

Once there was an evil king who decided that he wanted to throw the Jews out from his kingdom. And the way that he would do this was to have a debate with them, in sign language. He said to the Jewish Community I will give you three signs. And if you have someone who can understand my signs and answer me you can stay here for the rest of your days but if you not you will have to go. The Jewish community was up in arms no one knew what to do there were arguments and discussions no one wanted to get up. How would they debate a king and in sign language no less. So finally after days of argument a little man Yenkel the chicken man said if no one else will do it I will do it. And so they agreed and off yenkel went to the debate. There was big platform set in the center of town. Everyone was gathered around the platform and the king was on one side of the platform and Yenkel was on the other side of the platform. The king said I will give you three signs and if you get them all correctly you will be able to stay in this land with you people. Here is first sign. The king threw his arm out at Yenkel with his fingers extended. Yenkel looked at him and put up his fist in front of his face. The King said correct. I'm amazed. Here is the second sign. The King threw out his arm with two fingers pointed at Yenkels face and Yenkel put one finger in front of his face. And the King said correct again! Astounding. If you get the third sign right you will get to stay here with your people Then the king reached into his robes and pulled out a piece of cheese. Yenkel looked at him and

shrugged and reached into his pocket and pulled out an egg. The King said Correct again the Jews can stay. That evening in the castle the kings advisors gathered around him and asked about the debate. The king said it is astonishing that the Jews had this little chicken man who could read my signs. I put out my hand with m fingers spread to show him that the Jews were scattered all over the world. But he put up his fist to show me that they were one in hand of God. I held out two fingers to show him that there are two kings one on earth and one in heaven and he put one finger to show me there was only one king in heaven. I brought out some cheese to show him that the Jewish faith had gotten old and moldy but he brought out an egg to show me that it was new and fresh. It was amazing. Meanwhile at Yenkels - Everyone was gathered around Yengel in the chicken store and they asked what was the debate about. He said I don't know it wasn't much of a debate. He put out his had to grab me and put up my fist show him I would punch him if he touched me. Then he tried to poke my eyes with his two fingers so I put up one to block him. And then he must have known I was going to stand up to him so he brought out his lunch and I brought out mine. (This story was given to me by Syd Liberman a wonderful storyteller)

Our 3rd Principle reads -Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. And

sometimes I think that our acceptance of one another looks a little like the King and Yenkel - we think we know what the other is saying - but not so much.

I suspect that each of us has our favorite principle - some folks definitely love on the 7th principle respecting the interdependent web of existence. Some folks definitely love on the first "affirming the inherent worth and dignity of each person." We are Unitarian Universalists and so we are not required to believe or affirm all the principles - even though we are strongly encouraged to do so.

I have to admit that I struggle with the third principle. Actually I will be more forthright than that - I think it is weak. I don't think it goes far enough. In this world of great diversity and complexity are we really only asking of our selves and each other to simply accept each other? Acceptance can mean many things. One definition is "Favorable reception; approval." But given that elsewhere in our principles we affirm a free and responsible search for truth and meaning I don't think the third principle is asking us to approve of everything that everyone believes. I think that really in practice this third principle comes down to a practice where I will tolerate you and your beliefs. I don't have to engage with your beliefs I simply need to tolerate them and give you enough space so you

can believe what you want. And we don't require spiritual growth we simply encourage it. And then only in congregations - what about growing spiritually as an individual?

The third principle to me is lukewarm. At least now. Maybe not earlier in our history. But I don't think the third principle has kept up with the times. I think it leaves us stuck in our individualism and misses the richness of engaged covenanted community.

I told the story of King Sigismund and the Edict of Torda decreed in 1568 . In our history this is an important moment. And then the toleration was huge! Hungary at that time was a hotbed of power struggles between cultures, religions, and thrones. Hungary also shared a large boarder with the Ottoman empire. This was a time when there were state churches and reformers were often put to death for not agreeing with the state religion. Asking someone to simply tolerate a different religion was huge. This was not just about religious belief it was also about political power and who would and could rule. Kingdoms and countries were in turmoil and one way to quell the turmoil was to control the religious beliefs and practices of the folks who lived those countries.

King Zapolya asked Sultan Suleiman to protect his wife and child

because he did not want to King Ferdinand to take over his country and King Zapolya, his wife Queen Isabella were not traditional Roman Catholics. They tended toward what we would call humanism, they were influenced by the Ottomans to openness and tolerance and they reared their son that way. And so when their son John Sigismund ruled with the help of his liberal mother they established the edict of Torda which stated *" that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching."*

Isabella and John were encouraged in this edict by Francis Davide who is most famously known to have written "We need not think alike to love alike" Toleration at that time was revolutionary; it turned societies on their heads. And although we owe a lot of

our free thinking heritage to John Sigismund and Francis Davide I think we are called for more than toleration that says I won't kill you for your beliefs or I won't force you to believe as I do..

There is a tension in this third principle. As Rev. Rob Hardies wrote "We want to love the world, but does that mean we must condone all that is wrong with it, tha we must quietly acquiesce to injustice? What is there to love about contradictions?" (p 38 The Seven Principles in Word and Worship.)

WE live in a world of contradictions that is changing so fast. It is hard to make sense of it all and it is hard to hold the contradictions together. Even the Edict of Torda could only hold so many contradictions - there was not religious freedom for everyone one - simply Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unitarians. Others were not given legal guarantees.

Rob Hardies continues "Making sense of this craziness is a religious task. Religion is the faculty through which we try to make sense of the world and our place in it. But these days religion seems to more of a problem than a solution. What kind of spirituality can help us live with

integrity in the midst of the ambiguities, complexities, and disparities of our contemporary world? What kind of faith can sustain our love and care for such a world?"

Sometimes all this confusion, contradiction, violence and anger can trigger a fight or flight response. The flight response can be seen in some religious conservatives who see this as the end times and in some popular dystopian young adult literature. I think you can describe it as a flight response because quoting again Rob Hardies "It is the equivalent of living one's religious life in a gated community where one can hide from all the daggers beyond the guard at the entrance. This is the religious behavior of people who have long ago given up on loving this world." (p. 39) But religious conservatives are not the only ones prone to this. We centrists and left leaning religious folk can live out a flight response in our focus on our families, or our congregations. We hunker down and take care of our own and leave those others out there on their own because it is not our problem. There are overwhelming problems in this world and it is easy to make the problems more manageable by simply make our world smaller. The chaos that is my house can drive me nutty someday but it is so much easier to focus on than how will we solve the destruction of our environment.

Rob Hardies goes on in his essay to describe Bernard Loomer,

a member of the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley California. Loomer was a process theologian who would lead “Thought provoking theological conversations. After describing his vision of the complexity of creation, he often asks the group,”What is the size of your soul? By which he meant, :What is your soul’s ability to grow and expand, to stretch when life throws more contradictions your way."

This may be the saving grace of the third principle. If we were have acceptance without spiritual growth that would be pretty tepid.

Loomer said this about size - which he always wrote as S-I-Z-E for these conversations

“By S-I-Z-E I mean the capacity of a person’s soul, the range and depth of [your] love, [your] capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of you being without feeling defensive or insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness. I mean the power to sustain more complex and enriching tension.. I mean the magnanimity of concern to provide conditions that enable others to increase in stature.” (P41-412)

Consider our mission statement:

JUSTICE WITH LOVE AND JOY, OPEN TO AWE!

I like that mission statement. It does not include or exclude any particular belief - political, social or religious. But it does describe a community that is a place with a heart, a should that big.

what if it read:

"Appropriateness with kindness and a smile open to whatever" That's a bit watered down isn't it? Doesn't really inspire does it?

This past week we had a Program council meeting. The Program council is where the chairs of our different Program committees meet to coordinate activities and plan things that will be happening here at First UU. We took some time and did some intentional work around who we see ourselves as and how we communicate that to the world beyond these walls. WE came up with the following list:

We are Reconciling - relational accepting open minded growing

We are Kind - giving welcoming loving

We are Unflinching - supportive, protective of our environment

We are Flexible, learning

We are Enthusiastic- participator, laughing

We are Affirming-celebratory, truthful, non-judgemental, nurturing,
youth supporters,

In no way is that a complete description of us, and sometimes that list is more like what we aspire to be than what we truly are. After all we are human and sometimes fall short of our goals.

Tom Chulak who had been the District Executive for the St. Lawrence District once said that Unitarians do have a particularly UU spiritual practice - dialogue. He said he meant by that not simply conversation - although clearly we like that but dialogue - where different voices have a chance to be heard and are honored and opinions and values are not dismissed out of hand. Dialogue, when it is true dialogue, and not a pairing of monologues, is a spiritual practice because it demands of me that I listen to you in the wholeness of your person.

That what was missing in the story of Yenkel and the King - true dialogue. They were taking at each other. Something humans are prone to do and even our beloved principles do not keep us from that. If we

are going to take seriously our second principle - acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations it starts with respectful engagement a listening to one another in a way that honors the other. Then we begin to build a community that has JUSTICE WITH LOVE AND JOY, OPEN TO AWE! in its heart.