

Call to Worship

November 4, 2007

My sister was called nigger lover on a downtown Minneapolis street late one night as she and a black male friend walked to her car. As the offenders circled the block, she and her friend hurried to reach the car before they came around again.

“What does your husband do?” the man behind the counter asked me. “Attorney.” I replied stiffly, afraid to tell him the whole truth about who I am and whom I love. My son stood by and watched.

Are we prepared to make a difference?

Come let us worship together...

Readings

November 4, 2007

Skin Again

By bell hooks

The skin I'm in
is just a covering.
It cannot tell my story.

The skin I'm in
is just a covering.
If you want to know who I am
you have got to come inside
and open your heart way wide.

The skin I'm in looks good to me.
It will let you know one small way to trace my identity.

But then again
the skin I'm in will always be just a covering.
It cannot tell my story.
If you want to know who I am you have got to come
inside.
Be with me inside the me of me,
all made up
of stories present, past, future
some true to life and others all
fun and fantasy,
all the way I imagine me.

You can find out all about me-
coming close and letting go
of who you might think
I am
before you come inside and let me be real
and you become real to me.
All real then. In that place where
skin again is one small way to see me
but not real enough
to be all
the me of me or the you of you.

For we are all inside
made up of real history,
real dreams,
and the stuff of all we hope for
when we can be all real
together on the inside.

LOVE

Charles Olson

(down to my soul:

assume your nature as yourself
for the love of God

Stories
only
the possibility
of discrete
men (and women)

not even good enough

There is no intelligence
the equal of
the situation

There are only
two ways:
create the situation
(and this is love)
or avoid it.

Love. This also can be

Identity And Violence

Rob Eller-Isaacs
November 4, 2007
Unity Church

It's often said, quite sensibly that "you can't be all things to all people." You can, however, be one thing to all people and that one thing is your true self. The trouble is that once we've begun to strip away the layers of projection and self-doubt that cause us to deceive ourselves, and others, once we've begun the long, slow process of self-actualization it's very difficult to find companions who share that core commitment to live authentic, loving lives. Fortunately...

Love is the doctrine of this church,
The quest of truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
To dwell together in peace
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve human need,
To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine-
Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

A great many Unitarian Universalist congregations, including our own, use these words to re-affirm the basic purpose for which we gather. Historian and parish minister the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley writes: "Ultimately, the only freedom adequate to human dignity is the freedom to do what love asks of us. And the greatest blessings of life come to us and through us to the world when, with intimate and freely bonded companions, we are trying together to live with the integrity of faithful love." We are the loyal above all else, to the spirit of love. And "love," in the words of the great 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, "is the longing for the reunion of the separated." Now to turn to a theologian of a somewhat earlier era.

These words from the 16th Chapter of Matthew appear word for word as well in Luke and in Mark providing a strong indication that they are part of what we call, "the core material," the authentic words of Jesus. "*Now when Jesus had come into the district of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, "Who do they say that I am?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist and others Elijah: but still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. He said to them "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God."*"

The question of identity is basic to every human endeavor. You and I might argue with the narrow interpretation of Peter's answer to his Master's question. Religious liberals, even and especially those, whose lives are guided by the ministry of Jesus, do not believe he was the only child of the Living God. We hold instead that child ever born is son or daughter to the Living God. Now don't get snagged, what I'm asking us to consider today does not concern belief. Walt Whitman, the one that Ginsburg called the "courage-teacher" wrote:

*...Be not curious about God;
For I, who am curious about each, am not curious about God:
(no array of terms can say how much I am a peace about God and
about death)...*
*In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass;
I find letters from God dropt in the street-and every one is signed by
God's name..."*

I like to imagine that when Peter said, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God", Jesus beamed back at him, put his two hands on Peter's broad and sturdy shoulders and said,

“And so, my brother are you.” This radical recognition of the inherent Godliness or, if you prefer, “the inherent worth and dignity,” of every person is at the core of our theology and should be at the core of our practice as well. You’ll notice that we do not say we recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every white, heterosexual Unitarian Universalist or that we recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every liberal democrat or we recognize the inherent worth and dignity of everyone who agrees with us. We covenant together to the end that not some, but all souls shall grown into harmony with the Divine. We claim as first among our purposes the obligation to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. When one considers what our theology actually implies about how we ought to live our lives it becomes clear how powerfully our present faith reflects the life and ministry of Jesus and Hillel, of Mohammed and the Buddha, in fact of all the saints and sages who have called us to align our lives with love.

This is not a political sermon. I know full well that some of you are sick of listening to sermons about racism and homophobia. Some of you see prejudice and its systemic implications as parallel to other social action issues. Without denying the unending need to work to end oppression, disparity and environmental degradation I want to tell you that working to end categorical exclusion has a particular claim on the church. We can’t be all things to all people but we can be one thing to all people. We can be ourselves. We can be among those “relatively conscious” few who lean into the work of becoming the “beloved community.” We can choose to live the love that will not let us go.

This sermon is the third in a three part series intended to address both the importance and the limitations of identity-based politics. The series has been informed in part by a 2006 book Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny by Nobel Prize winning economist, Amartya Sen. In it, he makes a compelling case for cultivating a world-view that celebrates “diverse identities.” He asks us to refuse to be involved in what he calls “the miniaturization of human beings.” He argues that we miniaturize or diminish other people when we make assumptions about them based upon the notion that their behavior results from a determinant, singular identity. To use terms like “the clash of civilizations” or to engage in “the culture wars” is to oversimplify and so insult reality. It is wrong-headed and dangerous. Psychologically, this miniaturization functions much like prejudice. Its psychic engine is repression and projection. We bury or repress those aspects of ourselves with which we are least comfortable and then assign or project them onto those we deem to be most different from ourselves. It’s a familiar pattern with massive and tragic consequences. Allow me to share with you again this excerpt from the book.

Sen writes: “Our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when the manifold divisions in the world are unified into one allegedly dominant system of classification-in terms of religion, or community, or culture, or nation, or civilization. The uniquely portioned world is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse categories that shape the world in which we live. It goes, not only against the old-fashioned belief that “we human beings are all much the same: (which tends to be ridiculed these days-not entirely without reason-as much too soft-headed), but also against the less discussed but much more plausible understanding that we are *diversely different*. The hope of harmony in the contemporary world lies to a great extent in a clearer understanding of the pluralities of human identity, and in the appreciation that they cut across each other and work against a sharp separation along one single hardened line of impenetrable division... We have to see that we have many distinct affiliations and can interact with each other in a great many different ways. There is room for us to decide on our priorities.”

Sen is calling us to be mature enough to make reasoned choices about who we are, not to settle for simplistic caricatures but to come to know ourselves and others as complex and fully realized human beings.

I realize how difficult it can be to apply this kind of abstract argument to one’s own situation so let me offer a prime example grounded in my own experience. The practical result of what Sen would call “partitioning” is that we cut ourselves off from the very relationships which, hard as they may be to establish and maintain, contain the promise of genuine

transformation. Over and over again I see well-intentioned efforts for positive social change break up on the rocks of our refusal to move from abstract advocacy to genuine, lasting engagement not only with issues but also with real, live people. Our anti-racist efforts are a prime example. We begin by developing a common language we can use among ourselves. It's necessary. We need to know what we're talking about. Then we conduct an audit, examine our history, confess our large failure, celebrate our small victories and realize that ending racism will be the work of many generations. It is an important beginning. But there is something missing. What is almost always missing is the courage and tenacity it takes to make genuine, lasting connections across the forbidding partitions of race, class and yes, of sexual orientation and gender identity.

At our best we regularly risk reaching out across the comforts of our isolation. And we do so in ways visible enough to invite others in our orbit to take like risks as well. "There is no intelligence the equal of the situation. There are only two ways: create the situation (and this is love) or avoid it. This also can be love." The work has to begin with active opposition to the systemic barriers built of prejudice and privilege, which reinforce our isolation. But once those barriers begin to crumble, once we begin to lead more loving, more honest, more authentic lives we need to move beyond the old polarities, beyond identity-based politics and into genuine engagement.

People of Unity Church, I salute you as we stand together here at the threshold. I beg you to remember who we say we are. We are among those "relatively conscious few who must, like lovers, insist on and create the consciousness of others," those relative few who help to sustain the compassionate, person-to-person engagement, which is our only hope of harmony and progress. I pray we are among those who will break the chains of sectarian pride and shatter the barriers of privilege, even as we help each other cleave with clarity, tenacity and passion to the vision, the promise and the faith to which over and over again commit our very lives.

May it be so and amen.