

THE CHURCH AS A CIVIC INSTITUTION

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CALL TO WORSHIP

Good morning!
Come into this circle of love and justice.
Come into this community of mercy, holiness, and health.
Come, and you shall know peace and joy.
Come now, and let us worship together.

Just a few days before the beginning of the war on Iraq, I found myself talking with my brother Jim, who lives in a suburb of Chicago. I was talking about a completely unrelated matter, but then I found myself tempted to talk about the coming war. Now you and I know that there are certain topics-specifically, politics and religion-that no one should talk about to certain relatives. I *know* that. But I couldn't help myself. So I asked him, "How do you feel about the fact that we might attack Iraq?"

"Well, I guess I don't know much about it," my brother said.

Let me just pause and tell you a little about my brother. He is a college graduate, a husband, and the father of 11-year-old twins, adopted from Peru. He is retired from many years service with the Social Security Administration. He and his wife are born-again Christians. I love my brother. I know I shouldn't bring up these political issues-but when he said, "I guess I don't know much about it," I started to do a slow burn. Very un-peacelike. Now it would be one thing for him to say, "I've studied the issues, and I believe that we are right in attacking Iraq, and here are my reasons." I can respect that. But I couldn't handle, "I don't know much about it."

I started out by saying, "Now let me get this straight. You are a citizen. Your country is about to attack a country that has not attacked us, and you don't know anything about it?" In what I would have to describe as a-well, a somewhat raised voice-I moved decisively to fill him in on what he didn't know, thereby falling once again into my unfortunate habit of speaking *ex cathedra*, falling once again into the sin of self-righteousness. Will I ever, ever learn?

My brother's church does not do politics-but you know, truthfully, most churches don't. Most parishioners like it that way. Church should be a place where we are comforted and restored, they say-a haven from the ills of the world.

But then what can we make of these words from the book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of God has sent us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to comfort all who mourn." To bring good news to the oppressed. Not just to say to an oppressed person, "I'm sorry you're hungry, here 5 a bowl of soup." Yes, that would be a start, just to notice that somebody is hungry. But that's not the good news. The good news is that you will no longer be oppressed. You will be able to live in a society in which no one is hungry. The writer in Isaiah is not talking about charity here, the writer is talking about justice.

But as I said, churches are reluctant to go there, even liberal churches. Even many Unitarian Universalist churches. Voices begin to caution the minister, "When you start getting political, you make some people uncomfortable. You'll split the church. It will hurt us financially-some people will stop giving." Yes, we risk all this when we engage in justice work. Liberal churches discovered that in spades during the era of the Vietnam War. There are contradictions in church life which must be reconciled. Yes, there must be a pastoral presence-people do come to church to be comforted-to be comforted in that we are not alone in our personal pain, but also we are not alone in our pain as citizens. And the institution must survive, and not just survive, but be strong, else there be no place of witness. On the other hand, if the church is not acting as a moral witness, then it might as well fold its tents and go away. It will have lost its reason for being. It will have lost its soul.

At the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking to the National Conference on Religion and Race, said that the church had been "content to mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities," remaining "silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows." If the church continued this way, King said, it would become "little more than an irrelevant social club."

Last year, I was asked by some of my colleagues in the ministry to present a paper at a study group, and I took that opportunity to complete a project I had been working on. I wanted to find out what kind of response liberal Protestant churches made in times of great moral challenge in our country's history. I chose three periods of history to look at: abolition, the Civil Rights era, and the Vietnam War. The result was a 25-page paper, with the same title as this sermon. I want to share with you, in a very abbreviated form, what I learned.

In the 19th century, we find churches and society at large beset with the dispute over slavery. Church leaders worried about conflict splitting their congregations, and in particular Southern ministers felt the pressure to give in to the demands of their white parishioners, many of whom owned slaves. In fact, many of the ministers themselves owned slaves. During the first half of the century, the approach was a policy of "noninterference in civil matters." In other words, we just won't look at the issue-we'll be neutral. Neutral, of course, is never neutral-neutral is on the side of power. In this manner, leaders thought to preserve order-perhaps forgetting that civil order is not always the realm of the Holy Spirit. Church people showed an ironic display of "Christian charity" which called for them to take good care of their slaves, who were thought unable to care for themselves. Some writers even went so far as to suggest that under slavery, blacks would not have to face the problem of unemployment.

It would be a mistake, though, to believe that churches in the North were all hotbeds of abolition-just the opposite. After all, New England was home to many of the cotton mills that profited from Southern agriculture. Most Unitarian churches, almost all of which were in the North, were what we call "gradualists"-they said, in other words, that we need to be patient and tolerant: yes, slavery was a bad thing, but in time it will fade out. Let's don't cause trouble. They mostly did not support the radicalism of William Lloyd Garrison, or the well-known abolitionist Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister who worked for the underground railroad and kept a loaded pistol in his study.

William Ellery Channing, perhaps our foremost minister of the 19th century, served a congregation which included powerful men from the garment industry. Channing was forbidden by his board to do a memorial service for an abolitionist named Charles Follen. After that, he lost heart, and felt reluctant to preach at all, and his ministry just faded out.

Money talks then, as now. And money speaks in a powerful voice. And what does it say? Well, you've heard it speak. It says, "No more taxes. I pay enough in taxes." Or it says, "Increase minimum wage? No way - it will hurt business. And in a liberal church, it too often sounds like this: gays and lesbians should be treated just like everybody else. Blacks? If a black is qualified for a job, he should get the job. Fair is fair, justice is good-as long as it doesn't interfere with my economic life. As long as it doesn't interfere with my privilege and power.

Let's go now to the Civil Rights movement. The movement was hardly on the radar screen until the televised violence of "Bull" Connor in Birmingham in 1963. Even after this time, the church activists were mainly clergy who did not lead churches-they were people like William Sloan Coffin, the chaplain at Yale, and William Stringfellow, an Episcopalian lay theologian, people who did not have to answer to congregants. Very few priests, ministers, and rabbis at the local parish level were willing to face hostile congregations and risk social ostracism, loss of their pulpits, or even physical violence. In areas where the black population was relatively small, some congregations came to see the moral issue. But when whites were affected personally, the story was different. Northern clergy were harassed for challenging residential segregations. The Catholic Archdiocese convinced the Southern Christian Leadership Conference not to take their demonstrations into white suburbs. Now these were the same liberal Northerners who decried gradualism in the South. Religious leaders in the South who courageously witnessed to the evils of racism were vilified by the church and unchurched alike. Perhaps these ministers are the true heroes among the white clergy.

Churches have basically supported the status quo in the arena of racial justice. Studies have shown that people affiliated with churches are no less racist than those who are not. Clergy tend to be more committed to justice issues than their flock-for example, in 1965, 2/3 of Protestant clergy said they approved of the Civil Rights movement, whereas only 1/3 of the Protestant population approved. It is telling that Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed just as he was beginning to emphasize economic issues. At the time of his death, King was organizing sanitation workers in Memphis. For King, it was not the Klan or the citizens' councils that were the greatest stumbling block, but the moderates who were more devoted to order than to justice. "We will have to repent," said King, "not for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people."

Historically, Unitarian Universalists have a very mixed record in regard to race relations. We try, but we often misunderstand, and we often fall short of our ideals. We did have a noble moment that I

want to share with you, though. When Martin Luther King, Jr., called on clergy all over the nation to join him for the march in Selma, the national board of the UUA happened to be meeting in Boston. Dana Greeley, the President of the Association, urged adjournment, and all the Board members traveled to Selma to participate. So did two-thirds of our ministers, nationwide, and many of our lay people. Several of our people were beaten, and James Reeb, one of our ministers, was killed.

Even though racism was difficult for churches and their leaders, working against discrimination was an easier "sell" to churches than protesting the war in Vietnam. The issues surrounding the Vietnam War were not so clear, and most Americans viewed the war as a political, rather than a moral issue. As if you could divide the two. At the beginning, those who protested found their patriotism questioned; draft evaders were seen as traitors. Some activists understood that the war was racist. It was sapping funds from programs for the poor; black males were bearing the burden of the fighting, while privileged white males got deferments-not to mention the mounting casualties of the Vietnamese, people of color. Does any of this sound familiar?

To give our Association credit, the UUA was one of the first church groups to pass a resolution opposing the war-that came in 1964, at our General Assembly in San Francisco. But again, as with the Civil Rights movement, the protest against the war in Vietnam showed clergy to be far more willing to question our policy than their congregants. The next years saw many of our churches split by differences over the war. One church was burned down for providing draft counseling to war resisters. Several dozen ministers were forced out of their pulpits or seriously wounded in their ministries because of their controversial stands. But despite our lack of unity, the UU movement played a vital role in shutting down the war. The printing of the Pentagon Papers by our own Beacon Press in 1971 helped. The opposition grew to include nearly all Unitarian Universalists. Sometimes we wonder, as in recent days, if protest does any good. We only need to look back at Vietnam. Nixon has written in his memoirs that he did not drop the hydrogen bomb on the Vietnamese because, as he put it, there were too many people in the streets.

We are a church community. We are people of faith. At the same time, we are also citizens, and as such we need to be a moral voice in our community. Our church has a long history of civic involvement, starting at the time of our founding, in 1866. Our first minister, Thomas Lamb Bliot, along with the members of this church, either founded or co-founded nearly every civic institution in the city of Portland-the library, the museum, the Humane Society, the Boys and Girls Club, Reed College. Since then we have continued to be known as a church that cares about this city and that raises ethical and moral questions when they need to be raised.

As I said, there is no being neutral for a church. South African Bishop Desmond Tutu said it this way: "When the elephant has his foot on the tail of the mouse, and you say you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." And the elephant these days has his foot on the tail of the mouse-the elephant has his foot on the single mom who is working but can't earn enough to both pay the rent and feed her children; the elephant has his foot on the Muslim fellow, because of his name and color and place of origin; the elephant has his foot on the mentally ill man who has lost coverage for his medication; the elephant has his foot on children whose school days have been cut and cut and cut. There is no neutral here. There is only witnessing or failure to witness. There is only responsible citizenship or apathy.

One of our problems of the liberal church, one of the things that keeps us from being more of a moral force, is our very success, the comfort level we have achieved. Unitarian Universalist theologian

James Luther Adams warns us about the religion of comfortable people: "The religion of the successful turns out... to be a sham spirituality, a cultivated blindness, for it tends to reduce itself to personal kindness and philanthropy, costing little. Thus it betrays the world with a kiss."

I want to share with you a wonderful poem called "Living the Parable," by a man named Neal Bowers, a poem that speaks to the tendency of the comfortable to separate ourselves from those in need, to relate to them by being helpers, but never as equals, never thinking of ourselves as one with them- which would call for an entirely different relationship.

Wanting to be helpful, we all
see ourselves as the Samaritan
rather than the priest or his assistant,
and never as the bruised man in the ditch,
stripped and penniless, taken
to a room smelling of figs and tallow,
where he turns painfully in bed,
tonguing his chipped tooth,
touching his swollen eye.

After all, who would imagine himself
mugged somewhere between Jerusalem and Jericho
when he could ride in like some minor deity
on a donkey packed with oil and wine,
his fat purse tucked away, credit unlimited?

Better to be the one without cracked ribs,
safe on the hard-packed road,
pausing long enough to help
some creature with no luck-
a dog, a sheep, a beaten man-
not one of us.

Herein lies the lesson for a religious people motivated by noble sentiments, but tethered to the pole of privilege, wanting the transformation of self and of church, but wanting more, approval and comfort and security, not as God grants these, but as the world grants them. From our self-satisfaction comes alienation. In our fierce sense of individualism, we forfeit salvation, for we do not as yet understand that we cannot be saved alone.

We are caught at a particular moment, in a particular place, in history. This we cannot escape. It's grown-up time. Let us imagine the world the way we wish it to be; let us imagine lives that are free and joyful. Let us never give up this dreaming. And let us join hands-not just with our own kind-but with this one and that one and the other one, and begin to create this beloved community the only way we can-together. So be it. Amen.

PRAYER

Spirit of Life, help us to understand not just in our heads, but deep in our flesh, that we are one. Give us the courage to speak up, even when it's difficult and unpopular. Give us always, too, a vision of what we would become, and the wisdom and tenacity to travel the long road. Amen.

BENEDICTION

As you go from this place, may you be greatly blessed, and may you bless all you come upon. Go in love, and go in peace.