

A theology for the Twenty -first Century

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UU Society of Sacramento, April 8, 2018

I have a very ambitious agenda this morning, so I have broken the sermon into two parts of 30 minutes each. Just kidding. There will be two parts – focusing on liberal theology – specifically UU theology. Part 1 is Where have we come from and part 2 is where do we go from here.

But before I give you some background on liberal theology I think its important to explain why we should care about theology at all? What is the role of theology in our everyday lives?

Whether it is clear to us or not, each of us has a functional theology for navigating the big religious questions. We hold views about the meaning of life, our purpose, our place in the universe, what happens after death. We have a framework for answering these big questions. Some of these ideas may come from your childhood religion, your current religion, our culture. For orthodox this frame is the All-knowing God who has a plan for each of us, and our purpose is to understand and live in harmony with that plan. Others may have a frame that everything has evolved from a great creative force that drives the universe and our purpose is engage with the creative force. Still others may hold to the theology that center on the humans as the actors in the world, and that it is human actions alone that can save us.

Whether conscious or not, these frames affect the choices we make about how we live our lives. Among us here we will find many theological frames.

Theology is the process of examining these frames – studying the underlying assumptions and how they influence our lives and the choices we make. Our theology must make sense to us, and it must inspire us to make a difference. Being intentional about our theology allows us to make choices that support our beliefs and our values. Theology can ground our actions.

This morning I want to examine liberal theology – the origins of Unitarian Universalism. The term liberal doesn't necessarily refer to politically liberal – though most of us are. Liberal is in the sense of changing in response to the world, liberal in the sense of being open to new ideas. We also refer to this as a living tradition – one that changes as new truths and meaning emerge.

The liberal theologies Unitarians and Universalists are both the product of Modern thinking. The terms modernity refers to the era that began roughly with Galileo use of the scientific method in the 15th century – and though still very with us, started its decline sometime in the late 20th century.

Modern thought is so prevalent in Western culture that it is like the water we are swimming in. We are like fish who isn't even aware that the water exists. And yet modern thinking and theology has had a profound affect on our world. In the first part of my sermon, I want to examine some of the major ideas of our modern thinking, because now in the 21st century for better or for worse, these ideas are limiting us. We must make them visible to understand how these ideas have served us and how they need to change.

The biggest idea of modern era is the use of reason as a guiding force in and in particular the use of reason to discern religious truth. This is what separated the Unitarians from the other Christians in the early 19th century. Drawing from ideas of modernity, Unitarians stated that we should decide for ourselves what is true based on our own reasoning, rather than an external authority. Many of you left the church of your youth because you wanted to make your own choices, rather than to be told what to believe. This importance of reason permeates much of our modern thinking.

Another big idea of the Modern era is the autonomy of the self. If you studied philosophy, you would remember Descartes famous statement – I think therefore I am. This was a modern philosophy - a radical shift from previous ways of thinking. Another way of saying this is subjectivity. In modernist thinking the self is at the center and everything is in relation to it. Our constitution and declaration of independence are based on the idea of the rights of the individual. In the early modern era with this was radical way of seeing the world.

So far most of the things that I am saying are probably giving you a “so what” response. What's the point? Because it is important to recognize that these were radical ideas at the time, it took hundreds of years for these ideas to become prevalent in western culture. These ideas are the lens through which we view the world, and as we shall see, this lens has distorted our world in particular ways.

Another hallmark of liberal religion is the idea that we will have progress forever and ever until the we all live in peace and harmony. This is the theology of the arc of the universe bending towards justice. It is the belief that human exploration and science will answer all our questions and cure all our ills. It is an inspiring and hopeful idea. Related to the idea of progress is universality – that there are certain ideas and truths that are universally true. That we are heading to a future where these ideas predominate.

So at this point, you may say, what's wrong with modern liberal theology? Sounds fine? It has served us for many centuries.

Since the later part of the 20th century we have seen challenges and collapse of some of these ideas as the world has grown smaller and more voices are brought into dialogue. The modernist ideas I have outlined reflect a white male Eurocentric way of thinking – many people and ideas are left out of this world view.

Here are some of the challenges that have followed from the modern way to viewing the world. The focus on the individual has led to fragmentation and loss of community. The focus on individual rights has diminished responsibility to community. The focus on reason has resulted in our disengagement from the body, from intuition, from forms of knowing that are not intellectual. It elevated science and human knowledge above nature and natural systems. The focus on progress has led to an emphasis on perfection, and a relentlessness towards productivity and output to the sacrifice of other needs. The idea that progress is inevitable may cause us to be passive and less engaged in working for change. The concept of a universal truth can be taken to mean that is it our truth which is the universal one – excluding other ideas and frames of belief.

These ideas of modern era, which inspired many great things also brought us racism, capitalism and consumerism.

Now in the 21st century the challenges to these ideas are disrupting our ways of seeing the world. Whose world view is the correct one? What does correct even mean anymore – whose version of correct? Who gets to say? What new world view is being born? Liberal religion has been at a cross roads during this time of transition. With the tenets of our faith being challenged, what happens to our theology of reason, progress and the supremacy of the individual? Where do we go from here? That is the subject of the second part of my sermon.

Reading: From The Heart of a Faith for the 21st Century
By David Bumbaugh

The heart of a faith for the 21st century, I am convinced, is suggested by the seventh principle in our statement of principles and purposes: respect for the interdependent web of which we are a part.

Hidden in this apparently uncomplicated, uncontroversial, innocuous statement is a radical theological position. The seventh principle calls us to reverence before the world, not some future world, but this miraculous world of our everyday experience. It challenges us to understand the world as relational rather than hierarchical. It bespeaks a world in which neither god nor humanity is at the center; in which the center is the void, the ever fecund matrix out of which being emerges. It bespeaks of a world in which, because all things impinge on all other things, everything matters. It challenges us to accept personal responsibility for the whole and for all the parts of the whole, since in an interactive network, every decision, every relationship has significance for every other decision and every other relationship. It calls us to trust the process, the creative, evolving, renewing, redeeming process which bring us into being, which sustains us in being, and which transforms our being. It offers a vision of a world in which the holy, the sacred is incarnated in every moment, in every aspect of being, a world in which God is always fully present, and in which God is always fully at risk.

Part 2

Where do we go from here?

This was the title of my sermon the Sunday after the election. I don't always remember all my sermons, but I sure remember that one. I especially remember how I felt when I gave it. Confused, despairing, angry, humiliated, lost. How could I have been so wrong about the outcome of the election. It felt the like the ground had shifted beneath me, and nothing was as I thought it was.

Those of you who were here may remember the dream from the night of the election that I shared in that sermon. In the dream my spouse Nancy and I were diving on a highway, we were lost, hungry, and running out of gas. We saw a sign for a women's center at the next exit. We felt some relief until we took the exit ramp which was narrow, in disrepair and lined with homeless people. When we got to the end of the road, the building was boarded up and the sign said – women's' center closed forever.

The dream captured my feeling perfectly. The last 17 months have been disorienting and discouraging. While it seemed initially that Trump was a throwback to a more conservative era, he is accelerating the shift away from modernity that started several decades earlier. He challenges all our norms and process and institutions of the modern era. He lies without remorse and challenges the idea of truth daily. He speaks without filter, and sometimes speaks painful truths that make us flinch.

The world has shifted radically since the election. Our institutions are under siege. Many of us perceive a lowering of standards, while others have a distrust of whether there should be standards at all. We have retreated into tribes of like-minded people to survive our disorientation and despair.

This is what I know. We are not going to go back to how it used to be. The norms of our modernist culture will not be restored. For worse or for better, the white male Eurocentric/US way of ordering the world is coming to an end no matter if Trump is impeached, no matter who is elected next. In this time of chaos, new voices are crying out, new ideas are being heard. The way it used to be did not work for a lot of people, including people of color, many women, the working class and the poor.

We live in challenging times – and I truly believe that it is going to get worse before it gets better. There will be continued chaos and collapse. But we must find the possibility inherent in the chaos. We must recognize that the old ways did not work for many people and that this

crisis has the seeds of opportunity for change. That is why it is critical for a time such as this that we have a robust and grounding theology.

Roger shared with you a reading from UU author David Bumbaugh that I have been saving for many years. It was written in 1994 but calls out to us now in its relevance for our times.

I know that like me, many of you are inspired by the seventh principle – the respect for the interdependent web of which we are all a part. Like Bumbaugh, I believe that this is the theology for our times. I'd like to rename our seventh principle as radical interdependence. Radical interdependence, everyone and everything connected. Everyone and everything interdependent. I call it radical to wake us up – to counter the cynicism and passivity of our world today. I call it radical to have a theology centered on relationships rather than on the self. Radical in that it calls us to take the risk of honoring connectedness, calls us to make the sacrifice of changing our self-centered perspective to one of relationship.

What would it mean to see the world as relational rather than hierarchical? We would not look to outside authorities for solutions but seek to connect with others to find our way. We would trust not only reason, but intuition. We would honor and learn from natural systems and be in relationship with the creative powers of the universe. It would mean less control and more connection.

Bumbaugh says that this theology of radical interdependence challenges us to “accept personal responsibility for the whole and for all the part of the whole.” What does that responsibility look like when the needs for the whole differ from our personal desires? As we move towards diversity and inclusion, are we able to put away our need to be right? Can we let go of our need to have things reflect our world view? Are we willing to make sacrifices for the greater good?

What does radical interconnectedness require of us? Patience, humility, respect for ourselves, respect for others, respect for ideas and people that that don't make sense to us. Curiosity, self-restraint, tolerance, love. Bumbaugh names some challenges of this theology. The first challenge is risk. Radical interdependence is about relationship, and relationship requires us to risk. The second challenge is to trust the process, “the creative, evolving, renewing, redeeming process which brings us into being, which sustains us in being, and which transforms our being.”

In the time that I have with you this morning, I am not going to give you a fully flushed version of the theology of radical interdependence. And if I tried I would just reinforce the idea that making progress is more important than relationship. We are just beginning this conversation.

For now I ask you just to sit with these ideas. Look around at this congregation – we have plenty of diversity right here, in lifestyles, theologies, goals. A diversity that can make even this coming together challenging. On Sunday mornings, some want mention of God, and prayer, others are uncomfortable. Some like to sing, others don't. Some want upbeat sermons, some want to be challenged. Many dimensions. Allow yourself just to sit here in the presence of this community, aware of this diversity.

Our mission – we come together to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world. “We come together” may be the most important words in our mission statement. Can we begin living our theology of radical interdependence by allowing all our various diversities here have a place, even if some are not a fit for you, even if ideas and expressions make you uncomfortable? Can we trust the process in this community enough to risk relationships? I propose that this community is a wonderful place to practice what interdependence truly means, with those here now, and for those who have yet to come through our doors.

The theology of radical interdependence is a journey, it is a process, not an outcome. As I make my way in this chaotic world of ours I find myself grounded and sustained by this idea of that we are all in this together. I don't find it easy to stay grounded in times such as these, and I am a white person with resources and authority. News of the world, daily tweets, world strife can be disabling. I strive to lift myself up from places of despair and stay in relationship, even when it is hard.

My nightmare from after the election still haunts me. I want to rewrite that nightmare and move on from the feelings of despair, isolation and hopelessness. Where there was a dead end, I see a new route of possibility. Rather than feeling isolated I know that I am not alone to solve all the problems, nor do I need to have all the answers. I see all of us there at the closed women's center on the dead end, removing the boards, opening the doors and rebuilding a place of welcome for all who come. Where I felt despair, I can see possibility. Where there was hopelessness I see the power of relationship. I see a new dream taking form. May the dream of radical interdependence guide me and us all in the days to come, whatever gifts and challenges may come our way.

Blessed be.