

Last week I ended my sermon with an extended quote from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. One sentence of that quote has stuck with me all week - "With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope" MLK

What if our Faith, our UU faith that was so right for our time, so strong, so well placed and articulated, so visible to the world around us that we could hew a stone of hope of a mountain of despair. What if that is where this third principle is leading us?

"One way to interpret the Seven Principles is to ask, what essential question does each principle answer? Arguably the third principle addresses, how we can thrive as a church? We Unitarian Universalists are attempting to do something never quite tried before - base a religion on values rather than creeds. There are challenges inherent to being intentionally theologically diverse. How should we deal with those challenges? With acceptance and encouragement. As a UU poster reads, "Find us and ye shall seek." We aren't about mandating what you should believe, but we will encourage your progress on your own path.' <https://www.facebook.com/UU.Chalica/posts/10152649554235326:0>

What does and doesn't it look like to 'accept' another person's faith outlook? What is spiritual growth? What are ways that one person can 'encourage' another person's spiritual growth? How can this idea be applied even outside of one's congregation? This message is so needed today so needed. I turn on the news check the internet and one side

doesn't matter which is railing against the stupidity of the other side. There is little respect out there - there is little acceptance out there.

When the principles were written I would think that the authors knew their audience. They knew that we UUs can be irascible they knew that we can sometime be difficult, argumentative, focussed as individuals on ourselves, always needing to get the last word. Perhaps they knew that we needed to be nudged into accepting one another. As nice as we want to be - we still tend to talk before we think, and judge before we empathize.

Though we struggle with accepting one another, though we struggle with spiritual growth, though we do not have these things perfected we still have a message for this world. And this world needs our message of acceptance.

Turn on the internet, look at TV advertising, check out bill boards - all around us scream messages of non-acceptance. Apparently none of us are the right size, the right age, are not hip enough and if we are lucky enough to still have hair it is not the right color cut or curl. We don't have the right car, the right phone, the right anything. But we are sold a bill of goods that tell us if we buy the right thing we will become perfected.

And I am here to tell you that is wrong - just wrong.

Perfection is not the end goal acceptance is.

This congregation is, I think, a pretty extraordinary group of people. Within

the last decade you went through a pretty rugged set of controversies in this congregation sometimes referred to as the “troubles”. There was deep disagreement over leadership in this congregation, deep disagreement over how authority should be used. deep disagreements over how good or perfect this congregation should be. Eventually the disagreement bubbled up into an outright conflict of the worst kind. There were folks who were deeply deeply hurt by that conflict. Some of those folks left this community. And I don’t fault them for that. We each know who we are and we each know how much we can take. And for some folks it was the best course to find a different place. But there were also folks among us who chose to stay. And bless you. not only did you decide to stay but you all learned something. You chose to go through a congregational process the Healthy congregations program and you learned a lot from that. You took time and opportunity to examine the why and the how of what happened. This congregation has a deep understanding of what it means to be in covenant with one another. We have a deep understanding of what it means to engage with one another in respect even when and especially because we do not always agree. You all have learned a lot about how to disagree in respect. This is a work in progress this church. I don’t think we are a group of folks looking for a conflict, but we are also a group of people who know that we can survive conflict. We know disagreement will not be the end of us as long as the disagreement happens with respect. This congregation has learned the hard way how to make the wish that takes care of the most people.

Disagreement is hard. it is draining it takes time, and it is not always directly productive of positive results. Often we have to wait awhile for

those positive outcomes to become apparent. We human beings like to be accepted. Conflict risks breaking the relationships, risks losing connection. And yet if we are to accept one another we have to be able to tolerate the differences we have to be able to tolerate conflict . and we have to be able to help create courage in ourselves and others.

The third principle calls us to Encourage - which means to put courage in the other. last week I talked about fear based religions those religions that look to the end times for salvation, or those religions that simply focus on their own people. But in our very principles we are different than that. We are called to encourage one another, and we are called to encourage the world around us. If we are to encourage then we cannot be fear based we need to be hope based. We need to hold onto that Hope in the face of that which is not hopeful. We must put our shoulder to the plow and work toward justice. And that is not easy because so much seems to be working against us.

When I was on staff at May Memorial I helped the youth group to start going on service trips. I had been on service trips and I knew that this experience afforded the youth and adults who went on them a chance to get out of their comfort zone, to engage with the world a different way, to risk being in the world a different way, to help if only just a little to establish a more just world.

From the Unitarian Universalist College for Social Justice website

"As Unitarian Universalists, the core values of our faith call us to help

create a world of justice, in which all people are accorded their basic human rights and our communities transcend divisions of class, race, nationality, and the many “-isms” that can separate us. Living up to this vision is a difficult challenge. When we see that in spite of our best efforts there seems to be no end to poverty, violence, and injustice in the world, it is easy to become hopeless and fall prey to exhaustion, anger, disillusionment, or even cynicism.

We believe that genuine social transformation is brought about when individuals and groups are willing to be changed, even as they strive to change the world.

Participating in our UUCSJ programs, and doing the justice work that follows, will often lead us out of our comfort zones. We have to struggle with our own biases when dealing with different social issues and cultures. To be effective agents of change and transformation in the long run, we must develop the ability to stay connected, even when uncomfortable, without jumping into our automatic modes of defense. This kind of personal work requires a high level of self-awareness, patience, and compassion, which are qualities developed by spiritual practices."

Do you see acceptance and spiritual practice are tied together again. On one of our service trips we were in Boston. We were working with a ministry that reached out to those that were homeless. The program created a space for folks where they could come and create art, create beauty. Because you know if you are homeless there is not much

beauty in your life and not much opportunity to create. We were to sit down with these folks and just hang create something, and help the staff when needed. I observed a conversation between one craggy older gentleman and one of our youth. He asked her where she was from and she said Manlius. He said cool I'm from Dorchester. I knew those two areas - I knew what the demographics were, what the economics were. I knew that they were very far apart on the socio-economic scale. But these two human beings who were having a conversation did not know. They only knew that they shared something in their humanity. By being in a "foreign" space that service trip allowed our youth to engage with the world with less of the worlds expectations being pressed upon them. They literally were outside of their comfort zone and had to engage with the world in a more honest way. It was a moment of grace for me.

I was at an all day Leadership training earlier this fall. We were discussing what UUism is. And I said that Unitarian Universalism exists as part of Christendom. It is not a christian faith but that is our historical family and we exist on the margin of the Christian church. As you can imagine that made a few folk there really uncomfortable. I did not have a whole lot of time to unpack that for them there but I would like to unpack what I said here. We are not a christain church - we do not have a christian creed and we do not ask folk to affirm a christian faith. And I am happy for the theological diversity that that affords us. But the Puritans came over to america, from them arose the congregationalists and then there was the family feud in Dedham Massachussets where Unitarians split from trinitairans and the American Unitarian Association was born in 1825.

Our history is tied to the early Puritan settlers of this country. But now we are a little like the distant cousin who moved to a foreign country learned a new language, married someone from a different culture and sometimes we come back to visit the old family, It's a little uncomfortable we think we should understand each other but we don't. We keep bringing them new food they don't like. We have a shared language but the words have taken on different meanings. We think our old family is stuck, they think we have gone off the deep end

Because we exist on the margin we may not ever be the super large denomination. When one is pushing the edge of pluralism, like we are, it may not be possible to grow really large. I would guess that the majority of folks want to stay somewhere in the middle. But that is ok you know we cannot be on the leading edge unless there is a center and a way back there.

But and I think this is a big thing, we can have an impact on the social dialogue that is way beyond our size. Our country is becoming more and more pluralistic - religiously, culturally, politically. What we may have that other more mainline religious groups don't have is a lived understanding about how to hold a variety of folks and a variety of beliefs together in a covenanted relationship.

We are past the time when this country was large enough that we each could live in our own enclave of belief and let others have their space. And we are past the time when this country could maintain its false self

perception as a homogeneous culture.

So when I first started looking at this third principle my response was that it was tepid, it did not go far enough. But I would like to amend that. imagine if each of us were to intentionally and mindfully practice acceptance of ourselves and one another, if each of intentionally and mindfully encouraged ourselves and one another to spiritual growth. We can have an impact on this world right now that exceeds what is expected of a church our size. We can do that.

“More is asked of us than we could have imagined. The beauty of life is such that it will not let us go until we have offered the blessing we have to give. So let the beauty we have seen become the good that we do, [let us] place ourselves among those who bless the world.” – Rev. Rebecca Parker

In a world without end may it be so.