“Coming Out Day? How Did We Get Here From There?”

Rev. Dr. Jim Culver
Sermon at UUSP on October 11, 2009

To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our “free pulpit” tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

CALL TO WORSHIP
(In loving memory of my former colleague & mentor, Rev. Dr. Duncan Littlefair)

This is a day for us to live.
Let’s celebrate it and make a difference in the world.
Let’s be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And let us be especially grateful for the love which brings us together
Giving dignity, meaning, worth and joy to all of our days.

READINGS

Our readings this morning speak to the prejudice that a theistic understanding of the concept of God creates. These readings also shine a light on the gulf between the lives of the world’s major religious founders and the rules of behavior as adhered to by their followers, especially toward those considered “outsiders” in society.

Of our 4 readings, the first 3 are printed in our programs.
"If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads."

Hebrew Torah, Leviticus 20:13
"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

Christian Bible 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Of all the creatures in the world, will ye approach males, and leave those whom Allah has created for you to be your mates? Nay, ye are a people transgressing (all limits)! He said: "I do detest your doings:" "O my Lord! deliver me and my family from such things as they do!" So We delivered him and his family,- all Except an old woman who lingered behind. But the rest We destroyed utterly. We rained down on them a shower (of brimstone): and evil was the shower on those who were admonished (but heeded not)! Verily in this is a Sign: but most of them do not believe. And verily thy Lord is He, the Exalted in Might, Most Merciful."

Islamic Qur'an 26:165-175

Our 4th reading, actually a joke, speaks to the misinterpretation of religious writings due to either the passing of time, or a lack of context, or the desire to rewrite a teaching to align it with pre-existent rules, or, in the case of this joke, to simply hear a passage with different ears.

A northern snowbird returns to the South just prior to Christmas and walks into a bar in Georgia. The snowbird says to the bartender “I noticed your manger scene and I’m curious…why are the 3 wise men wearing fireman’s hats?” The southern bartender replied, “Well sir, it says there in the Bible that the 3 wise men came from a fire. (southern accent “far”)

(southern accent “far”).

SERMON

National Coming Out Day…how did we get here from there? How did we evolve to create a closet to come out of in the first place? What can we do to make a difference in erasing this and other prejudices?

For our guests here today, please allow me a moment to provide them with a framework in which to listen to this sermon on an emotionally charged subject. Here at UUSP, we don’t tell you what you must believe. We don't ask you to check your mind at the door. Instead we invite you to join in a conversation about the meaning of life, love, and service. My sermons are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thoughts.

Today, we participate with other churches across the country in a Standing on the Side of Love campaign. The primary purpose of this Campaign is to support people who are stigmatized in society as being "the other." This can take the form of supporting national events, such as today’s National Equality March and National Coming Out Day. This also can inspire us to become locally involved in those endeavors that root out prejudices in all their many insidious forms, both in small group contexts and as individuals.

With that said, let’s begin by exploring together how this “closet” was created in the first place. This, then, may lead to a deeper understanding both of the prejudice that is homophobia and of those who espouse it. Following that, let’s ask what we might do with this understanding in the context not only of a mass march or a well supported petition signing, but also of smaller social situations we might find ourselves in one day wherein we’re alone in conversation with someone with an opposing view. As Unitarian
Universalists, we recognize the importance of getting involved in groups to make a difference in the world. We also know that on a more personal level, we can’t coerce others to understand our values, we can only enter into a dialogue wherein we speak the truth in love, perhaps gaining some richer level of understanding, perhaps only agreeing to disagree.

So, National Coming Out Day…how did we get here from there? How did we evolve to create a closet in the first place? To lead us to that deeper understanding of prejudice in general and the closet specifically, we need to go back in human history a bit...about 1 or 2 million years ago.

At that time in history, an increased brain size in our apelike forebear named Homo Georgicus helped our mammilian rise to dominance. Those ancestors organized as a community and hunted for food in organized teams instead of as single predators. By about 800,000 years ago, the species Homo Ancecessor began to be skilled in making both tools and weapons, physical talents that also meant that these ancestors had the capacity to anticipate the use of these tools and weapons. Our forebears now had the ability to think abstractly, a skill that they used to plan for things that would happen in another time and at another place.

Sometime around 150,000 years ago, our species named Homo sapien grew from consciousness into SELF consciousness. These ancestors remembered their collective past and shared stories, sang songs, painted walls, and anticipated the future by planning tomorrow’s hunt and storing food for an upcoming winter. They also developed sounds for both objects and actions, creating language, which is the primary tool of abstract thought. Our species had uniquely evolved to become self consciousness, time aware
creatures with the ability to communicate.

During this time in history, our ancestors lived in fear of the awe inspiring natural forces that they could experience yet could not understand. Through excavated burial sites which suggest mortuary rituals, we can discern that they recognized that there was a time before they were alive and there would be a time after their existence ended. They understood that they were going to die, a moment many of us as parents witness as our children grow into self consciousness in early childhood. Our kid’s subsequent questions about death, their difficulty sleeping and need for nightlights are a part of the process of maturity. How must this self conscious revelation of death have impacted our ancestors who lacked an experienced parental figure from whom to seek answers?

In response to this realization that they must die, and with no one to address their question concerning their mortality as our kids today might, our human ancestor’s only choice was to create meaning. At this point in history, some 30,000 to 50,000 years ago, our ancestors explored the concept of God in a primitive, theistic way. Theism is not God, however you choose to define that term, but rather theism is our ancestral coping device created to address the potential meaninglessness of existence.

These early Homo sapiens wondered if nature’s wonders such as rushing rivers, ocean tides, wind, sun and moonlight were controlled by some power beyond their senses. To this power they gave the name “spirit”. Our ancestors witnessed thunder, lightening, wind, rain and snow. Was spirit up there above the clouds causing these events to occur? Could they meet this spirit, ask for its blessing and enjoy protection both from the natural forces they feared and from the anxiety of knowing that they will die?

Over generations, these spirits, thought to inhabit everything animal, vegetable
and mineral, became the stuff of our ancestor’s earliest religion, called animism, or the belief that something or somethings called spirit animate all that lives. The purpose of this first religion was to honor these spirits so that they would offer protection from a hostile environment and from the anxiety of death. God as a being apart from ourselves with super powers beyond those of mortals had been created.

Later, some 10,000 to 15,000 years ago when humans shifted from hunters and gatherers to agricultural activities, theism took on the form of mother earth and exhibited feminine characteristics, bringing life out of her womb. Later still, about 5,000 years ago, our ancestors organized these supernatural spirits in a structure similar to their own tribal communities as a family of lower gods or spirits ruled over by a supreme god. The ancient Greek period, evolving roughly around 3,000 years ago, created a followed this pattern under the sovereignty of Zeus. Still later, theism transitioned from a world of many spirits to one lone god who watched over and protected only the tribe that served that one particular deity as its chosen people. Each tribe, then, called upon their own God for protection from natural elements, blessing for their crops, and punishment of their enemies in time of war.

The theistic image of God as created by our ancestors was now a separate being, supernatural in power, living above this world and able to descend from the clouds to bless or to punish. As soon as this theistic concept of a god had evolved, our collective anxiety was put on prozac, since anxiety was the motivating reason for the human creation of a theistic god in the first place.

All that was needed to spin this human coping device into a religious system was to fill in a few details of the created deity. To accomplish this, our ancestors created
the correct way to worship so that this god was on their side. They also created laws governing the correct way to behave in order to gain their god’s approval. The epitome of this formulation of correct worship and correct behavior would be etched in the Hebrew tradition on two tablets of stone, known as the Ten Commandments.

Anxiety still existed, however. Not until religious systems could reassure their followers with the claim of possessing ultimate, eternal truth did anxiety truly dissolve. Only eternal truth could deter anxiety and offer security. The idea of one God Almighty, who watches over us, listens to us, walks with us and protects us, and whose form of worship and rules of behavior are ultimate and eternal, came into being. The frontrunners in this understanding of the divine nature were the Hebrews, who were the first tribe to believe that their God and King was the only God and King. This forced them to attribute their failures not to another stronger God worshipped by a tribe in a neighboring land, but to their own lack of proper behavior and correct worship.

To summarize our brief history thus far, ancient human anxiety regarding the potential meaninglessness of life was addressed by the creation and evolution of a theistic understanding of God. These ancient, humanly created systems still operate today in many fundamentalist versions of the world’s religions whose roots trace back to Abraham, including the mega church brand of Christianity as practiced in our own country today. With this historical understanding, it becomes apparent that humanly created religious systems have never been a search for truth, they were created for and continue to be a search for security.

For those of us in this congregation who are UU Christians, UU Muslims or UU Jews, I ask that we remember that there is a vast difference between the inspiring lives
And divine teachings of religious founders and the theistic layers of human interpretations, rules and regulations that have been heaped upon them. There is nothing unsupportive or disrespectful about tracing the evolution of human attempts to create a supernatural God. We are not God's creator. Unfortunately, the original themes of the world’s major religions as initiated by their founders have been so altered in an effort to align them with previously created theistic understandings of a God that I doubt that Abraham would recognize our faith communities today. As for the discovery and understanding of that which we might call God, we’ll never understand this mystery of God. Yet this realization doesn’t dissuade us from beginning our own individual spiritual journeys, as UU’s we understand that this truth enlarges our personal faiths and inspires us to seek our own answers as we work to make a difference in the world.

As we are gathered here today, the era of a theistic fundamentalist understanding of God is over. Here in Florida, we no longer believe that hurricanes or heat waves are a supernatural God’s attempt to punish sinners. We don’t interpret this season’s swine flu as punishment imposed by an angry Father. We don’t wonder what we did wrong in the Tampa Bay area to deserve both the Tampa Bay Rays baseball collapse and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers winless start to the NFL football season.

However, theism continues today in prayers, hymns and spoken messages in fundamentalist branches of all the world’s religions. Those worshippers who have not yet started their own unique spiritual journeys fear that if theism is dismissed, only meaninglessness remains. In 2009, those who attend theistic denominations in the belief that that style of worship is the only vehicle available to them to gain an understanding of God are no more capable of living with the anxiety and fear of nothingness after death.
than were our first and most primitive ancestors. That’s why fundamentalist believers become angry and violent when their theistic faith is challenged.

Theism, as a way of understanding God, has given birth to prejudicial religious anger. For millennia, the major world religions ignored or encouraged prejudices based on gender, race and sexual orientation. It was not until the early decades of the 20th century that women first courageously marched and demanded equality in the home and the voting booth. Decades after that, racism was revealed for the prejudice it was as segregation began to be addressed. Finally, toward the end of the 20th century, gays and lesbians began the agonizing process of abandoning their closets. The 20th century did not witness the end of sexism, racism or homophobia. Yet these prejudices began to die through the process of group protest and individual debate in the previous century. This is important to pay attention to, as many here today have grown weary of fighting their battles for social justice and have become impatiently frustrated that greater progress has not been made. Be strong and of good courage in your journey to make a difference in the world by remembering that no prejudice in history that has ever been publicly examined did not proceed to die.

Yet with all the progress made, why do fundamentalist religions today still fight against the full equality of women? Why do theistic based religious leaders still seek to take away from women the power to make decisions about their own bodies? Why is the most racially segregated hour in our country today Sunday at 11:00? Why is the loudest advocate against gay marriage still the church?

I believe that there is a relationship between anger and religions that continue to adhere to a theistic understanding of a humanly created tribal leader God. It is a
theistic interpretation of our world’s religions, twisted by an overlay of the preexistent creation by our ancestors regarding the demands of a supernatural God that is historically closed minded, prejudicial, angry and violent.

If instead of viewing sacred writings as living documents, focusing on the actual lives and beautiful lessons of religious founders, a theistic religion chooses instead to lay claim to the human created rules and regulations that came before the religious founders, then the specter of Eternal Truth will cast its shadow, and that religious system will spend more time living in the past and controlling their follower’s behaviors than in growing, loving, and making a difference in the world.

A prime example of this is the disgusting suppression of humanity known as slavery. During our country’s opening centuries, our forebears chose not to follow the example of Jesus as he lived and worked among those looked upon as “the others” in 1st century society. They chose instead to adhere to the rules of behavior created thousands of years before Jesus. This allowed the evil institution of slavery to be supported by the quotation of scriptures such as:

You may purchase male or female slaves from among the foreigners who live among you. You may also purchase the children of such resident foreigners, including those who have been born in your land. You may treat them as your property, passing them on to your children as a permanent inheritance.
Leviticus 25:44-46

In this country, slaves were beaten, executed, refused education and had their families separated on slave blocks. These acts of prejudice, violence and anger were the behaviors of devoutly religious theistic Christians. When slavery ended, it was replaced by the equally evil institution of segregation.

The connection between anger and a theistic view of God has been seen for
centuries in the anti-Semitism handed down from 1st Judea right on through to Pope Pius XII. This prejudice is still evident today in many theistically based Christian Fundamentalist denominations.

What is there about a theistic understanding of God that produces anger inside those who simply come to religion to be better people and unfortunately end up in a theistic based church, synagogue or mosque? Why did slavery, the Holocaust and the closet come into being? How did we get here from there? I believe one answer to this question, one piece of this puzzle, is that those who are “the others,” Jews, Blacks, Hispanics, Women, Gays and Lesbians, mentally and physically challenged persons have not been the only victims of theistic religious anger.

Perhaps a key to our gaining a deeper understanding of prejudice is to understand that theistic religions turn anger and guilt inward on their own believers in an attempt to control and contain their followers. In Fundamentalist churches, synagogues and mosques today are spoken and sung messages packed with self-negativity and self-rejection. “Lord have mercy on me a wretched sinner.” What message is being sent regarding the respect for human life when the constant theme of theistic worship is for mercy? “Lord, I have been washed in the blood of the lamb, shine down your mercy upon me though I am not worthy to gather up the crumbs under thy table.” What is the impact on human beings to be constantly begging for mercy? Can anger and guilt that has been turned inward ever be reflective of the spirit of life? Are we human beings ever inspired to make a difference in the world by being told how hopeless, wretched and sinful we are? Does that ever make us more loving? Does that ever make us more accepting of those different from ourselves? Is one of the keys to a deeper understanding
of prejudice the recognition that this constant theistic message of guilt and shame produces anger that is then projected onto someone else? Shamed people will shame. Judged people will judge. Punished people will punish.

This antiquated, humanly created, theistic understanding of God that has influenced all of our world’s religions has created a climate of religious anger. It has justified prejudice, preached self hatred, emotionally abused and threatened punishment throughout all eternity. In doing so, it has fueled the violence toward the stigmatized in society, aided the institution of slavery and participated in the creation of closets from which human beings suffer to escape. Instead of allowing individual spiritual journeys in a joyful self discovery of what God or faith or a religious life means to each, theism has given our society a primitive, tribal Father God who caused the death of his only child, the damnation of five Billion disbelievers, the subordination of women, the oppression of gays and lesbians and the justification of slavery.

Fundamentalism, with its absolute truth claims, is unacceptable. It is the antithesis of a pluralism which is vital if we are to survive together on this ever shrinking planet. As we shared with our kids earlier in today’s service, we’re like crayons. Our pluralism reveals that we have different names and enjoy a diversity of colors, yet we all need to live in the same box.

So, what can we do to make a difference in addressing these prejudices?

As a community, we can sign an equality petition that awaits us in Gilmour Hall. In this larger context, we join a collective effort standing on the side of love, justice and equality. As individuals, we can share the vision of this special place, perhaps gaining some richer level of understanding on both sides of a potential discussion, perhaps only
agreeing to disagree, yet at the least suggesting that there are other options besides clinging to an antiquated understanding of God or facing a meaningless death. In this more personal context, we might help someone move beyond theism, separating their theistic interpretation of God out of the life and teachings of their chosen religion’s founder as a first step on their own unique spiritual journeys. In doing this, we will begin to address these dying religious systems that inspire hatred in the name of their one almighty God and the necessity of an Eternal Truth. This at least might ease the tension of religious anger by addressing the negative self image that theism has nurtured.

We can share that while not all UU’s believe in life after death, we all can agree that there is life before death. What we say and do matters. We share our gifts and talents to make a difference in the world. For many, meaning is derived from living a life that is worth dying for. We can further share that while not all UU’s believe in life after death, we understand that there is love after death. The love we share during our lifetimes will continue long after we’re gone.

We can share that we are not inherently sinful, doomed to a hell of punishment unless some higher authority gives us detailed answers to which we must submit and never question. We are not weak and childlike, incapable of rising up to meet the many challenges life brings. We have inherent dignity and worth, qualities that inspire us to speak the truth in love and to assist the cause of justice. This helps us nurture and develop the potential that life has given us. Not to give us the answers to life’s questions, but to give us a loving community in which to follow our own conscience, help us come into the integrity of our own answers. Not to protect us from the realities of suffering, but to move us to engage social problems and do our best to make a difference in the world.
Religion, as Unitarian Universalism defines that term, gives us a way to make our lives, our values and our beliefs harmonize with one another, within the context of a loving community. Love binds us to one another. The true value of being a religion or looking at theological ideas is to see how they transform our character and guide our behaviors. That’s what faith is all about. Not theistic humanly created rules, but faith is what transforms our character and guides our behaviors.

Finally, we can share our faith with others in an effort to dispel prejudices and ease anxieties in the same spirit of love and for the same reasons we do all that we do…to bring Dignity, Meaning, Worth and Joy to all our days.

Waves of love.