

“Universally Yours: The Vision of a Uniquely American Religion”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar
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You know how some days turn out much differently than you expect. I had one of those days a few months ago. I arrived at the office of Chandler-Frates and Reitz to have lunch with Jack Allen (a member of the church, whom at the time I barely knew). Walking into the front entrance I was greeted by a receptionist who invited me to wait as she called Jack to let him know his lunch appointment was here. I noticed a beautiful painting on the wall. It drew me towards it with its extraordinary quality of light and color. I recognized the artist. It was the distinctive work of P.S. Gordon, and it was an original. Now I had that wonderful feeling that one gets when standing inches away from a spectacular original painting by a renowned artist. Pulled in almost like a child to a candy store, my eyes began to get lost in the detail of the flowers and the glass vase that contained them. They looked so real.

Then, Jack appeared and said, “Oh, let me tell you a little about this painting.” Over the next three or four minutes, Jack kept me spellbound as he explained the vision of his company using the handful of objects in the still-life. I was engaged, I was fascinated, it was fun and it was interesting, and I walk away not only having heard the vision of his company and being inspired by it, but because of the delightful and simple images, I could remember it and even without the painting in front of me, I could explain the vision to others.

It made me wonder whether people who visit All Souls go away with such a strong vision of who we are and for what this church stands. One thing about Unitarian Universalism is that not only is the name long enough to choke a horse, but it's complicated to explain. You may've had the experience of trying to explain it to someone and found yourself either talking for too long, or feeling like you've grossly oversimplified it. Another problem is that it's tempting to tell people what we're not rather than what we are. When Brent Smith was the senior minister here at All Souls, he printed up little cards you could carry around in your wallet with phrases to explain what this church is about. That was a great idea and I've been told it helped a lot of people. Many Unitarian Universalists around the country carry little cards with the seven principles of the UUA on them. I'll tell you, I've been a Unitarian Universalist all my life, and I still can't remember all seven of them. More to the point, when someone asks you about your church, they really don't want a laundry list of long, highly crafted phrases that express ideals in a generally unmemorable way.

This has been a problem for Unitarian Universalists for a long time. Just to emphasize my point, when a ministerial candidate goes before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee to get credentialed as a Unitarian Universalist minister, one of the questions they are often asked is to imagine you are on an elevator coming down from the fourteenth floor of a building and the person next to you asks, “What is Unitarian Universalism?” And you need to explain it before reaching the ground floor. Let's face it, it's really not easy to explain this religion in a minute or two. And even candidates who have completed three and four years of seminary aren't always good at explaining it adequately and succinctly.

Personally, I'm glad not to be a part of a religion that's so uncomplicated that it can be explained by reciting a short set of slogans or creeds. Nevertheless, it leaves us in an awkward situation sometimes. And imagine, if those of us who are members of the church have a hard time explaining it, just think of how it must be for someone who comes for their first visit and hears just one sermon and then tries to explain it to their friends and family afterward. Especially if the sermon they came to hear happened to be on abortion rights or Iraq. Or if I happened to be on a tear about the mayor or some other public issue (which Valerie and I are apt to do once in a while). They could walk out of here after experiencing a Sunday service wondering what the heck this religion is all about.

But, what if there was a painting? A large, original painting by a renowned artist? One that touched your heart and dazzled your eyes when you enter the main foyer of All Souls? What if any member of the church

could walk up to someone who was looking at the painting and explain to them in two or three minutes the core vision and values of this church? What if they could do it in an engaging, fun and memorable way, so that no matter what the sermon that day was about, the visitor would walk away knowing what is at the heart of All Souls? They would know about our early American heritage and our integral connection to the founding of this great country. They would know that our history reaches back four hundred and fifty years to Europe. They would know that we value diversity, freedom, justice, democracy and equality and that love is the spirit of this church. They would know that we have helped to shape the core ideals that are the bedrock of the United States of America and have applied them to our religion and the totality of our lives. They would know that we have recognized in these ideals not only the highest principles upon which to form a government, but also we have recognized that they are ideals upon which we can base a highly sophisticated approach to religion and the questions of living a moral and meaningful life.

Then, when these visitors get home, or go to work the next day and someone says, “Oh you went to that church; what do they believe there?” this person, who had only visited for one service, could articulate at least some of the most important points of our history, heritage and vision. They would be able to say something positive to explain what we're about and why it matters.

As it turns out we've had an original P.S. Gordon hanging in our church for a long time. Anyone know where it is? Ralph Waldo Emerson's portrait in Emerson Hall. Pat Gordon, who's a long time member of All Souls, painted that portrait in the 1970's. John Wolf asked Pat to paint that portrait. This summer I asked Pat to paint something else.

Thanks to his generosity and talent and the financial support of a few special donors, we will now have a painting in our foyer, just outside the door to the sanctuary that has within it, objects that reflect and remind us of our history, heritage and vision.

As soon as I mentioned the idea to Pat, he said he knew what piece of furniture to place the still-life on, a piece of early American wood furniture to represent our origins in the ferment and founding of America. Pat knows that some of our early Unitarian and Universalist forebears were creators and signers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, people like Benjamin Rush, Samuel Adams and Thomas Jefferson. In the story of the founders of American Independence, we find the values of Unitarian Universalism. These noble men and women created a revolution that was the most complete, unexpected and remarkable in the history of the world. And they knew that just as people can be guided by conscience in the choosing of their government, so too can our conscience be our guide in choosing our beliefs, our ministers and our practices.

On the table, in the painting, you find a Bible, signifying our deep roots in the Christian and Jewish traditions. But Pat placed the Bible just on the edge of the table, because Unitarian Universalists have always been on the cutting edge of Biblical scholarship and interpretation. Touching the Bible is a book by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Unitarian Minister and great American philosopher. In his Divinity School Address at Harvard University in 1838, referring to the Bible, he told us that the totality of God's revelation and wisdom could not be sealed in a book that was written centuries ago, but rather that God's revelation is continuous and is manifest in all times and places. Therefore, we can find truth and wisdom and miracles all around us and within us. His transcendentalist philosophy catapulted Unitarianism from identifying as a strictly Christian faith into being a faith that is open to the wisdom of men and women of all eras and all cultures. While we maintain our Christian heritage, we also embrace a larger vision, and we're willing to respect and learn from Buddhists and native peoples and others who may have different ideas about Ultimate Reality.

Then, the painting has flowers. Wow, can Pat paint flowers! He's painted a bouquet so full and deep and varied because it represents us: all a bit different, but each valuable and each adding something significant to the whole. Like flowers, our beauty and power is only increased by being together in all our diversity. It follows the great American creed: E Pluribus Unum – Out of many, one. That's what this church is about,

unity within diversity. We join together from many varied perspectives and beliefs to be one community of faith and vision. Like our country, we are not divided by our differences, but strengthened by them. And like the flowers in the vase, all of us are nourished from the same Source. In this depiction the Source is the water. It represents God, the Numinous, the Holy. It's a fitting symbol for Unitarians because even the humanists and scientists among us can relate to the image of water as the source of all life. Water is colorless and formless; it is in us and around us and sustains us. In this painting it represents the Holy.

The vase then represents our church: the structure where we come together to be nourished by God and one another. Pat chose a simple vase with clear glass to represent the simplicity of our sanctuary and the clear glass windows that remind us each week as we look out on the world that our religion is not just in here one hour a week, but it is out there in the world everyday, every hour. Of course Pat picked flowers from our memorial garden to place in the bouquet and he included a sprig of pine from the pine tree that sits outside our chancel window. It is where we often return the ashes of our beloved to the good earth. The tree is a symbol of the renewal and rejuvenation of life from generation to generation.

You will also find a dead oak leaf placed gently on the table in the painting. It's there as a symbol of the mighty cloud of witnesses, a reminder of those aged men and gracious women, and little children who have gone before us. They may not be with us in body, but they remain forever with us in spirit and they always remain a part of our picture, a part of who we are and the vision of what we will become.

There's an antique wooden voting box to represent our commitment to democracy in religion. Always remember that democracy began in our churches first and then made its way into our form of government. The first ballots cast on the shores of the new world were cast inside churches as the members voted on ministers. This was unheard of in England and Europe and it may have come in part from the influence of the settlers' encounters with Native Americans and the way they organized and made decisions. Either way, it was a profound theological statement to allow lay people to vote on who would be their minister. It was an affirmation that people are able to discern right from wrong, good from evil, and therefore, it was a basic affirmation in the worth of human beings and of life. The affirmation was so strong that it aided in the people's willingness to rise up against the tyranny of the monarchy and to form the first democratic government, a government founded on principles of equality, liberty, justice and self-determination.

Then, in the painting you can find not one, but two beautiful glass hearts on the table. It's the only double representation, emphasizing that Love is the spirit of this church. Nearby we find the Statue of Liberty. We are nothing if we are not free. And this must include not only political freedom, but freedom of conscience and belief, freedom to question authority, and freedom to question all aspects of life and its meaning. Any tradition that hinders the ancient and ageless cause of human freedom robs its people of the very essence of humanity. We have a free pulpit where our ministers are given full liberty to speak from their conscience, and we have free pews where we trust that each member is able to decide for themselves. Yet, we know that freedom for freedom's sake is not enough. That's why nearby you'll find a scale of justice. Our freedom must be used responsibly and employed in the effort of justice for all. In the coming years, let us point to the Statue of Liberty in this painting and explain that, "here in this church, we have taken the ideals of freedom, justice, equality and tolerance and applied them to our religious lives." Some ideals are just too good to be left to politics.

Then you'll notice a small blue and white vase that I picked up on the children's choir trip to Transylvania and Hungary this summer. It comes from the Carpathian Mountains from the place where Unitarianism originally formed as a religion in 1568 during the Protestant Reformation. To understand who we are, one needs to know that we are not some New Age religion. We are part of a rich spiritual heritage that grew out of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. We may have formed in our own time and in our own way in this new world, but our heritage is much older than two hundred years and expands far beyond North America.

I could literally discuss the painting for hours and even days. The nature of this painting is that its explanation is like an accordion; it can expand and contract. It can be explained in two or three minutes, or in a twenty-minute sermon, or each element can be taken apart and used as the basis of a year-long seminar. This week, Pat and I will be writing a brief description that will help all of us explain the painting to others. Most importantly, I want anyone who visits us to go away knowing that ours is a uniquely American church that connects us to universal and global ideals.

It's no coincidence that a year ago on the evening of September 11th, people of all walks of life made their way to this church to attend our service. It's no coincidence that I was interviewed on the TV news that day, and quoted on the front page of the Tulsa World the following Sunday. It's no coincidence that Unitarian Universalist minister Forest Church was asked to be on national television to offer commentary during the national prayer service led by President Bush the Friday following September 11th. From the very beginning, we have had a special place in the religious life and moral development of this country. Our religion is inextricably tied to the ideals that all Americans hold dear. If our nation is ever going to fully live up to the ideals upon which it is founded, then we Unitarian Universalists have the task of carrying on the tradition of being a free and democratic moral voice of liberation and unity.

Because the future of this great nation, will hang on the balance of what happens in the hearts and conscience of its people. You and I, and the religion we share, have been and must remain a vital part of the American story. To fail to realize and communicate the magnitude of our vision is to reduce the potential of our souls. Literally, the lives and liberties of millions born and unborn have an essential interest in our success. Let us never fail to positively state: who we are, why we are, and why it matters! God bless you. Amen.