

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
 “Beyond Tribalism”

Rev. Sam Trumbore October 2, 2022

### Call to Celebration

A reminder that we are in the special period of the Jewish calendar between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur called the High Holy Days or the Days of Awe. It is a time of introspection, for apologizing, asking forgiveness and making amends for wrongs and harms caused during the previous year. It is an excellent time to, in the vernacular, clean up your act.

It is also a time for deepening one’s spirituality and faith. A time for creating Beloved Community, for the work of creating peace, justice and harmony. That work requires we learn to transcend our tribalism and find a greater unity in our diversity. It is time to heal our relationships with each other as part of that process.

I found [these inspiring words](#) from a Central Synagogue Yom Kippur morning service that speak the spirit I hope we can bring now into this space:

How lovely are your tents, O Jacob,  
 your dwelling places, O Israel!  
 In Your abundant lovingkindness, O God,  
 let me enter Your house, worship in Your holy Temple.  
 I love Your house, O Eternal One,  
 the place where Your glory dwells.  
 So I worship with humility;  
 I seek blessing in the presence of God, my Maker.  
 May my prayer now, Eternal One,  
 find favor before You.  
 In Your great love, O God,  
 answer me with Your truth ...

as we join together in the celebration of life.

### Reading

Mark 12:28 – 34 (NRSV)

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

Jesus answered, "The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "God is one, and besides God there is no other";

and "to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and "to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from realizing the nature and abode of God."

After that no one dared to ask him any question.

## Spoken Meditation

Psalm 132 translated by Nan C. Merrill

Enter the Silence, into the Heart of Truth;  
For herein lies the Great Mystery where life is ever unfolding;  
Herein the Divine Plan is made known,  
the Plan all are invited to serve.

Listen for the Music of the Spheres  
in the resounding Silence of the universe.  
May balance and harmony be your aim  
as you are drawn into the Heart of Love.

Those who follow the way of Love  
with calm and faith-filled intent,  
Know that all is working toward healing and wholeness.  
And may the healing power of Love  
lift you from the limitations of fear and ignorance  
into the arms of freedom.

May the peace of the Spirit bless you and lead you on life's journey.  
Be not afraid of the Silence, for Wisdom's Voice is heard there!  
As you follow the Light, you become gentle and kind,  
you come to live in the Light and see through Love's eyes.

Children enter the world radiating the Spirit—  
learn from them of innocence and simplicity;  
Learn to co-operate with the unseen realms,  
to see beyond the veil.

Wise are those who learn through silence;  
learn then to listen well.  
For beyond the silence and stillness within,  
you will come to know a profound and dazzling Silence

—

Herein lies the Music of the Spheres, the harmony of creation.  
Enter the Sacred Altar within,  
converse with the Beloved in sweet communion.

Blessings of the Great Silence be with you as  
you help to rebuild the heart of the world with love!

## Sermon

We know we live in polarized times with strong divisions between Red States and Blue States, between Democrats and Republicans, and between cities and rural areas. Yet that wedge is now creating divisions even within the Evangelical Christian Community.

The New York Times Podcast, “The Daily,” had an [illuminating interview September 23](#) with Kevin Thompson, a 44 year-old conservative Evangelical pastor. Conservative, but in the pre-Trump way of being conservative.

Thompson grew up in the small, mostly white, very conservative Arkansas town Fort Smith. He grew up in a church-centric, family-centric missionary Baptist Church with a strong feeling of security and being loved. Even though his parents divorced, the church was his stable, comforting rock. It was in that holding environment he sensed his call to ministry. At 16, he was preaching in small towns and to youth groups.

He was well liked but not every sermon went over well. He got in trouble at a Wednesday night prayer meeting preaching in a sermon “one way God makes himself known is through nature.” He found out Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism don’t mix very well by the cold response to his words. That rejection made him question his calling to ministry. What persuaded him to continue to pursue his call was stepping out into the night air, alone, looking up into the heavens and seeing a shooting star, so bright that it lit up his faith. That might have been a sign to check out Unitarian Universalism but he was clearly still in the conservative Evangelical camp.

After college, Thompson headed to seminary. In seminary, he encountered other seminarians studying in different faith traditions. He is forced to confront differences in Christian belief from the sheltered Baptist bubble in which he had grown up. This drove him to reassess his theology and interrogate the assumptions that informed his faith. One Black professor who inspired him, the first Black professor he’d ever had, by the name of Robert Smith Jr., popped his bubble. Dr. Smith seemed to be so different politically and yet he also exhibited a persuasive, authentic love of Jesus.

Thompson preached a sermon for his class drawn from an often quoted passage from Ezekiel 37 about the prophet walking through the valley of dry bones. Thompson took the perspective of the prophet Ezekiel who’s walking alongside God and pitying these poor dry bones that need’s God’s help.

Smith made the challenging observation that in the Black Church, it would never be preached that way, that the preacher was the prophet walking through the valley. Instead, the Black preacher

would be identifying with the dry bones that God is rescuing and reanimating. Smith pointed out that Thompson always preached from the place of the person in power. Then he asked, “Have you ever considered that **you** need to be rescued by Jesus?”

It was a light-bulb moment for Thompson. Here is how he explained it:

It’s a blind spot I didn’t recognize. And there’s no way for me to recognize it unless a person with a different background, experience, and understanding had pointed out to me that I had been reading scripture through **a lens that was incomplete** and was totally biased by my culture. And yet, I didn’t realize it was biased by my culture. ([transcript](#))

This was a formative moment for Thompson’s theology and ministry. He realized his job as a pastor wasn’t just to reinforce everyone’s biases but to challenge them. He recognized that is what the Biblical Prophets did. He recognized that is what Jesus and Paul did too. His own realization of his bias helped him understand that spiritual growth and development requires experiences of discomfort.

Thompson returned to his hometown in 2002 to serve as pastor for Community Bible Church. He took the approach of humility rather than triumphalism. You are messed up and so am I. Jesus will save us together. And he was very successful, growing the church and being well loved and respected in the community. The church grew from 300 in 2002 to 1600 by 2016. Things were going great and Thompson was having a great ministry.

That started to change in 2016.

Remember that Thompson is from Arkansas, home of Bill Clinton. Clinton’s sex scandals demonstrated his lack of good Christian character and Thompson had preached against him. Then Trump comes along with the same questionable character traits. He is a reality TV star, an owner of casino gambling establishments and involved sex scandals too. Thompson blogged about his dislike of both Trump and Hillary Clinton and not planning to vote for either of them. The immediate hostile reaction from his congregation was intense. It was at that moment he began to see how politics and faith were merging in the pews. There wasn’t room any more for being morally challenged by the pastor. You’re with us or against us.

What changed in 2016 and again in 2020? Why did people suddenly become so brittle and unwilling to be self-critical? Why did they become defensive and fearful of the other side? I don’t think I’m going to need much time explaining it. One word says it all. Trump.

Yet we can’t lay the tribal polarization completely at Trump’s doorstep. What he is extremely skilled at is sensing a crowd’s anxiety and amplifying it for personal gain. It is the emotional fallacy that the person who deeply understands your concerns and fears has the solution to them. In fact, the opposite is often true. Trump has little or no creative problem-solving or community building ability. His empire building strategies, only have the ability to divide, conquer and destroy.

Unfortunately, the source of the polarization Trump exploits has been the liberal success at driving social change.

The conservative small-town Thompson grew up in, *assumed* white Christian patriarchal heterosexual and birth gender assignment conformity. Non-conformity was strange and curious at best but more likely considered socially deviant and immoral.

They watched with discomfort uppity twentieth century women who wanted to be in control of their own bodies and decide for themselves whether or not they wanted to follow God's plan for them to become mothers. Then came the sexual revolution starting with the birth control pill that opened the possibility for women to enjoy non-procreative sex. In the 1970's and 80's, same gender love made its bid for normalcy culminating in marriage equality. That victory was followed by the rapid evolution of thinking and practices about gender diversity. And since desegregation and civil rights legislation, white supremacy has increasingly been threatened. The truth of inequality becomes self-evident in moments like the murders of George Floyd, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile.

What, for many of us, is progress moving to a more open, pluralistic society is a direct assault on the white Christian patriarchal heterosexual and birth gender assignment conformity of the missionary Baptist small-town church. Their armored cultural bias does not want to be changed because this bias is God's plan for America.

When I think about their dilemma, I'm usually thinking about how wrong they are and their need to change and evolve toward my way of thinking. I'm sure they would feel the same way about me. If I would just take Jesus as my personal savior and submit my life to the authority of scripture, I will find my way home to their point of view.

Maybe ... or maybe not. Jesus had something to say about this. As Jesus put it so well in the sermon on the Mount starting in Matthew 5:43 (NRSV adapted):

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of the most high. The Holy One who causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the vile tax collectors doing that?

And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the self-righteous do that?

Be virtuous, therefore, as your Creator is the template of virtue.

It takes courage to virtuous. It takes a lot of courage to love your enemy. That's why I appreciate the scripture I read today about Jesus affirming the core of Jewish faith, the Shema, the First Commandment would be familiar to every Jew hearing him. "Love your neighbor" would have been less commonly spoken. Some Jesus Seminar's Biblical scholars think Jesus's use of "love thy enemy" might be an echo of the famous Rabbi Hillel, who was his contemporary.

It is said: A devout student approached Hillel with the request to teach him the whole of the Torah while the student stood on one foot.

Hillel responded: “What you find hateful do not do to another. This is the whole of the Law. Everything else is commentary. Now go learn that!” ([The Five Gospels](#))

One solution to the dilemma of moving beyond tribalism may be found in the story of Pastor Thompson’s awakening in seminary. Professor Smith reached deep into his heart by helping him see he was preaching from a place of privilege rather than humility when considering the dry bones section of Ezekiel.

I’d like to repeat what he said happened because I think there is so much packed into his words:

It’s a blind spot I didn’t recognize. And there’s no way for me to recognize it unless a person with a different background, experience, and understanding had pointed out to me that I had been reading scripture through a lens that was incomplete and was totally biased by my culture. And yet, I didn’t realize it was biased by my culture. ([transcript](#))

Somehow, the growth and development about difference happened for him in an encounter with difference. That encounter was necessary for his insight to happen. It wasn’t something he likely would have come to by himself. The very idea that there are multiple lens to read scripture and some have culture bias is a rude awakening for a literal Bible reading fundamentalist.

So the question that arises from this quote is: How can encounters be set up where this kind of awakening can happen?

The group who inspires me the most on this front are the [Braver Angels](#).

The first meeting of the Braver Angels happened *after* the 2016 election. It brought together 10 Trump supporters and 11 Clinton supporters in South Lebanon, Ohio. It was their first Red/Blue Workshop. It was an experiment to see if Americans could find a way to disagree respectfully as well as find common ground. Some were quite pessimistic thinking it couldn’t be done.

It turned out they were able to connect. Native born and immigrant, Christian, Muslim, Humanist, Black and white, they could listen to each other’s points of view *after* they had heard each other’s stories. They could hear each other when they sensed each other as neighbors in a country they shared rather than as a stereotype. They were featured on NPR and went on the road to showcase their dialogue techniques.

The Braver Angels name was inspired by the words of Abraham Lincoln, who not only called on Americans to summon the “better angels” of our nature – but called on us to find the *courage* needed to pursue a more perfect union, “with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right.” (<https://braverangels.org/our-story/#problem>)

Their work is about building civility and civic trust. It is about healing the wounds between left and right. They reject the normalization of extreme polarization. Their work is about inspiring the beloved community through bridging the partisan divide and strengthening our democratic republic.

To that end they:

- state their views freely and fully, without fear.
- welcome opportunities to engage with those with whom they disagree.

- treat people who disagree with them with honesty and respect.
- seek to disagree accurately, avoiding exaggeration and stereotypes.
- look for common ground where it exists, and if possible, find ways to work together.
- believe that all of us have blind spots and none of us are not worth talking to.
- believe that, in disagreements, both sides share and learn; neither side is teaching the other or giving feedback on how to think or say things differently.

They are guided by the Braver Angels Rule: At every level of organizational guidance, red and blue leaders are equally represented. Regarding race, ethnicity, and social and economic class, our constant striving is to be an organization that reflects the country they seek to serve.

The Braver Angels capture a vision of enacting the words, love thy neighbor, love thy enemy. If you take the Braver Angels approach and apply it to religion, they are doing what we aspire to do in dealing with our own diversity of beliefs within Unitarian Universalism. It doesn't mean any denial or suppression of one's own identity. It does mean speaking honestly, respectfully and fearlessly. It means being willing to be changed.

And that takes courage.

May we find that courage to reach beyond the limits of our tribalism as we seek to build Beloved Community.