolerate: to put up with; to bear with abhorrence.” Christopher Lasch had this right, in our first reading.

Some years ago, the UU congregation I once served in Knoxville, TN, actually had a debate over the word. They had built a new building. Stunning interior; the exterior plain and energy efficient. Then the architect suggested inscribing above each window a word associated with congregation’s values: “Love, justice, community, reason, freedom, truth, conscience. . .” the congregation chose by vote the 24 words. Initially, “tolerance” was not among them. Then one member argued that it really should be. He finally won. But I understand the ambivalence of others.

A great historian of Unitarianism once declared that we have a trinity of values. Throughout our history it has been “freedom, reason, and tolerance.” Accurate enough. But my friend Forrest Church often has quoted G.K. Chesterton’s great insight that “every institution perishes from an excess of its own first principles.” Saying that therefore we Unitarians had better beware most the very values that we most hold dear. Excessive freedom, without responsibility; excessive idolatry of reason, with insufficient imagination and compassion; and excessive tolerance, for what we really should not tolerate all of these can threaten not only us, but any effort at democratic living today.

President Obama spoke to the first danger on Tuesday, when he talked about how all of us have collectively avoided hard choices that simply can’t be put off any longer. Christopher Lasch, in his book, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, deals with the second. Frankly, he puts part of the blame on folks just like you and me, the well-educated, bi-coastal elite. We talk a good game about tolerance. But in fact we have damaged democratic debate, even avoided it. Our own education and our economic

interests made us more international and cosmopolitan. Small town and rural Middle America got the message. More traditional and religious values weren't much respected. And a right-wing political movement soon arose that first mobilized their resentments -- and then sold them out, to economic abandonment.

President Obama, I believe, knows that the culture wars in America are not over. If not healed, they could threaten our ability to make the decisions that matter the most. What people like ourselves must accept, I think, is that tolerance will always feel weak; because it is -- a weak virtue. Whereas intolerance, like that of the man with the shotgun who went into the Knoxville church this summer, or the terrorists who want to destroy democracy, always seem stronger. What we often miss is the deep fear and insecurity that intolerance and violence feed on.

So what is the solution? Tolerance is not enough. It must be replaced by respect. Authentic respect. The basic kind that is necessary to debate difference in civil and non-violent terms. Even with Rick Warren. I don't want to ban him from public visibility. Rather I want him forced to debate equal marriage. And I want liberals to engage others who share his reluctance. Which is why last week I called on people like us to celebrate Freedom to Marry week by reaching out and helping to change minds. Because before we demand respect for ourselves, let's remember that enduring respect has to be earned. Sometimes by taking risks.

Lasch says idolators of easy tolerance have "a tourist's approach to morality." Rumi says that many are "spiritual window shoppers." Taking no real spiritual risks or responsibility for being this sort of person and not another, declaring oneself, choosing a spiritual community, a authentic spiritual discipline, having opinions, deepening one's inner life, while debating, respectfully, ultimate issues and related life and death matters.

After all, our forebears did not struggle and die for us just to sit on the sidelines, surfing the channels until we hear a voice or story we find more attractive or amusing! They fought for each of us to be able to go deeper, to seek a deeper faith, of the kind that does not come in one-size-fits-all form, knowing that ultimately the real spiritual virtues cannot be legislated or coerced. Like hope and love, they can only come to those who stay open to them, among all the challenges of human diversity.

May our new President help more people in this world to learn that; lest, in disdaining the virtues that we most need we lose faith with democracy itself, or hope for our collective future, or love for those whose fears may simply be different from our own. So may it be. Amen

*Hymn 287

Faith of the Larger Liberty

Vincent Silliman

Benediction

Go out into the world in peace.
Have courage.
Hold on to what is good.
Strengthen the faint-hearted.
Support the weak.
Challenge the indifferent.
Return to no one evil for evil.
Help the suffering.
Honor all beings.
Take some risks.
And earn their respect.
Amen and amen.