

“Reasons for Religion”

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October 10, 2004

On a cold rainy afternoon in 1952, in southeast Alabama, two of my older brothers and I were doing a good thing for our family, gathering firewood. As children of a Sharecropper, we lived in a rundown log house where a fire in the fireplace was our only heat. So cutting and carrying firewood was a regular chore. However, on this particular day, something was different. For reasons I don't recall, we had not yet gathered any firewood, and there was an early freezing rain. Because I was only four years old and not big enough to carry much wood, my brothers insisted that I bring my little red wagon down into the woods, so I could pull my share of wood home. As it turned out, they decided that we could get more wood by me taking a few pieces in my arms and they would load my wagon as full as they could and the two of them would pull it. They loaded my wagon so full that when we tried to cross a boggy area, my wagon sank deep into the mud. No amount of effort could get the wagon out; so in the freezing rain, we gathered what wood we could in our arms and walked home. The next day when I went back to get my wagon, it had sunk even deeper into the bog and I couldn't get it out. By the following day, it had sunk totally beneath the bog.

Today's lesson is about your little red wagon and about how many logs you want to put into it. On one level, this sermon is addressed to you as an individual. On another level, this sermon is about our collective little red wagon and about how heavy you want to load it.

What has motivated me to preach this sermon at this particular time is that we, as a congregation, will soon be entering a discernment process to identify and name who we are, what we want to be and become, and what we want to be doing. The purpose of this sermon is to remind us of the general purpose of religion, to offer a broad historical, theological perspective for that discernment process, and to caution us against loading our wagons too full.

The title of this lesson is, “Reasons for Religion.” Let’s begin by looking at the most basic general purpose of religion. The term, “religion” comes from the Latin word, “religio.” “Re” indicates “again;” and “ligio,” from which we get the word ligament, means to bind or bond. In other words, religion is a process of healing or knitting back together what has been broken, reconciling what has become alienated, bringing back into oneness what is fragmented, restoring harmony to what is in turmoil.

Religion is a living transformative process alive in every area of life. This process of restoring and maintaining cosmic integrity is inherent in nature, in the nature of existence, in the very nature of God. Whether we say, “God is One,” or affirm, “the interconnected web of all existence,” the intent is the same: to assert that ultimately there is only one life.

Perhaps the most common human experience is that of feeling separate, but our deepest religious impulse is to know oneness. This yearning for harmony is inherent in life itself. *The heart of the universe* - alive in the forests and oceans, *the heart of the universe* - alive in each of us, *the heart of the universe* - alive in God, *the heart of the universe* **pulses with the intent of oneness.**

Therefore, religion, as a living transforming process, is alive in the forest and oceans, working for the healing of the earth. Religion, as a living transforming process, is alive in the whole human family, working for the healing and reconciliation of our global village. Religion, as a living transforming process, is alive in each of us, working to bring us into conscious awareness of our indivisible union with this one indivisible life.

At this point, I want to shift our focus and invite you to look at your life and religion from a really long view. Imagine that this sanctuary represents all existence, including all galaxies. Remember, there is only one life. All that is, is ultimately one. Now imagine that one single cell in your body represents our entire solar system, and that within this one cell is our sun and all its planets. Whatever you are, and whatever religion is, has its meaning within this enormity.

And what about time? What is the significance of our lives in relation to time? Estimates are that the universe is about fifteen billion years old; that the earth is about four and a half billion years old; and that humans have been on earth about five million years. So what about you and me? Whatever we are, and whatever religion is, we have our meaning within the vastness of time.

The point of this long view reminder is not to take away the joy of knowing that we are conscious participants in this one eternal life, but to give us perspective about our time and place in this sacred experience. Whatever we be, and whatever we do, let us be and do with a sense of gratitude, reverence, and awe for the gift of conscious life.

As we prepare for our congregational discernment process to name who we are and what we want to be and do, I would encourage us to remember that all life has an inward dimension and an outward dimension. Whether we consider an apple tree, a river, a galaxy, or a person, all life has a silent, invisible, inward process and an outward manifestation of that process. As individuals, and as a religious community, we need to keep a healthy balance between our inward process and our outward manifestation of that process. To exaggerate or eliminate either, for prolonged periods, is not healthy.

What needs balance is our whole life, not just one small part that has traditionally been called religious. If we see only church related activity as sacred – only church stuff as religious – only church stuff as needing balance - then two bad things happen. First, life never feels balanced, because it isn't. And second, we keep on trying to balance the wrong stuff. We keep on trying to balance the part rather than the whole.

But if we see all of life as sacred – all of life as a living transformative process - then our balancing of the inward and outward will seem natural, and it will make sense because our whole life will be more balanced.

Religion is a living transformative process in the universe that lures all that is to unity, oneness, harmony. The process of religion offers us the perspective of eternity and comes to us in the polarities of inward process and outward manifestation.

As we prepare for our congregational discernment process, I would encourage us to remember that there is a diversity of needs, gifts, limitations, and interests in our congregation; and that all of these are valuable. We also need to remember that our needs, gifts, limits, and interests change. For example, at this point in your life, you may be helping to build this congregation into a strong healthy religious community. But a few years ago, you might have needed to be on the sidelines

just quietly doing what you could, but having little time for anything but family and work. However, a few years from now, you might be a social activist, immersed in political leadership or you could be a spiritual mystic, immersed in study, prayer, and meditation. As we consider our future, I hope we remember that at different times, we have different needs, different gifts, different limits, and different interests. In other words, let's intentionally include all.

At this point, I want to briefly mention some significant functions of religion. First, religion helps us develop our beliefs. At one level, beliefs are important; and at another level, beliefs are very secondary. Each of us has a small collection of beliefs that are very important because these constitute the inner core, the hard core of our life commitments. This hard core of beliefs is relatively stable. On the other hand, each of us has a large collection of beliefs that are much more fluid and likely to change.

At different times in our lives, sorting out what we believe carries different degrees of importance. There may be times when clarifying what you believe is very important to you, and during those periods, you should do that work very intentionally. But there may be times when you lay aside that work, confident that your religious journey is now leading you to a different focus.

Related to beliefs are daily thoughts. The Buddha said, "We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make the world." One function of religion is that of refining our beliefs and daily thoughts.

Religion also provides guidance for moral and ethical behavior. The Ten Commandments, the Hebrew prophets, the Code of Hammurabi, the Golden Rule, even our Unitarian Universalist Principles – all of these provide guidance about behavior. But religious guidance related to moral and ethical behavior is often more subtle than what is written on the page. At its worst, religion is distorted and misused by religious and political leaders to justify war, conquest, slavery, discrimination, and anything else. At its best, religion simply points us to the source of life and counsels us to stay centered in the source until we find guidance.

Another function of religion is creating and maintaining religious community. The religious community, at its best, is a laboratory for being and becoming and for being engaged by the living transformative process.

Another major function of religion is that of awakening consciousness of the divine. In fact, I consider this to be the heart of religion, worship, and all spiritual practice. To the degree that I am conscious of the divine in me, I treat myself better, and I am less fearful. To the degree that I am conscious of the divine in you, I treat you better, and I am less angry. To the degree that I am conscious of the divine in nature, I treat nature better, and I am less destructive to all beings and to the earth. To the degree that I am aware that the divine is in all and that all is in the divine, my experience of indivisible union with the one indivisible life is enhanced, and I am more *at one-ment*.

At this point, I want to address two issues that may come up in our congregational discernment process when we name who we are, what we want to be doing.

In this process, the notion may arise that our congregation needs to do something or become something that would set us apart from other religious communities, something that would distinguish us from all the others. If that urge should arise, I would encourage us to remember our historic and contemporary role as an alternative religion. I spoke of this just a few weeks ago.

Ours is an authentic history and proud tradition of heresy. The nature of our heresy has always demanded, and still demands, that we be radically inclusive. Those who are not welcomed in, or not comfortable with, more traditional religious communities always have a home here. The nature of our heresy has always demanded, and still demands, that we be a haven of religious freedom. For us, ultimate religious authority is not external, but internal. It is vested in reason and conscience and limited only by the commitment to do no harm. I know of no other religious community so radically committed to religious freedom. Our historic and contemporary difference is the reason for our existence. We have no need to create a unique role or a distinguishing characteristic, only to live out our heritage of radical inclusion and religious freedom.

A second issue that may arise in our discernment process is the desire to be more engaged in social action in the larger community. Under some conditions, this can be a very good, creative, and liberating ministry. Under other conditions, this can be a very guilt driven, angry, and fragmenting chore. I would encourage you to consider the following.

First, examine your life situation and your motivation. The traditional way of saying this is to ask, “Do you feel called to the project being considered?” If you aren’t sure what being called means, the following questions and your answers will give you a good hint as to whether or not you are called to a particular project or ministry.

1. Do you personally have the time and energy to be actively engaged in this project? Or is this just a really good idea that you think the church, the minister, or someone should do?
2. Another question to ask in discerning whether or not you are called to do something is whether or not your gifts and abilities match those needed by the project? The flip side of this question is whether or not your particular set of limitations, at this particular time in your life, would allow you to be fully engaged with this project?
3. Another question in helping you to sort out whether or not you are called to do something is to ask if the doing of this thing, even though it might be difficult, would create within you a sense of joy and creative excitement?
4. You will also want to ask about the cost of doing this thing. What will you need to give up in order to do this, and are you willing to make that sacrifice?
5. Above all else, you will want to ask three hard questions about your motives. First, you will want to ask, “Would I be doing this out of guilt or fear?” If you answer, “yes,” don’t do it. Next, you absolutely must ask if the doing of this thing would be a diversion from silence. John Irving said, “We often will do anything to prevent that nothing is on our minds.” (Terry Landon, gave me that quote.) If the doing of this thing is a diversion from silence, don’t do it. First, learn to be silent. The final hard question about motivation is this: Would you be undertaking this project because it evokes your compassion or because you think something is wrong with the world and you need to fix it?

So here’s how you can get a good idea about whether you are called to be engaged in a new project. If you personally have the time and energy to be actively engaged with a new project, if your abilities and limitations are compatible with the project, if the doing of this thing, though it

might be difficult, would create within you a sense of joy and creative excitement, if you are willing to make the sacrifices demanded by this project, if you are not doing this out of guilt or fear, if you are not doing this as a diversion from silence, and if you are doing this because it evokes your compassion, you probably are called to do this thing.

Let me go back and say a brief word about not taking on a good task because you think something is wrong with the world. The fact is, many people believe there is something wrong with the world. That something is wrong with the world is a basic assumption in the Jewish and Christian religions. Because most of us grew up in one of those religions, most of us never even realize that this was a theological assumption. We just bought into the assumption that, “yes, there is something wrong with the world.” In that view of the world, suffering, injustice, sickness, and death are all considered solid evidence that something is very wrong with the world; there is the hope that one day all of these will be totally done away with. But not all religions hold this view. The Chinese, especially the Taoist, teach that life has polarity. These polarities are called yin and yang. The concept, in its most basic form, is that there would be no life, as we know it, without polarity, that yin and yang depend on each other, that neither could exist without the other, and that each evokes the other. For example, there would be no electricity without both the positive and negative charge. There could be no up without down, no hot without cold, no tall without short, no pleasure without pain, and no good without evil. In this view of the world, there is recognition that good and evil are absolutely dependent on one another. For example, without evil, we would not be able to recognize good; we would not be able to do good, we would not be able to be good. Without evil, good would not be a possibility. Good exist only as long as its polarity, evil. Evil is the evoker of good and good is the evoker of evil. The Taoist say, “A good man is a bad man’s teacher; and a bad man is a good man’s opportunity.” The point is, we can choose compassion as our motivation for good. We don’t have to be motivated by anger or carry the assumption that there’s something wrong with the world that we have to fix. Be careful not only about how heavy you load your wagon, be mindful about why you are loading it.

Let me remind us all that every religious community has two general kinds of ministry, the Deployed Ministry and the Dispersed Ministry. The Deployed Ministry is the things we do in small group that are sponsored by the congregation. Examples of Deployed Ministry would be the choir, the religious education volunteers, the social concerns committee, the groups that

volunteer at My Brother's Table, the DALs, the Women's Group, the Membership Committee, the Board. All the things we do in small groups under the auspices of the congregation is our Deployed Ministry.

Unfortunately, many people believe Deployed Ministry to be the only authentic lay ministry of the congregation. In fact, some believe that the only real ministry is that which is done by the minister. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Lay Ministry and Ordained Ministry have different functions, but both are equally authentic and equally valuable. The same is true for Deployed and Dispersed Ministry. What we do together in small groups is authentic and valuable ministry, but so is what we do in our Dispersed Ministry.

Dispersed Ministry is the good we do in our everyday lives. Dispersed Ministry will always be the largest and most influential ministry of any religious community. Dispersed Ministry is the living out of our highest aspirations and deepest commitments in everyday life. Dispersed Ministry is the ministry of raising your children. Dispersed Ministry is the ministry of taking care of an elderly parent. Dispersed Ministry is the ministry of being with someone you love who is sick, injured, or dying. Dispersed Ministry is the ministry of doing an honest day's work and serving those that your job calls you to serve. Dispersed Ministry is the ministry of volunteering at the hospital, or with hospice, or with Habitat, or with any other helping organization. Dispersed Ministry is the ministry of caring for animals, especially those lost and sick. Dispersed Ministry is the ministry of using your artistic abilities, or your gardening abilities, or your carpentry abilities to help others and to make the world more beautiful.

One of the things that pains me so much is seeing so many of you not counting all the good that you do in your everyday lives. Either you don't understand that what you are doing is real ministry; or for reasons I don't understand, you don't count your Dispersed Ministry as authentic ministry. And because you don't count what you are doing in your everyday life as ministry, you load yourself up with guilt for not doing enough.

How heavy you load your wagon is up to you, but I am here to tell you that neither God nor life expects you to load your wagon so full that you can't pull it home.

In the late 1940's and 1950's, much of Christianity looked back on World War I and World War II and asked, "Where was the Church during these massive social disasters of the 20th. Century?" Out of either guilt or responsibility, Christianity developed what became known as the Social Gospel. It was an authentic attempt to be relevant to the needs of society. This was probably what American and European Christianity needed to do in that particular time and circumstance. I have no problem with what they did then.

However, we do not live in the 1950's and our world has changed greatly since then. The pace of life, the technology, the amount of information we are confronted with every day - not only our emails, but knowing so much of what is going on in the whole world, every day. No other generation has ever been confronted, every day, with so much information. We are confronted, every day, with news of rape, murder, robbery, abuse, poverty, corruption, war, even beheadings. No other generation has ever had to emotionally deal, every day, with the stress of the whole world. On top of that we have growing expectations by employers, increasing stress related to raising children, and mounting concern for aging parents. As a society, we have little time for family and even less for ourselves.

In light of our time and place in history, I'm convinced that one of the major needs of our society is for religious communities to provide sanctuary. Not sanctuary in the political sense, but sanctuary for the soul. We need a time and place to stop, to reconsider our lives, to hear ancient wisdom and the fresh voice of the spirit, to find new direction and strength for going back into the world. Sanctuary is not a place of residence, but it is a place of renewal. Whatever else we decide to be and do, I hope that being "sanctuary" is included.

As I reflect on the reasons for religion, there is one thing that James Luther Adams said that I want to pass on to you. James Luther Adams was our most outstanding Unitarian Universalist theologian of the 20th. Century. Adams held that a central function of religion was to help persons make commitments about life and that these commitments, when taken collectively, constitute one's identity. Adams said, "The decisive quality of the personality is its commitment, for the commitment determines the self."

In our upcoming discernment process, we will in fact be sorting out our commitments and therefore our identity. Let me offer one final word about this. This process really matters, to you as an individual and to us as a religious community. It is a process not without consequences. Therefore, I encourage you to pray about these matters, or to ponder them, or to meditate; or to just quietly consider your needs, gifts, limitations, and interests. What are your deepest creative longings for good? What is God's will for you and for this congregation in the coming years? If we rightly discern the direction in which our internal energy is flowing and then align our external energy with that, our life together will flow as smoothly as our aligned energy. But if we fail to discern the direction in which our internal energy is flowing, or if we fail to align our external energy with our internal energy, our life together will be like trying to pull a heavily loaded little red wagon out of a bog during a freezing rain. Trust me, we don't want to do that.

What we do want to do is to align our external energy with the living transformative energy of the universe, and go with the flow.