

Free for What?
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, November 6, 2016

It can be argued that freedom is at the core of a liberal religious faith such as ours. The words liberal and liberty share a common root, after all. We are about the work of liberation, freeing minds, bodies, and spirits from conditions of imprisonment and oppression, not for ourselves alone, but for all of humanity. Free is what we make each other.

No matter the outcome of Tuesday's election, our work is the same. We are and will continue to be about the work of liberation, or in the words of the ancient prophet Amos, our work is to bind up the broken and set the captives free – no matter who wins the presidency on Tuesday.

Our early Unitarian and Universalist ancestors came to this country in search of religious freedom. The quest for liberty and freedom is woven into the fabric of American culture here in the United States. On the eve of this momentous presidential election, I find myself turning to the work of James Luther Adams to understand why freedom is such an important religious value.

Adams is considered by many to have been the preeminent American theologian of the twentieth century. His Christian Humanism broadened my own theological grounding, helping me to see that one could be both, that they are not mutually exclusive. Adams sharpened his theological perspective while spending a year in Germany from 1935-1936. He could easily have been imprisoned for his

work with the Underground Church movement. While in Germany, he filmed people involved in church-related resistance efforts, people like Karl Barth, Albert Schweitzer, and others.

Adams returned to the United States with an even deeper conviction of his assertion that religious liberals could not afford to be theologically content with vague slogans and platitudes about open-mindedness. One of his contemporary colleagues, when challenged by Adams to cite the sources of the ideas he was stating, accused Adams of “salvation by bibliography.”

Adams was fierce in his admonition that liberal churches not become impotent in face of the world’s evils by not being grounded in an intellectually rigorous theology. His time in Nazi controlled Germany taught him exactly what was at stake. He saw the role the free church – that is the church not tied to governmental authority -- could play in resisting structures and regimes that keep people from being less than free. He also saw the qualities and attributes churches needed in order to be forces of resistance in the face of injustice and evil.

His classic piece of writing, *I Call That Church Free*, is still instructive for us today. Adams writes:

“I call that church free which enters into a covenant with the ultimate source of existence, that sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.”

This statement reminds of the affirmation recited each Sunday here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greensboro that ends with the words, “Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.” The covenant we make is a sacred promise, not just among ourselves, but with something higher and larger than we are; call it God, or the Goddess, or Mother Earth, Gaia, call it the universe, call it love – there is an ultimate source of life that is beyond human making. The free church is always in relationship with sacred sources that both sustain us and transform us. Without this relationship, there is no church.

“[The free church] binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority. This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.”

Idolatry is one of those religious-sounding words that Unitarian Universalists often stumble over. We would be wise to make it part of our vocabulary.

Awareness of idolatry keeps us in right relationship with the ultimate source of our being, however we name that source. In its most literal sense, idolatry is the worship of false gods. The false god of our American culture – our idol -- is being made visible right now in Standing Rock, North Dakota as the indigenous tribes stand off against bulldozers and armed police who are there to enforce the will of

oil companies in search of profit while desecrating graves and endangering the water supply not just of the indigenous people, but for millions of us who live downstream.

The free church protects us from such idolatry by binding us together across the generations. We draw on the wisdom of generations past and we consider the well-being of generations yet to come. It is here that we find the courage to do what must be done. I'm thinking of all the Unitarian Universalists who have gone to Standing Rock to lend their voices and their bodies to the cause. Last week at least 30 UU clergy joined the 500 who responded to the tribal leaders call for a day of peaceful, prayerful, and lawful action.

I've been following the photos, videos, and commentary of many of my clergy friends who made the journey. I see there the responsibility and joy of worship that Adams talked about, the responsibility and joy even in facing hardship, in squaring off with agents of oppression and injustice. That they had the courage to do so is a direct consequence of their engagement in congregational life back at home.

In congregational life, we embody that same spirit, of responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life. When one among us dies, it brings us pain and sadness. Facing it together is what builds resilience. Even in the face of death we find the will to go on, to find meaning and purpose, and even joy, again.

I'm reminded here of the words of the poet Oriah Mountain Dreamer: "It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone and do what needs to be done to feed the children." The free church builds resilience and resilience is the ground in which hope grows.

"I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship, that protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom; that yearns to belong to the church universal."

I've been here with you for just a short time – three months now. It has been an honor and a privilege to witness the ways in which you care for each other and the ways in which you intentionally build trust. This is not easy work, but challenging to do – to protect not just your own, but the spiritual freedom and integrity of everyone who comes here, even when you disagree. I think of the congregation as a learning laboratory for what the world needs most. It's a place where we build the skills needed to navigate the world and make it a better place. I believe our world today is thirsty and hungry for what we have here – a place where Jews and Christians and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and Pagans and Atheists and Agnostics can coexist peacefully – which is the embodiment of the church universal. Peace does not mean the absence of conflict, but the peaceful resolution of conflict. That you work and learn to do this here is no small thing.

“[The free church] is open to insight and conscience from every source, it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.” Put another way, we believe that revelation is not sealed. Truth and wisdom are not bound up in a single ancient book but are to be found in many forms and from many voices.

As a child growing up in the Lutheran church, one of my questions was “Why did God quit talking to people? If God talked to people in biblical times, why doesn’t God talk to us now?” It took coming to Unitarian Universalism to find an answer to that question. The words of the holy, the sacred, and the divine are all around us if only we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. Paul Simon had it right when he said, “The words of the prophet are written on the subway walls and tenement halls.” Today the prophet’s voice is just as likely to be heard in a rap song or on social media as in a psalm.

It is within free religious community that we sort it all through, separating the wheat from the chaff, listening for what is true and rejecting what is false, listening for that which exposes injustice and oppression while also listening for that which affirms values that uphold the flourishing of all life.

“[The free church] is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.” A pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred site. Muslims travel to Mecca where the faith of Islam began. Buddhists travel to the Bodhi tree where the

Buddha became enlightened. Coming of Age youth in Unitarian Universalist congregations travel to Boston, which is where our faith took root on American soil. Those who traveled to Standing Rock last week were on a pilgrimage.

We are pilgrims on a journey together. But make no mistake. This is no vacation, no pleasure cruise – not that those are bad things, it’s just that our purpose is larger than that. We are a people on the move. Our destination is the heart of the world, which can be any place where we can serve human need, any place where we can alleviate suffering, or lift the bonds of oppression, or liberate the spirit.

“The goal [of the free church] is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing.”

To be part of the free church is to engage in the calling to speak the truth in love, even when the truth is hard, or ugly, or painful. Because the truth is often hard, or ugly, or painful, we are also called to the ministry of healing, or what our Jewish siblings in faith call *tikkun olam*, which is the healing of the world.

This is what freedom is for. We work to liberate ourselves from whatever oppresses our bodies, our minds, or our spirits. We liberate ourselves so that we may also liberate others as they work to liberate us. Free is what we make each other. No one of us is free until all of us are free. This is the ultimate expression of

our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle of affirming the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. What happens to one part of the web happens to the entire web.

“[The free church] aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit “that bloweth where it listeth . . . and maketh all things new.”

That last phrase is the King James version of a verse from the Gospel of John which in more modern language says: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

The spirit of the free church moves within us. It is a unifying spirit, seeking peace and justice and freedom for all. We know not where the spirit will call us. That will be revealed in the coming days. We do know that we are called to be in covenant with each other and with the spirit of life. We do know that ours is the work of liberation, the work of freedom, work that will be ours to do no matter the outcome of the election.

As you move out into the world this week, take the spirit of the free church with you. Let its spirit be a source of strength, resilience, and courage. Let it be a source of hope. Take this spirit with you and remember what freedom is for.