

“Why Being Liberal Isn’t Enough”

So this week we learned, among other things, that Jesus
Might have been married –
My favorite cartoon had him walking out of the house
With an annoyed look on his face,
A voice bubble coming out of the window of the house behind
Him, saying “*Don’t forget to get a pint of milk on your way home!*” –
And with this papyrus discovery challenging the orthodoxy
About who Jesus was,
It’s a good time to challenge our orthodoxy who we think we are
As religious people,
So if you find yourself feeling a bit uncomfortable this morning,
Please know it is, as a colleague once said to his congregation,
Entirely intentional.
And that is because we are toughest on those we love.

And as a way to get at the orthodoxy I speak of,
Go back with me into my memory banks.
The year is 2000, it is autumn, the month is October,
And we are back in St. Louis to see the family,
Bringing in tow with us our beautiful new baby boy
Born that July...
There so we could bless and dedicate him
In my home congregation, the First Unitarian Church of St. Louis.

Earl Holt, one of the ministers at the time,

Also thought it would be great if I gave the sermon –
I mean, why not? At that point I had not quite two years of seminary
Behind me,
I had never given a sermon to actual people before,
And I hadn't slept in about three months,
So this seemed like a good idea, right?
“*Why not preach, Nathan!*” Said Earl.
“*Well, I can think of a thousand reasons why not....*
but okay, Earl, sign me up.”

And so I did. That morning I knotted my tie in the mirror.
I obsessively read and reread my manuscript
Over my bowl of Wheat Chex,
And I tried on the much too short robe I had borrowed from Earl
That came to just below my knee caps.
On the way to church that morning we passed by
The front yards of my childhood,
And because the year is 2000 and it is October,
What do we see in the front yards of nearly every home?
Anyone guess?
Yes, that's right, political signs. *Bush/Cheney. Bush/Cheney. W.*
Occasionally I would see *Gore*, but only occasionally;
remember this is the Midwest,
and when we all learned we had to split our country and our people
into colors, this would be Red State.

We pull into the parking lot,

And from the corner of my eye I see a familiar looking
Ford Explorer, cherry red, shining.

“Hey Mom,” I say. “That looks just like Uncle Denny’s car” –

Uncle Denny the faithful Catholic,

The ardent Republican,

The man Karen and I feel especially bound to because of the time

He dropped everything and drove that same Ford Explorer

From St. Louis to Boston to put in a kitchen and bathroom in our bare bones

Dorchester condo, right after he lent us money for that condo,

Because we had so little and I was helpless with tools

And the baby was on the way, no matter what.

As the poet says, there are names for what binds us,

Strong forces, weak forces, and there was a bond, a strong one,

between Denny and me.

“Hey Mom, that looks just like Uncle Denny’s car;

*I thought we agreed to invite relatives only to the baby blessing after my
sermon...”*

*“Oh, she says, I might have invited a few. They love you, they want to hear
you.”*

And now I’m remembering back to the soccer fields of my childhood,

When my relatives would be there to cheer me on from the sidelines,

Only this time they would do it from the pews.

There is a sound for what this feels like, and that sound is: *“ugh...”*

Worship begins, organ pipes up, hymn books open, ministers process in.

From the back I see the extended family, all Catholic, nod looks of approval

That seem to say, “Well, it *seems* like a church,”
 Never mind there is no crucifix hanging from the rafters,
 Or that this church is known as one of the city’s ‘liberal safe houses.’
 I learn later this is the first time they have been in a church for worship
 That was not Catholic.
 I scan the pews – aunts, other uncles, grandparents, cousins.
 They fill up the whole right center portion of the church.
 Mom invited *everyone*. *Ugh*.
 But where is Denny? Don’t see him. Did he decide in the end
 He just couldn’t come inside, my being his nephew aside?
 Did he see the two men holding hands on the way in,
 And that he just wasn’t comfortable here?

First verse of hymn, second verse, third verse.
 I’m up front, short robe, I don’t know the hymn, so I’m mouthing the words.
 And then from the back I see him come in,
 maybe he had been in the bathroom,
 And he’s scanning the pews for the family,
 And as the fourth verse concludes he sees them and
 Begins to walk forward up the stone isle,
 ‘click, click’ of shoes,
 And as he does everyone else in the sanctuary sits down,
 So he’s conspicuous, he’s noticed.
 Even from my perch in the front I can see that he
 Has a “W” button on his lapel. “*Ugh*.”
 And then, like he has done every time in his life when in church,
 He stops before he enters his pew and gracefully genuflects

Toward the front of the church, signing the cross as he does so.

Ugh.

Later we would we all laugh, but me less so, even to this day.

Why? Why would that be?

Because from my perch up front I saw what no one else saw that morning.

I saw the faces of people turn toward Denny and back again

Toward their pew mates, eyes rolling, mouths smirking,

Voices murmuring, a few fingers pointing.

To me and I'm sure to Denny the message felt clear.

The congregation that had so welcomed me and so nurtured me

was saying to my uncle I loved with his "W" button and Catholic habits

and assumed non-liberal ways – *You, well maybe you...are not so welcome.*

Thinking back, I think this was the first time my Unitarian Universalist faith

Matured, because it was the first time I had the experience

Of feeling hurt and trying to heal from that hurt in one of our congregations.

The poet reminds us there is a name for the flesh that grows

Back stronger after such instances: Proud Flesh.

Every political season I feel this proud flesh being tested, be stretched,

as a UU minister.

And this is because I feel now more than at any other time

The pull on the skin between, on the one hand,

ours being a proudly open and diverse faith

That strives to welcome all who come to our doors,

And, on the other hand,

the liberal religious values and causes that lead us to sometimes believe
We all should vote a certain way.

Said a fellow UU to me the other night at a party, someone who attends
Another congregation:

Do you have any Republicans hiding in the closet in your congregation?

I laughed, but honestly the question made me wince

Because I know for a fact we do,

And for all our talk of openness and diversity –

Here comes the uncomfortable part –

We can be a fairly politically intolerant people,

And I put myself first in line.

Just last Sunday, in fact, on my way home from hearing Robin tell us and
our children

The good news of our gospel that says

We love people beyond belief,

I saw the signs on the front yards of the other party

And caught myself making all kinds of assumptions and judgments

About them.

This ever happen to you? Oh yes.

There are forces that bind us, says the poet,

And one of them is how quick you and I move

From vehemently disagreeing with someone's ideas (*Uncle Denny,*

How can you think that?)

To discounting them as people.

Or in other words: *You...well maybe you....are not so welcome.*

Luckily for us this faith asks to be better than we are.

So this is when I tell us about the phone call, these are not rare,

The phone call from someone named Max.

“This is Nathan”, I say, picking up the phone.

Hi, Father, my name is Max and I’m calling

For my friend.

I’m not religious myself, but she is a good, faithful Christian,

Believes in Jesus, believes in the Bible.”

And before I even have time to stop myself,

I notice I’ve already labeled this person

As a conservative Christian,

These phrases ‘*believes in Jesus,*’ ‘*believes in the Bible*’

Like signs in those front yards sending me galloping

Along toward my assumptions and my judgments.

And so I wonder: why is he calling me, the liberal UU minister?

Well, my friend is really sick and I’m just calling around

To ask how I can find someone to give her the Sacrament of the Sick,

I think it used to be called The Last Rites.

Do you Universalist Unitarians do that?

And we go on to talk about what he is looking for,

How he literally has the phone book in front of him

And he is calling churches from Ashland

To Sherborn looking for some advice,

And how I am the first clergy person who happened to

Be there to pick up the phone.

Funny thing about looking up religion in phone books –
 They don't break things down for you like the rest of the world.
 They don't, for example,
 say: *“Liberal folks who drive Priuses
 And vote Democrat especially welcome!”*
 Or *“4 out of 5 Republicans choose these!”*
 Instead it simply says ‘Houses of Faith’
 Leaving it up to us to find our way home.
 And when you're trying to decide who will bless your
 Friend before she dies...well, your priorities change,
 And the forces that bind us from one person to another
 become a little more clear.

Later today I am scheduled to call Max again, as promised,
 To see if he needs me after all.
 He said he really did want a priest if he could find one,
 And after pointing him to the ones I knew I told him
 That if he still needed someone I was happy to stand in.
 I will also thank him,
 Because without intending to he reminded me
 That if we Unitarian Universalists want to be a religion
 For our time, if we want be the people we say we want to be
 Who love people beyond belief,
 then we are going to get a whole lot better
 At ministering to and being in community with people
 who do not always think like us.

Because friends, and here comes the sermon title,
please don't tell headquarters:

But I don't think being Liberal is enough.

And this because the signs out on the front yards are flying,

The partisans are winning,

And at least one of our politicians is telling us

That 47% of us may not be worth the time.

In this climate what I need, dare I say what we need,

Is not another place that knows how to appeal to its base

And is inclined to say in light murmurs and rolled eyes:

Well you...maybe you....are not so welcome.

Instead, as religious people, we are called to lead our lives

Asking different kinds of questions than: *who belongs?*

Instead, we might ask, as was asked of us at General Assembly this year:

what would a year of thinking of us as a 'human race' look like in

your life this year?

Instead, we ask: what does it mean for you to not label someone as

Republican

Or Democrat, conservative or liberal, and make all the assumptions

That go with those labels.? Forget trying that for a year.

Try it for just a day.

Instead, we ask: how we can expect the world to heal if we can't also heal

The wounds we cause, if we can't say to the Denny's in our congregations,

Assuming we have any left: *"I am sorry; can we begin again in love?"*

Instead, we ask, in that style of the old preachers:
Can I get a witness! Can I get a witness!
Can I get a witness for my colleague Rebecca Parker
Who told us several months ago that coming up with brilliant answers
to the question: What is UUism? will not save us!
No, what will save us is how well we show what we love,
And what we love, she said, is far more important than what we think.

And Instead, we ask: well, what do we love?
And we answer, among so many other things:
well, we say we love diversity, we love pluralism,
But for that love to flourish this much is clear:
We will have to learn to live with the consequences that diversity brings,
Which means welcoming people who might not just look different,
But just might also think differently and believe differently
And vote differently and talk about God differently
and want to do church differently.
For me, it will mean that I will have to get better at checking my
Judgments when people like Max call in to get help for their friend.

And along the way we will mess up, of course,
we will flail and fail and, yes, even hurt each other.
And then, if we're lucky, we will see how the flesh grows back
Across the wound,
More strong than the simple, untested surface before,
Because the people that learn to forgive each other

Are the people that grow.

There is a word for it on horses, the poet tells us:

Proud flesh.

And so we may be proud of the ways this faith makes us

Better than we are.

We are bound together.

We are bound together.

We are bound together.

Amen.