

Sermon: UU Round-Up Feb 13th 2022

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Intro:

One Sunday a year I take time to talk about Unitarian-Universalism writ large. And, today just to have a fun target to aim my lesson at, I am using my friend Rodney who having been attending for about a month, and like most people who stroll thru the door having had no history with Unitarian Universalism is about the perfect muse.

With Rodney as my target.

I am just going to lay out as best I can, in a who, what, where, when, why reporter kind of way what Unitarian Universalism is.

Inspirational? Maybe not. Educational? I think so.

But beyond Rodney, anyone who is sorta new to Unitarian Universalism, or thinking about joining this church should come up and sit in the front row. I have reserved some seats.

What you will hear is a primer that not everybody who chooses to sit in our pews is required or even cares to know, but I can almost promise everyone will learn at least something interesting today.

Because I like to think of this as either speed dating with our religion or as a last ditch effort to cram for a UU membership test that doesn't exist, I will go fast.

What Do UU's Believe:

Rodney, since most conversations about Unitarian Universalism begin with the question of just what is it you're church believes in, I will start there. And, the answer, when compared to most other religions with clear and bold beliefs, can be a judgmental "not much."

And that's kinda true. As my favorite UU joke suggests, "What do you get when you cross a UU and a Jehovah's Witness, the answer being, someone who comes to your door, but isn't sure why?" Bears a truth. What we are believe and are selling doesn't fit well in a soundbite.

However, the answer to the question of what UU's believe and are about, is really a much more meaningful, "a whole lot." Than it is a comical not much.

UU's believe in pursuing and enhancing justice here on earth. And, because we believe that because things change what we believe has to be malleable and flexible, not much more that can be stated permanently. We have evolved to believe different things over time. Rodney, we almost humorously have so little to say, **because** more and more when it comes to permanent truths, or the supernatural speculation, we have come to believe in a way less and less. In fact, we UU's are so skeptical of saying anything definitive about anything supernatural that we just don't. We institutionally gave up on theology. I know, crazy, but Kinda refreshing too.

It's not like we don't want to provide answers, it is just that

We, as a church, came to slowly realize that making such claims, when it is clear that we humans that we don't have access to the answers to the life's big questions was a fool's errand, and that intellectual and spiritual humility was probably the best path. It certainly is the safest one.

As you walk towards the bathroom one of our old banners reads, "Love Beyond Belief" and I don't know if we ever have improved from that.

Rodney, you are sitting in a church, that does not claim to have any idea about whether there is, or whether there is not a God, or heaven, or life after death. And, in that spirit, doesn't in an odd way, think it is really any of our business what you claim to believe.

That's a strong take. Let me compromise that a little.

It's not really that we as a church or as a movement don't care what you believe, or think, we just don't think it is our job to determine what your path to a deeper more meaningful life is.

Although, oddly enough-at the same time we feel like it is precisely our business to help you find and live it.

To steal a cool line “We are far more interested in getting heaven into people, than people into heaven.”

Any given UU might have faith in any number of supernatural beliefs, we might be moved by God, or the promise of Nirvana, or feel called to follow the wisdom of Native populations. That’s great. We simply have observed that everyone has their own path to walk and their own truth to find.

I know weird, perplexing, right?

That obscurity, really our humility is not for everyone. Our blurry sense of not only what it is to be a UU, but what truth is, is a large part of why we remain small.

What unifies people in this church is an appreciation for the curiosity and wonder of being alive and a drive to make a difference.

For UU’s we mix freedom of thought and belief- with a drive to improve.

We may not believe in a heaven out there, but I can say tearing up that we sure want to build it here.

Justice, fairness, equity, and an end to suffering and exploitation here on earth is way more important to us than what anyone thinks they believe about a great beyond. We can get pretty indignant about that. We are about deeds not creeds.

Although most modern UU’s would never care to, we can trace this back biblically, - to the debate between Paul and James hidden in the Christian scriptures about what is more important, the right supernatural beliefs or good works

We are part of the Christian path to those that said there is no true faith that does not come without works.

We believe as Emerson said... “The gospel you are living is speaking so loudly I can’t hear what you’re saying.”

Emerson was a Unitarian Minister for the very first part of his career by the way.

Rodney, if we do have any identifiable guideposts, they would be the 7 Principles.

In summary Rodney, the 7 principles lift up the inherent worth of every person, a formal democracy and shared decision making, the truth that everything is connected- in particular our relationship with the planet- and that we want a peaceful world and need to work to build it. See, Rod- we do believe in things, and those principles are fueled by 6 identifiable sources.

Show (Six Sources)

I will be discussing both these in a few weeks, but

We get our wisdom from all the world’s historic religions, in particular the Christian and Jewish ones; we are moved by the actions and wisdom of heroic, prophetic people; the quiet brilliance from nature; and those commitments are both balanced and informed by a skepticism from the world of science.

THEOLOGY: Mostly because I like their wording-I have woven together the different responses to theological questions that belief.net has come to determine are UU’s answers to theological questions, and I think they are right. For UU’s, **the universe is a beautiful**, intricate, complex place, the foundations of which are a Mystery. The "whole truth" of how things work is too large, and our minds/knowledge/intuitions are too small to grasp it all. If the Universe can be said to have a purpose, its purpose is for us, not against us, and it is for, not against, us all not a bias select few. Given how little we can know for sure, our focus should be on this earth and life; beauty, justice, and love. We claim the rational, eschew the irrational (contrary to reason) and question the non-rational (that which is neither provable nor disprovable by reason alone.

DEFINING TENSIONS: That is all very flowery and nice, but Rodney, there are some natural and enduring tensions within our movement that demand some light in terms of understanding us, and define us.

One of them is **theology**. Although nobody much gets too in the business of getting in the business of others theology, and we all agree that we are not theologically exclusively Christian's anymore, or theologically anything really, there still are some theological tensions that persist. What we debate about how religious we are over and against how humanist we are. And occasionally, but rarely, we fight about whether we are more a safe place from religion, or a safe place to be religious.

This tension about fifteen years ago flowed into a debate about the kind of language we are comfortable using both in services like this one, and out in the community. Again, this was a debate between our more humanist members and our more theistic ones. During the presidency of the Rev. William Sinkford, he suggested that UUs have sadly abandoned traditional religious language, and in doing "abandoned" words with potential power to others who not only might join our movement, but in essence turned over the definition of "reverential language" in public debate to more conservative voices.

What we call ourselves: (Fellowship, church, congregation, Universalist Unitarian)

This debate internally is most within our ranks in what we choose to call ourselves. Are we a movement, a church, a fellowship or a society, and are we more aligned with, or more apart of mainline faiths or not etc. Roughly, those UU communities that are newer, smaller, and without ministers are being more likely to be more secular and call themselves a fellowships, those that are older, generally bigger, and with ministers generally bigger maybe more inclined to call themselves a church. However, all versions of that mix can be found.

Balancing insider and outsiders/ Political Tensions:

If there is a variety in our balance of secular humanist values and our historically spiritual ones on politics are a lot clearer. Sorta.

Politically, although there is variety here too, we are predominately liberals and democrats, so much so that there is an instinct to believe that even though we may not agree religiously, we can mostly agree politically. This of course is its own blessing and challenge. Since most of us share a political worldview, but the church is officially open and non-partisan, we are always engaged in a delicate balance of experiencing the pleasure that comes from the assumption of us all being kindred spirits, with a real caution that we are not alienating those who don't share our world view, and the desire to make this a safe place for all.

It is obviously a tension with no easy answers.

Comfortable and Radical Tensions. This is most poignantly felt in the tension between what are generally shared political feelings, and our commitment to free thought.

Back in the late 60's many churches were fractured from the internal debates about the Vietnam War. And, how active the church should be in the peace effort. A decade ago, how Gay we wanted to be, speak to, or appear was a point of at least some consternation, and today how, in what way we are engaged in the effort to actively shape our own internal culture become more multicultural, while we are still largely congregations filled overwhelmingly with white middle class people is where the rub is today. The question of reverential language from a decade ago has morphed into a question of how much talk about "white supremacy" culture is appropriate. All these tensions make sense for us being both a mainstream respectable collared organization, mostly filled with well meaning, middle class people, and having aspirations, values, and vision of a more integrated world. In short, we are called by our own values to be a little more cutting edge than our social location might make it comfortable for us to be.

That tension is pretty enduring, and our complacency, not to mention our whiteness, was one of the reasons Martin Luther King who when he was in Boston getting his Doctorate, frequently attended UU churches didn't become a UU. And thank God he didn't we might still be in discussion groups about whether we should march over the Pettis bridge in Selma. See, at our worst Rodney, me, we, and us, not being generally directly affected by many of the social ills we aim to improve, can get stuck in our heads. They say UU's don't go to heaven they get off a floor below for the discussion group about it.

So, if someone asks Rodney this week what the sermon at church was about. Rodney might be inclined to say to some of our friends, oh today was a day Steve dedicated to explaining his **Denomination** to me?

But, I am pleased to tell Rodney that this church is not part of a denomination.

This church- and us as members of this particular UU church- are part of an **Association**.

An Association of Congregations to be specific.

Within Unitarian Universalism each church stands more on its own than in other traditions. This church is responsible for its own budget, for hiring and firing ministers with a fair bit of freedom, and in general, for better and worse is free to succeed or fail on its own.

We do have both constraints and supports from the UUA the Unitarian Universalist Association. Rodney, this is because we inherit from our pilgrim ancestors a church structure we call "Congregational Polity." We and the Congregationalists are the two church traditions that stand in the direct legacy of the Christians who came from England and Holland walked off the Mayflower.

This independent spirit and a structure that parallels that, comes from the religious freedom our puritan ancestors came to America to find, but goes even further back through all of Christendom. See that desire for independence comes from being people today with very strong and modern cautions about church, but historically from being the people on the outside, and often on the firing line of the bigger stronger Orthodox Church. In very early Christian times our religious ancestors lost debates with and were subsequently outed and persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church, but then, as the Protestant Reformation unfolded, not to break with tradition, we were on the losing end of all the big theological debates we had with the Lutheran and Calvinist churches. It all made us as an institution skittish of creeds and people having power over us.

Rodney if you know anything about what it was like to challenge the church orthodoxy, at any time more than 300 years ago, you know it was a dangerous trauma producing place to be. Some of our heroes were those people burned at the stake.

I don't expect you to care much about this.

And you thought we were an organized religion. We're too independent for that title.

The long and short of the differences between a Unitarian or Universalist theology and that of the traditional church it often circulates around the status of Jesus. Historically Unitarians and to a degree Universalists took Jesus to be a wise, courageous, human whose chief contribution was in demonstration of how to be a courageous and compassionate human being, whereas the church decided Jesus was more heavenly sent part of a cosmic drama between God and the world for the state of our souls.

As time moved on, as the reformation turned into the renaissance, the renaissance into the enlightenment, and the enlightenment into modernism, and beyond moment we always found ourselves on the religious edge of that independent streak of critical thinkers. Leaning always into the new truths that were emerging, from commitment to critical thinking eventually and slowly steered us as a church away from an exclusively Christian orientation, and as it did that we slowly became more committed to freedom of thought, to a deep appreciation of tolerance, and to a sense of justice that extends beyond church walls.

Rodney, UU's eventually decided to keep most of the core values and principles taught by the church, like a love for our neighbor as ourselves, and encouraging people to have a commitment to service and good deeds, without grounding them in theological terms.

What we call ourselves: (Fellowship, church, congregation, Universalist Unitarian)

If there is a variety in our balance of secular humanist values and spirituality.

American UU History: Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religious tradition that was formed from the consolidation of the two religions contained in the name. In America, the Universalist Church of America was founded in 1793, and the American Unitarian Association in 1825. In a way they were always close in beliefs, and grew up as neighbors, the Unitarian's starting in the Boston area, the Universalists having some roots in the Philadelphia area, but really growing up in more rural areas on the edge of America's frontier. More than theologically different, they were culturally different. Unitarian's were generally wealthier and part of the intellectual elite in America. Some of the founding fathers were Unitarians and/or had Unitarian ideas. Most of the energy for Universalism came as a reaction to, and in opposition to the kind of Christianity that preaches God's wrath over his love. They both would have been describable as liberal free thinking Christian churches. They would have until the open minded part pulled in particular the Unitarians away from an exclusive relationship with Christianity. For most of the 1800's and on into the 20th century until they merged in 1961, these faiths became the new religion of Unitarian Universalism through the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). Since the merger of the two denominations in 1961, Unitarian Universalism has nurtured its Unitarian and Universalist heritages to provide a strong voice for social justice and liberal religion. **We could also talk about UU's World Wide-**I am of course speaking about AMERICAN Unitarianism, and Universalism. Although American UU's are our own thing. There are Unitarians, or Unitarian Universalists all around the world. Well, to be accurate all around the world in little pockets. Sometimes in quirky spots. There are U's or UU's in Burundi, Bolivia, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, the Congo, Cuba, and the Czech Republic.

We have a community or communities in Denmark, Finland, France, and Germany. Hong Kong, Hungary, and India. There are UU' in Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, and there growing community in the Philippines.

You could find at least a small fellowship in Poland Romania, Singapore, South Africa, Sri-Lanka, Switzerland, and Uganda.

It's a weird collection, and all with their own unique history. Oddly enough, one of the largest and densest gathering of Unitarian's anywhere in the world are found in Transylvania, which is now in Romania. These are pretty old school very Christian Unitarian's who have women and men sitting on different sides of the church. Being from the home of Dracula has not helped our reputation much, but they are there not because they drink blood, but because about 500 years ago, there was for a heartbeat a Unitarian King as much as 150 congregations with 80 thousand Romania. There is another roughly 10 thousand Unitarians of British origin in the North East part of India, and 200 in Madras in the South.

Brittan has 5k members spread across 184 congregations,

The UU's in Canada and the US were from the 1960's to 2002 all governed by the UUA, but 20 years ago the 5 thousand Unitarians that live north of the boarder- frustrated that the UUA's focus was almost always on events in the US decided to go it alone.

Now, the UU's in Canadian's now have their own National organization, and have chosen to replace the flaming chalice with a glass of Molson Beer with a candle floating in it, placed on top a round piece of Canadian bacon. Ok, that is not true, but it would be cool if it was. Right now there are about 500,000 Unitarians and Universalists in the world today. Many of those were either founded by the British during their colonial expansion, or founded by ex-pat American's

who live overseas. Some, like the groups in Europe have a legacy that extends back to reformation, and some are independently founded.

About twenty countries fall within the umbrella of the International Council of Unitarian's and Universalists or ICUU, which is one of many affiliate organizations that work internationally. Although there was a kind of missionary spirit to much of what the British did now nearly a couple centuries ago, we UU's have grown so concerned about not proselyting that we really have moved away from the bread in one hand, the bible in the other style of growth. I believe it is true when I say, our evangelism and relationships overseas really are sensitive about that.

INTERNATIONAL FOCUSED GROUPS:

There are in fact a number of groups that support our connections and or try to do good work overseas.

Then there is the Partner Church Council, largely is focused on Transylvania supports North American congregations in being in relationship. We are connected to the International Association of Religious Freedom.

There is a "Faith Without Borders" (FWB) program that is run out of the International Office at the UUA designed to assist congregations in creating and sustaining effective ministries of international engagement. There is a UU Service Committee that works to advance human rights and social justice both here and abroad. We UU's have a unique and close relationship with the United Nations through the UU United Nations Office.

Show important Chalice Symbols

Chalice symbol: (SHOW SYMBOL) Rodney, the most common symbol of Unitarian Universalism is what we call the [flaming chalice](#). The chalice as a symbol has no official interpretation. If you haven't noticed, or been around long enough to appreciate it, we UU's don't like to be told exactly how we should interpret anything. The chalice is seen often, but not always framed by two overlapping rings that many interpret as representing Unitarianism and Universalism.). The chalice as you might know or suspect itself has long been a symbol in religion. The **Chalice** is intentionally similar to the Grail of lore, and has resonance with a communion cup. Historically chalices like this one have been a common symbol of liberal Christianity. The chalice was also used by the followers of Czech Jan Hus who was like us a part of the more innovative group of reformers during the reformation in the 1500's. UU's more directly inherit the flaming chalice because it was the logo of the Unitarian Service Committee during the Second World War. It was created by an Austrian artist named Hans Deutsch who was inspired by the containers Greeks and Romans burned holy oil in. Other symbols connected with Unitarian Universalism have included a slightly off-centered [cross](#) within a circle (a Universalist symbol associated with the Humiliati movement in the 1950s, a group of reformist, liturgically minded clergy seeking to revive Universalism). Like with this image, you might often see a chalice within a collection of other religious images. We are very ecumenical and pluralistic minded. So many UU congregations now light a chalice at the beginning of worship services. A tradition that really only got started in the 80's. It was just voted the most Unitarian thing one can do in our Association's official quarterly magazine called "The World." I hand Rodney a "World" magazine. Every member gets one. It's part of the deal for being a member of a UU church. So here is the deal with **membership**. And I am not pitching that, but while we are here, becoming a member of a UU, I believe any UU church is pretty simple. Mostly it is about **signing the book**. (I Show him the book.) Signing the book like signing a contract is essentially a carry-over from our early American days. Can you feel the secular very human quality of this act? Don't miss the theological implications of this. I think it is telling and very

American that being a part of the church is a human thing like signing a book, and not having that relationship be a sacramental event like being baptized or circumcised. Sometimes now that comes with either the assumption or the actual willingness to acknowledge that you are covenanting with the church. Covenanting is an old biblical word and concept for being willing to come into agreement or contract with the church body. Really that is it. We here at PUC make people take about an hour long class filled with very similar to the things we are talking about, and a few details about this particular church, people have to make some kind of identifiable donation. It could be a nickel, but it can't be something one just drops in the plate, the donation has to attach to your name, and "presto-chango," that person is one of about 160 thousand UU's enrolled in a church in the US. About 600 thousand people in the US identify as being a UU when asked what their religion is, but more than 2/3rds of them are not active members of a congregation. **Churches pay to the association**, a voluntary contribution essentially based on the wealth of the churches area and number of members. Sometimes people who don't have any idea how unobtrusive we are about our message getting out, and how passive we are about recruiting think we are a cult, but I tell them we are **not even close to being passionate enough about evangelizing** our message, or keeping members allied with us to be a cult. We are frankly too opposed to proselytizing to be a cult. This is captured in one of UU's most indicting jokes. Hey Rodney, do you know what you get when you cross a UU and a Jehovah's Witness? (No) Someone who comes knocking at your door, but is never sure exactly why? Funny and not funny all at once. The funny thing is for all our tolerance and feelings about how impolite it is to try to recruit others, we actually do have a message.

If that is appealing to you as it is to so many people. And that sense that that message is a smart, necessary, and healing one that more people need to hear, you might be a UU. **We think we should be bigger.** And, you probably wouldn't be a UU you were not a bit perplexed as to why we were not bigger. Why we are not bigger frustrates and perplexes us. If you have followed any of the religious surveys. We are about .02 percent of one percent of American's. More people think like us than ever. We are relevant, refreshing and many people who take their survey from belief net.com come out as UU's. The belief net survey has probably helped people who didn't and don't go to church know they were UU's. Whether it has led them into joining or participating in our churches is another matter. See, as true as it is that more and more people think like us, they ironically are also the exact **demographic of people who in particular don't go to church anymore**, but more broadly, don't join things anymore. Pew's famous decade spanning studies on religion have shown that far and away the most significant religious shift over the last couple decades is in the number of non-affiliated religious people. These "non-affiliated" people, or "**non's**" as the study dubs them have been on the rise for a long time, but since 1990 what was a decade long steady climb, has turned markedly upwards and begun to increase exponentially. Pew notes that this growing group of "non's" seem to be motivated in two ways. Half of this group are what Pew calls the "hard" "**none's**" who clearly define themselves as agnostics, secular humanists, or atheists. The other half, who classified respectively as "soft" non's retain a sense of personal faith or spirituality, but are content to be outside the bounds of church. So there is something very comical or frustrating, depending on if you're a chalice have full or have empty person about all this matters. The question is, will we find ways to help those independent minded people spiritually grow? Will we be, can we be flexible enough to meet the needs of people, who may think like us, but are not sure they want "church?" What can we and will we do to help, touch, those who want to make a difference, but are trending away from institutional loyalties, and affiliations in general. That remains to be seen. As the old saying goes, luck is where preparation meets opportunity.

Conclusion: In the end, for all the limitations that a commitment to tolerance, autonomy, and open-mindedness bring, there really is nobody quite like us. Our religion on both sides were part of the history that led to the division of church and state. Our religious ancestors fought to have science taught in the schools. Although many of our ancestors on the Unitarian side were of course making a lot of money from the cotton trade, overall we were pretty quick to join the abolitionists, and fight to end the slave trade. We were ahead of the curve in set precedence in regards to women's rights. Across the globe, and across the

history of religion, there really are few movements and institutions that have made such peaceful and significant transitions in their evolution that we have. As churches go, we were ahead of the curve on embracing the LGBTQ community and in embracing that who someone loves is a spiritual issue. An issue where the freedom of who you love needs to be respected. We have been the group that has always fought to draw more people into the circle of care and concern, and isn't that the only answer for us as a species. This institution and all our brothers and sisters around the country are ahead of the curve. To borrow what the UUA President Rev. Susan Fredrick Gray said about her own theology, expanded to speak for our movement...Love is foundational to our religious understanding. But it is not a love that is simply an emotion, a feeling, or an expression of the bonds of loyalty. In personal relationships, when we love someone, we wish for them the fullest unfolding and development of who they are. Love as a religious practice extends our compassion, solidarity, and care beyond the personal to seeking the liberation and wholeness of every person, and beyond that, to all things. It is this understanding of love that teaches that the work of justice is inseparable from a faith rooted in love. If the future goes as well as it possibly might, it will look like the world we love enough to fight to build. **Amen**