

Courage of Our Convictions

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A Sermon Given at the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, October 15, 2017

As you have heard, this month's worship and community theme is **COURAGE**. We've learned about courage in general, and how we need to be together as a community. And also individually vulnerable in order to be courageous. Then we heard about a man, the Reverend Carlton Pearson, who was courageous enough to discard something he had believed his entire life, because he was presented with living human proof that his belief was wrong. Who had the courage to begin preaching that. And who lost everything that had meant success to him up to that point. Who then accepted other ways of being successful in support of the truth.

Today, I am speaking to the ***Courage of Our Convictions*** as Unitarian Universalists. And I have two people to thank for their huge contributions to this service. One is Jaime Short, a member here and our Office Administrator. I mentioned this month's theme to her and she said "What about us having the courage to speak about what we believe and about our faith to other people?" And I said YES to that, as the subject of UU Evangelism is near and dear to me and has been for decades. What a great idea!

The other person for whom I have so much gratitude regarding this service is Greg Minter. At our last Board of Trustees meeting, Greg took responsibility for the Opening and Closing words. He read a wonderful excerpt from our Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide and also told a story of sharing his faith with friends. I asked him to turn both those things into a Reflection on Sharing Our Faith – and so he did! And it was great!

So thank you, Jaime and Greg, for shaping this service and my sermon on a topic that I love: Unitarian Universalist evangelism. And I love the topic of UU Evangelism because I love our faith!

According to a report compiled by the UUA from nationwide surveys done by other groups, in 2008 almost 600,000 people in the US claimed their identification as "Unitarian Universalist." Yet our actual membership as of 2016 is about 155,000 adults and 45,000 children, for a total of about 200,000. This number, with some ups and downs, is almost exactly where we were in 1961 when the Unitarians and the Universalists consolidated into the Unitarian Universalist Association. Where are the other 400,000 UUs and why are they not coming to our churches?

There are many answers to that question, I am sure. But one of them is that we don't invite them. *We don't invite them!* And this is true even though personal invitations are the most successful way of getting folks to come visit any religious community.

Why might we be so reluctant to invite people? Why are we such reluctant evangelist? Evangelism simply means "the good news." If we think we have something good here at Second Unitarian, why would we not want to share that with others?

First, though, I want to say something about our Unitarian Universalist faith. I definitely have a bias here!

I believe we have one of the most powerful and beautiful religious messages in the world. One that is especially suited for these times.

Our message is of both spirit and reason in faith.
Our message is of an open, yet responsible freedom of faith.
Our message is of self-governance in faith.
Our message is of covenant in faith.
Our message is of acceptance of all people in all their many forms and beliefs and characteristics in faith.
Our message is of love and justice in faith.
Our message speaks clearly to the meaning of life and how we are to live our lives in faith.
Our message saves lives, both metaphorically and literally!

AND – on top of all that - We offer salvation through our Unitarian Universalist faith! Yes, we do!

All of this together is a message that should and does resonate with so many people, especially with those who are younger.

And if that is so – where is everyone?

While we do some kinds of outreach to people through several means, most of the people who come here find us on their own in some way.

I think that's too hard! And before the internet, it was really hard! We have hidden ourselves much too well.

We have been prevented in our evangelism by lacking motivation for it. And by lacking the words and skills to do that evangelism. And also by a fear that we are not 'supposed to' engage in Evangelism, because that is what other faiths do in their efforts to claim that they are the only true religion. And we don't think that **any** religion, including ours, can claim to be the 'only true religion.'

And all of these blocks – the lack of motivation, the lack of words/skills and the concern about doing something wrong. These all relate to the search for meaning, and a lack of clarity about that. And a connection to the meaning of our faith for our lives, is, as I have said and believe, a big part of what is missing here at Second Unitarian. A reason for the 'stuckness' that brought you to seek Developmental Ministry.

I found a short essay at our UUA website about Evangelism. Its author is not given, sadly. I'm going to read it to you, as I think it says everything that needs to be said about Evangelism in our faith and addresses each of these concerns.

A Liberal View of Evangelism: Reach In, Reach Down, Reach Out

Evangelism is about reaching out. However, before we can reach out we have to reach in and reach down. Before we can be an inviting church that attracts and keeps visitors, we have to know who we are, what we stand for, what we have to offer. It arises from the deepest place of our sense of what is sacred, of what it means to live religiously.

*Evangelism is not a membership program, a set of activities or even a set of skills. Evangelism has very little to do with deciding to grow. At its core, evangelism is the natural outgrowth of our sense of religious community. That is why deciding to grow, ironically, has little to do with growth. This is why churches that **do** grow often have no particular membership program. What growing churches do have is a sense of their mission and an enthusiasm that is palpable and contagious.*

*Evangelism is the **natural** result of a deep belief that we Unitarian Universalists have something important and precious to offer. Evangelism is founded on the beliefs that people have a need for religious community, for deep relationships, for spiritual exploration, for social involvement. None of this, in a liberal church, has anything to do with conversion. In a non-creedal faith like ours, evangelism cannot be founded on convincing someone that we have the truth and the way.*

However, in a profound sense, evangelism for Unitarian Universalists has everything to do with salvation. A religious community is a place that can save us from the crushing triviality of consumerism, instrumental relationships, superficiality, alienation and isolation. Our communities are a place where we can connect with our true selves, with each other, with our communities, with our sense of the sacred. A place where we truly can find salvation – that is, being made whole, not being saved.

*Evangelism is, then, a **religious** orientation based on an eagerness to share something precious, to share our good news. Evangelism goes to the core of a church's culture and identity. A church without energy and enthusiasm cannot become evangelistic by doing some public relations, a bit of advertising, doing a better job greeting visitors and adding programs. Though all of these can help.*

*The beginning of a transition to a culture of evangelism, a culture of reaching out and sharing, is for our members to touch again the source of their connection to their faith. When each of us can answer why we are Unitarian Universalists and why being a member of our church is vital for us and what we love about our congregation, **then** we are on the way to being evangelists. We can't help it. Good news (which is the meaning of the word 'evangelism') wants and needs to be shared. And we can't share our good news until we know what it is.*

Something I have said to the Board of Trustees and maybe to others – is that all you have to do to reach the goals you have set out, all you have to do to be the religious community of your dreams – is **to fall in love with our faith all over again!**

I am in love with Unitarian Universalism! IN LOVE. O, well, I have to be because I am a minister, right? NO – it's the opposite. I'm a minister because I love our faith so much. I wanted to dedicate my life to it. I had to. I couldn't help it. Because I love our faith so much – WHO we are, HOW we covenant to life together and WHAT we do in the wider world.

And as we heard in Greg's reflection, this is not just about us and our desires to live in this sacred place of wholeness. It is about the others out there who need us! Who are suffering in a religious context that is painful or hurtful to them. Or one that they have outgrown in some way. People who want religious community deeply, but in looking at other religious traditions here in Omaha, do not find in them a source of affirmation and meaning. **How can we leave them alone out there?**

The Reverend David Miller puts it in this way:

I woke up this morning and my first thought was, I just don't get it. I don't get any reluctance to evangelize our faith. Remember proselytizing is different from evangelizing. Proselytizing is trying to get someone from another faith to change theirs to yours, evangelizing is just spreading the word about your faith so others are informed and can know. The world is at such a perilous place.

We have come so far in so many ways but unless we take great strides in making bigger advances to help the planet and unless we all can somehow turn the tide of fundamentalism and fear, we are in danger of the future that not only faces seven generations but maybe even ours.

*That is why I don't get it. If we truly believe in the power of this faith to change lives, if we truly try to practice the principles listed on our hymnals and websites, if we truly feel that our historical and theological lineage of love infused with reason, deeds over creeds and a desire for a just, kinder and more compassionate world is essential, why is there **anyone** not wanting to grow and sing Unitarian Universalism from the highest mountains and the tallest peaks!?!*

And that's all about the meaning piece. That belief we have in the power of this faith to change lives. Our belief in the power of this faith to give meaning to our lives. Our belief that our Seven Principles are worth living. Our belief that we have this amazing historical and theological lineage of prophetic people who have loved and lived us into existence.

In order to reach out to others, we must connect with what we love and cherish about this faith. Because our conviction about that. And our courage to share it. These are the only things that will bring people here to stay.

These people who are **yearning** for us. And don't know we're right here. We can't let them down.

So I hope over my time here with you to walk with you to that place of meaning. To learn what this faith and this community mean to us and to learn to share that with others. Both of these are truly our religious duty.

As Edward Schemp says:

*Unitarian Universalism is faith in people,
hope for tomorrow's child,
confidence in a continuity that spans all time.*

*It looks not to a perfect heaven,
but toward a good earth.
It is respectful of the past,
but not limited to it.*

*It is trust in growing and conspiracy with change.
It is a spiritual responsibility for a moral tomorrow.*

So may it be. Blessed be.