

"Enslaved by the Truth?"

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Mitchell Howard
To the UU Congregation of Whidbey Island
October 31, 2004

Today we have gathered where powerful time-lines converge, at a focal point on the circle of the year. This is Reformation Sunday, marking the anniversary of the date in 1517 when the ornery German monk, Martin Luther, outraged by the selling of indulgences, got seriously in the face of Roman Catholic authority. We also have arrived at the hinge of the pre-Christian European year: Samhain, when the land of the living and the land of the dead draw close as we head into the dark of winter. Our Universalist tradition is attuned most resonantly to nearby pages on the calendar, as the Christian Feast of All Souls looms ahead, on Nov. 2. This season is so charged with power that last week, on the eve of a full moon, while a total lunar eclipse unfolded, the Boston Red Sox even won the World Series!

Puritan New England, whence the tree of American Unitarianism mostly sprang, carried well into the 19th century the tradition of an "Election Sermon". In the season when God's chosen people gathered to choose their earthly leaders, they sought from their preacher words to inspire wisdom in that choosing. Such sermonizing was totally kosher in a society which did not respect – nay, could not imagine -- the separation of church and state. Even after the American Revolution, New England divines dutifully sought to shape the minds of the electorate, over whom they were settled as shepherds. Now, in our thoroughly secular age, no clergyperson in America would dream of telling his or her parishioners how to vote, I am sure. Well whether or not we can really be sure that the wall of separation is being respected elsewhere, we, here, can and will certainly uphold it, we who count Thomas Jefferson among our revered precursors. All the same, I would be untrue to myself, to you, and to the memory of Emerson, Channing, Parker and Jefferson alike, if

I did not acknowledge that here in the United States of America, we, the people, face some stark choices just two days from now. A troubling theme has run throughout this election campaign season. Entities such as “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” and “Texans for Truth” have arisen to tell us that one candidate or another is not leveling with us about essential matters. Reflecting on this conundrum of dueling truths, as the year has lurched forward, led me early on to look to the older layers of our faith tradition, and there I found a text from the Gospel of John, and in it I recognized my touchstone this Reformation Sunday, pre-Election Day Sermon. It is the 32nd verse in the 8th Chapter of John: "You Will Know the Truth and the Truth Will Make You Free".

When I was young one of my hometown newspapers put that verse near the top of its editorial masthead, which seemed to me right and fitting. To know the truth, in this boy’s world of geometry and logic, meant to know that which was not false. Falsehood enslaved; truth liberated: what could be simpler, purer, truer than that? It seemed, to my youthful innocence, a clarion call of reason and enlightenment. It was what a free press was for! It rang true as a warning against dogmatism, which smothers elusive truths under a blanket of too-easy certainties.

Having unearthed a biblical text as a springboard for this autumnal Sunday, I did what any self-respecting, early 21st century, retired UU minister would do. Before cracking open any of my venerable New Testament reference works from two decades ago, I googled the verse. Into the search window went the phrase” Commentaries on John 8:32”, and – in Google’s charmingly vague words – out came “about 3,090” results. And, as I paged through the results and surveyed the descriptions, I became progressively sadder. Sailing the world wide web ocean of the internet is always a wild experience. It has an “anyone-can-be-a-publisher” aspect that enables a

proliferation of small sects – even, I suspect, many sects of one. Advances in printing technology half a millennium ago aided the rapid growth of Christian sects based on minute shadings of doctrine. Today’s internet shows promise to far outstrip the Reformation’s mushrooming of sectarian hairsplitting. However we may view such proliferation, it remains the sad fact that, when I searched the Web for references to John 8:32, I found mostly endless variations on narrow, fundamentalist dogmatism. There was little of the classical liberal spirit to be found amongst the bulk of these web-based commentaries. Essentially, it all boiled down to the following syllogism: Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life”; “you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free”; therefore, you will be made free by accepting this one true spin on the meaning of Jesus the Christ, only-begotten son of God!

In my home, we respond to good news of that sort with a phrase dripping with Gilbert and Sullivan irony: “Modified Rapture”. I would love to know – who wouldn’t? – that the saga of the universe comes with a happy ending and that all of us will be one in the end with an all-loving creator who will sustain us in eternity. However, I cannot just pull up to the window and say, “I’m convinced: where do I sign up for this truth that will make me free?” I am not one who can easily put aside all critical thought to accept a proposition that has but a shaky basis in those laws of nature and nature’s god that we have grasped to date.

The orthodox assume as a given the supernatural story of the Nazarene rabbi as either the Creator of the Universe incarnated, or at least a kind of demi-God. They take for granted that the notion of Jesus as “the way, the truth and the life” can only make sense within the metaphysical superstructure that was constructed around his memory during the first four centuries after his death. This doctrine survived without serious challenge for another millennium before Reformation, Renaissance and Enlightenment

brought both its origins and its internal soundness into serious question. The orthodox spin on John is also entangled with the doctrine immemorially summarized by the sign at the gospel mission, “Jesus Died for Your Sins”. In the theology biz, we call that notion the “doctrine of substitutionary atonement”.

I’m not here to re-fight ancient theological battles. Should anyone among you be still devoted to the doctrine that we are depraved by the primal sin in the Garden, and feel in need of a restoring sacrifice which was accomplished by a supernatural intervention two millennia ago, I don’t know quite what I can offer you. You see, our Universalist ancestor, Hosea Ballou, in his “Treatise on Atonement”, pretty much closed the door on that discussion nearly two centuries ago. On a more personal note, my heart and soul simply couldn’t abide the “faith-based economics of substitutionary atonement” even if Brother Ballou hadn’t blown it away with reasoned scriptural analysis back in 1805.

So on this Reformation Sunday, having been accosted by this seductive verse in the Gospel of John, I ask myself, should I spend our time together on this autumn Sunday trying to upgrade the conventional interpretation of a bit of very old scripture? My answer is yes. We are a knowledge-thirsty people, in this church of the flaming chalice. The puzzle of truth is always important. Freedom is nearly as critical to human life as carbon and oxygen. So, yes, there is no better time than now to muse on this ancient verse. The nut inside the shell of John 8:32 is worth digging out, but not using the tools orthodox Christians might require.

Let us rummage about in our unorthodox tool-box and see what we find. I am a devotee of etymology, always eager to delve deeply into the historical roots of words, looking for the subatomic meaning of even the pithiest epigram. It is often a frustrating quest, due to the shallowness of our

sure knowledge and the opacity threaded through the world beyond our words. Yet I struggle on, and, from time to time, encounter a nugget in the mud. I think I may have found one recently, which I promise I will share before this day is done, but first I owe tradition and the mainstream a few moments rummaging elsewhere in the toolbox.

Let's just pull out and examine the word "truth", which is the linch-pin of John 8:32, both as the object of the slippery verb "to know" and the active subject of the powerhouse formulation "shall make you free". Down the centuries since this verse was first penned, two broad streams of simplistic response to its challenge have dominated human thought and feeling. One I might call "Pilatistic Cynicism" and the other "Pietistic Fideism". The Pilatistic Cynic's core motto is that wistful phrase attributed to the Roman bureaucrat Pontius Pilate "what is truth?". "Pietistic Fideism" can be summarized in the annoying bumper sticker slogan, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it". The Catholic Encyclopedia defines "fideism" as "a system of philosophy or an attitude of mind, which, denying the power of unaided human reason to reach certitude, affirms that the fundamental act of human knowledge consists in an act of faith, and the supreme criterion of certitude is authority". I have even invented for this school of thought a mythical patron saint, St. Tautologos, protector of those addicted to circular reasoning, and those who are happy to take things on faith, however contradicted by evidence or logic.

Cynical, pragmatic old Pilate and his latter-day emulators are essentially nihilists who reject the very idea of such a thing as truth, or any absolutely reliable standard for understanding or behavior. Such a principle may grow out of craven self-serving, or spring from loftier lattice-works of reasoning. The existentialists of half a century ago swung between elation and despair at the freedom their nihilism implied. We Unitarian Universalists

have, during my lifetime, been subject more to the temptations of extremist doubt than of extremist certitude. We who love freedom may prefer such nihilism over the absolutist fatwas and dicta of Ayatollahs, Popes and Televangelists, but I submit that neither of these paths has anything to offer the dedicated seeker of truth, whatever the motives of those who promote them.

Though we seekers should back no dog whatever in the fight between these two simplistic yet perilous strategies for dealing with the “Truth Problem”, we need not despair of finding a better way. Further rummaging in the toolbox revealed a tool I call “ethical messianism”. It’s at least as ancient as Isaiah, and as fresh as the movement of the last century known as “Liberation Theology”. This approach may assume the revelatory validity of the gospel story, but it did not obsess on the miraculous personhood or incarnational magic in Jesus the demigod-like Christ figure. Rather it turned to the liberating power in the ethical teachings of Yeshua the once-obscure rustic rabbi. When Liberation Theologians read John 8:32, they presume it points to the vital seed embedded in the sayings of Jesus and the accounts of his actions on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Their “preferential option for the poor” was used against them by those who accused them of being Communists in bishops’ clothing. But, in fact, the gospel record they cited is full of a Jesus who echoed the justice-loving prophets of old Israel and foreshadowed the liberating movements that swept Europe and the world during the last five hundred years of the second millennium. We in the Unitarian Universalist tradition have also been influenced by Liberation Theology, though we have for the most part not jettisoned our hard-won critical approach to scriptures of all sorts. We, too, in our social witnessing and advocacy efforts, have sailed into waters which may cast us in a light that shines more political than spiritual. I remember visiting in Toronto about a

quarter of a century ago with Duke Gray, then the minister at our First Unitarian Church. Duke joked that, just as a wag once called the Church of England the “Tory Party at Prayer,” he often thought of his congregation as the “Ontario New Democrats at Silent Meditation”.

I would contend, however, that, if we are to be loyal to the distinctive virtue of Unitarian Universalism, we must resist the temptation to become merely “low-church liberation theology” types, just as firmly as we resist the temptations of dead-end nihilism and “Pilatistic Cynicism”. Why do I make a big deal of this contention, on this Reformation Sunday? Why John 8:32, at Samhain, just two days before All Souls’ Day collides with what is commonly called “the Most Important Election of Our Lifetimes?” Well, as Brother Martin said nearly a half a millennium ago, “here I stand, I can do no other”.

Here I stand, an ordinary fellow with extraordinary hopes. Here I stand, a child of the Enlightenment and yet a littermate of the first-born atomic generation, an aspirant to ecstasy and poetry who yet wishes to someday leave his son a world trending not only toward astonishing progress, but some modicum of natural balance. Here I stand, a mere mortal infused with the infinite reach of mind, a person who is still entranced by the dynamism encoded in that ancient phrase, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

Notice this: the verbs in John 8:32 are in the future tense. There is implicit here the sense of a journey, a process, rather than a discrete transaction with a simple measurable output. Like all great poetry, like all abiding epigrams that transcend corny bromides, it leaves us to live with a great deal of ambiguity. What IS truth, after all? Is it static, or dynamic? Is it a wave, or a particle? And what does it mean to be “set free”? If one is captive to a patent falsehood, like $2+2=17$, the liberating truth of $2+2=4$ will help in many daily tasks, and make for a more ample, satisfying life. But

there are so many subtler forms of enslavement we humans can fall into, even by our own choice. We can so easily be enslaved by comfort or caution, by careful calculations or carefree courage. Things that we deem blessings can become cages if we are too attached to them. Traits we know to be virtues can become addicting strait-jackets if we worship them as idols. Let us dare even to ask, can we be enslaved by the Truth?

To tackle that last poignant conundrum, I will finally pull out the etymology tool from my personal toolbox. The Greek word translated as “truth” in John 8:32 is “aletheia”. In the middle of that word you see “lethe”, a term recognizable from our childhood doses of ancient Greek mythology. Digging down to these roots proved a dazzling reminder to me. Although I’d long ago learned that the word “aletheia” refers to a state of “non-forgetfulness”, I had never put it together with the stirring epigram that is John 8:32. Look carefully and you see behind the orthodox Christian trappings, the perennial teachings that form the heart of the Hindu-Buddhist tradition. We find our liberation, according to ancient wisdom stream India calls Vedanta, when we attain mindfulness of our real nature, which partakes of the divine creative energy at the root of the whole swirling Universe. Every enslavement is a form of forgetting. When we are unmindful, we are filled with automatic entrapments and illusory imperatives. Nor must one necessarily accept the Vedantist worldview or the Buddhist psychology to find power in the notion that mindfulness is liberating. Beholding “truth” as “aletheia” reconnects us as well with the old Socratic path of wisdom-seeking. We may live in fear of what will happen next, or what awful fates await us, but if we are mindful, we grow comfortable blooming in the present moment, and thus can overcome our ensnared captivities.

Americans who love the liberal spirit that birthed our nation must not yield the flag or the Constitution to those who would make them the sole

possessions of a conservative faction. Likewise, we who share with orthodoxy common roots in the soil of the prophets of ancient Israel, including rabbi Jesus, must take our own possession of what is good, powerful and full of blessing in that lineage, even as we clear away the weeds that have grown up over the millennia, blocking the light.

Our Unitarian titan William Ellery Channing famously thundered “revelation is not sealed” in the face of dogmatisms that refused the ministry of reason. We are all inheritors of the Reformation begun by Luther and company, and ought not to surrender its mantle to religious reactionaries, not here in our covenanted circle, nor in the public square. The Enlightenment legacy is our special care, since it was the nursery of Unitarian Universalism. When it is attacked by neo-medievalists, in the academy or on the Federal bench, ours is the duty to defend and extend its illuminating energy. When the spirit of the witch-burners is rekindled in this land, or anywhere on Earth, we who have learned to integrate pagan wisdom ought to be the boldest of sentinels, warning a free people against the temptations of the stake.

If, indeed, you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free, it is always a do-it-yourself affair. Awaiting rescue from the sky, or from someone else’s revealed truth, may be an appealing movie dream, but it’s neither a good bet, nor particularly good exercise for the spirit. We, in what we have loved to call “the free church”, are the minutemen and women of this particular moment, when our America stands perilously close to descending into know-nothingism and theocracy of the most recidivistic sort. As Election Day approaches, we need more than ever to remember that “aletheia” means “not forgetting”, that truth is an unfolding, discovered by those who seek to go beyond the shackles of our past. As Nov. 2, 2004 arrives, and passes into history, my call and counsel to you all is to rededicate yourselves to the search for deeper connection with mysterious but luminous truth. You will thereby,

step by daring step, become the free persons we celebrate in our hymns. Be intolerant of absolutism, in yourselves and in the common life, but practice the art of citizenship with a tolerant heart, a skeptical mind, and a will that is bent toward justice and dedicated to the happiness of all creatures.