

September 18, 2014
Claire Feingold Thoryn
Theme: Unitarian Universalism
Sermon: Revelation is Continuous

Reading: “Unharvested” by Robert Frost

A scent of ripeness from over a wall.
And come to leave the routine road
And look for what had made me stall,
There sure enough was an apple tree
That had eased itself of its summer load,
And of all but its trivial foliage free,
Now breathed as light as a lady’s fan.
For there had been an apple fall
As complete as the apple had given man.
The ground was one circle of solid red.

May something go always unharvested!
May much stay out of our stated plan,
Apples or something forgotten and left,
So smelling their sweetness would be no theft.

Sermon: Revelation is Continuous

It’s a blessing each of us was born.
It matters what we do with our lives.
What each of us knows about God is a piece of the truth.
We don’t have to do it alone. (Laila Ibrahim)

May something go always unharvested!

In Robert Frost’s poem,
the tree has let its last late harvest of apples fall.
The ground is red,
the air is sweet,
and now that the leaves and branches are relieved of their burden,
they are light and blowing in the wind.

Even unharvested,
the apples have left a gift of beauty,
first to the poet,
and then to everyone who reads the poem they inspired.

“May much stay out of our stated plan,” Frost says,
may the world be bigger and more surprising and sweeter
than we can imagine.

May the harvest be bigger than our arms can carry,
so there is always something yet unharvested.

What each of us knows about God is a piece of the truth.
And we don’t know everything there is to know.
Last week I gave my Credo,
answering the question of What do I believe?
The question I am trying to answer in this sermon is:
What is Unitarian Universalism, anyway?
And why does that matter?

I realized on Friday that that is actually a really hard question,
And there are a lot of ways to answer it,
but there is always next Sunday.

In the 60’s, Unitarian theologian and professor
James Luther Adams described what he considered to be
the main tenets of “religious liberalism.”

This religious liberalism does not mean political liberalism.

In this context,
the word “liberal” describes an approach
away from
literal, fundamentalist, narrow understandings of the divine,
and *towards*
an open, curious, wondering journey.

Adams declared the primary principle of
“religious liberalism” to be this:

“Revelation is continuous.”
Revelation is continuous.
There is much knowledge still on the tree,
on the ground, unharvested.
Adams wrote:

Meaning has not been finally captured.
Nothing is complete,
and thus nothing is exempt from criticism. ...
We cannot properly place our confidence
in our own creations;

we must depend upon *transforming reality*
that breaks through encrusted forms
of life and thought
to create new forms.
We put our faith in a *creative reality*
that is re-creative.
Revelation is continuous.

I love that idea, transformation that breaks through
“encrusted forms of life.”
A creativity that lives and breathes
and grows and dies
and changes and is reborn.
A reality that transforms us,
re-creates us,
gives us new beginnings, every day.

As Gracie Allen once said:
“Never put a period where God put a comma.”

As a child being raised Unitarian Universalist, I never could understand why my
Christian friends
called a book written 2,000 years ago,
the “New” Testament.
There seemed to be so many newer testimonies to be found.
So much new creation,
so much transformation
since the day that book could ever have been considered “New.”

There are other progressive faith traditions that share the idea that revelation is
continuous.
We aren’t as unique as we sometimes think we are.

The United Church of Christ is the denomination
probably the most similar to us—
Protestant, progressive, teach the same Our Whole Lives Sunday school curriculum—
except they are still whole-heartedly in the Christian camp.
They have turned Adams’ idea into a great slogan:
“God is still speaking.”

Many Unitarian Universalists also believe God is still speaking.

And Unitarian Universalism also affirms that God speaks not only through the life of
Jesus,
but also through the lives of many great humans—
and through the natural world we live in—

through science and reason and thought—
through poetry and music and song.

As James Luther Adams put it, we put our faith
in a creative reality that is re-creative.

There is always something unharvested.

Now, humans being humans, we can't let it go there.
We build elaborate institutions
to try to understand who we are and who we aren't,
what we believe and how we behave,
and we call those institutions religion,
and within religion we have these further divisions of denominations.

I was raised UU,
the product of an interfaith marriage.
It has been my religious identity, spiritual home,
and way of seeing the world since before I can remember.

I was that kid in elementary school
that when another kid said,
“Hey, you believe in God, right?”
I said, “I don't know, exactly *what* do you mean by that?”

That is true, that happened.

As a Unitarian Universalist,
I find the label helpful,
I find the identity meaningful.

For me it is like knowing where I am on the family tree.

I'm out here, on the Protestant branch,
way out on the liberal limb,
hanging on to the Unitarian twig.
I'm still connected to the rest of the family tree
and we are waving in the same breeze.
And there are many apples of knowledge still yet to be harvested.

But not everyone likes the whole
institutional denomination thing,
and when we humans are behaving badly,
religious institutions can serve to divide us.

The comedian Emo Phillips has a classic joke about this I have to retell.

Here's the joke:

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump.

I said, "Don't do it!"

He said, "Nobody loves me."

I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes."

I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?"

He said, "A Christian."

I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?"

He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me, too! What type?"

He said, "Baptist."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Baptist."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912."

I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

According to some website that is the best religion joke of all time. So the sermon jokes are just going to go downhill from here.

But seriously folks....

we know that human beings find ways to use religion to divide and destruct all the time. It isn't surprising that many people reject the whole concept of religion and say, "I'm spiritual not religious."

What I think people are trying to say with that phrase is that they have a yearning, a deep need for something MORE—something unharvested, some knowledge just out of reach.

They feel a connection to something
they may or may not call God.
They yearn to experience beauty and glory and gratitude.
They seek out those experiences.

But, perhaps the spiritual-but-not-religious person thinks that churches and church people
don't have much to offer to answer that yearning.
That they won't find within these walls people who *also* see God in sunsets or on the
beach.

They think that religion is something out there—
instead of something that can happen in here.

Well, here is what I think.
Religion is spirituality lived in community.
Yes, bad religion creates divisions.
And yet, good religion brings people together.
I believe Unitarian Universalism is good news,
and good religion.

James Luther Adams says, of institutions:

Anything that exists effectively in history must have form. ...
Thus we...deny the immaculate conception of virtue
and affirm the necessity of social incarnation.
His language is so beautiful that it is almost hard to figure out what he means by that.
What he is saying is that our spirituality must be relational,
lived out in human interactions and communities,
for it to have any power, any meaning or purpose at all.

He continues by saying:

There is no such thing as goodness as such; ...there is no such thing as a good
person as such. There is the good husband, the good wife, the good worker, the
good employer, the good layperson, the good citizen.

Alone, our spirituality can too easily remain oblivious to anything outside our own
personal experience.

Spirituality without other people—
without community—
is at its best lonely.
at its worst selfish.

Adams says

A faith...is only adequate...when it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape the various institutions—social, economic, and political—of the common life. A faith in the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality is one that tries to shape history.

Together, we are pushed to look beyond our individual cares and concerns
And inspired to heal and strengthen the world.
And with the help of a whole community,
our power is magnified.

It matters what we do with our lives.
We don't have to do it alone.

I received a beautiful testimony to the power
of religious community a few weeks ago from a Follen member.

This person, who I'll keep anonymous, wrote to me:

[My spouse and I came from different religious backgrounds.] After our first child was born, our lives spiraled out of control. I grasped at visiting churches to try and find some kind of spiritual home.

One church was nice but did not have a strong children's program.
Another church was foreign to me because
I could not understand all the rules and regulations
that make you a worthy person in their eyes.
But my spouse and I could not agree on a place...

A few years went by, and one day I came to Follen, this time with two children, but leaving my spouse at home. This time I felt such a relief. Every Sunday, I was able to send the kids off to Sunday School and I could sit in silence and let the words that were spoken wash over me. The first time I sang a familiar hymn I was moved to tears. Those Sundays helped strengthen me in ways that I did not realize until much later. The following September, my spouse joined us in Sundays at Follen, both kids became official members of RE and joined the choir. I guess the rest is history.

I am not much of an expert on what it means to be a UU. The denomination is not what I find important. It is the community of people that I find at Follen. These people that I know and don't know share the same basic beliefs of being a good person and being good to other people, no matter what. I am thrilled to have my kids think of themselves as UU.

This past spring I was almost moved to tears [when we sang a hymn I used to sing growing in up.] I felt a little piece of my old home was with me in my new home.

Our spiritual home is big enough to hold all of that;
the life out of control and the peace within;
the ancient tune and the new words.
What each of us knows about God is a piece of the truth.

Our church community is held by the larger denomination, and with its power our strength is magnified.

It's a blessing each of us was born.
It matters what we do with our lives.
We can change history together.

May the harvest be bigger than our arms can carry.
Because we don't have to do it alone.

And may we have a good, and sweet year.

Amen.