

**February 19, 2017**

**Sermon: “Being Inclusive in an Exclusive World”**

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For those who didn't experience it: During the Vietnam era our nation was divided. There were those who believed the Vietnam War was contrived and immoral. This position opposed the national draft and encouraged young men to oppose the war by ignoring the draft. This position favored disobeying law for a position of moral supremacy. This position was favored by younger, more academic and more liberal elements of the nation. Most were Democrats. On the other side of the argument there were those who believed the prevailing political theory of the day, which was the domino theory. This was the idea that communism would infect Third World countries and they would fall like a row of dominos and once they were communist they couldn't revert to democracy. This position supported the Vietnam War on the basis of nationalism and supported the military draft because it was the law of the day. This position was held by many of our greatest generation and more conservative elements of the country. Most were Republicans. These opposing positions dominated many of our churches and created a political divide in our churches that persists to some extent to this day.

The first two congregations I attended had this dynamic. In Sacramento, which had two military installations, attenders were not meant to be welcomed if they were military. Almost 10 years later in Plattsburgh New York, we were

the only military family in the congregation. Though there were members who fought in both the second world war and Korea, there were no Republicans left in many of the congregations. As we moved into the 80s, the political divide within our congregations grew. Many members began to think liberal religion equated to liberal politics. It did not, but it's affect was to make our tents smaller. As Republican politics politically aligned themselves with the religious right, fewer members of our congregations who were Republican would identify themselves. While the members of the congregation were always polite, there was always a feeling that opposing positions had no validity. This is the problem with too much uniformity within our congregations and within our demographics. During the Vietnam era there were many far left leaning political positions held in our congregations; many by lay leaders, and some by ministers. It was a contentious and divisive time throughout the country and our congregations mirrored these divisions. After the Nixon-Ford presidencies the political tensions drew down until we saw the rise of the religious right politically. It was called the moral majority. I felt they were neither; moral nor majority. Liberal churches were horrified because this moral majority religious organization was so political. The Unitarians and Universalists have advocated for their political positions for at least 100 years, from being abolitionist, universal suffrage to civil rights, gender and sexual equality. The Catholic Church has always advocated for their political positions. Many of our members began to feel we were all the same political persuasion. We were being exclusive. Our assumptions had made us smaller.

One of our ministers, Mark Belletini, tells us,

“For religion to be significant, it has to provide more than the comforts of community. It also had to provide opportunities for deepening, for what I call spiritual growth, and for the casting down of false images of stereotypes, which hurt us all. A good religion has to open us to the real diversity of our modern world. For our work as liberal religious people is not to be competitive with others, and to find ways to supersede others, but rather to find ways to supersede ourselves, to grow beyond our limitations and our constrictive boundaries, each and every one of us. Diversity, you see, must not end up being some sort of feel good slogan, a word we keep in our back pocket to make us feel like we’re broad minded. Diversity is a gift. But it cannot be a gift... unless it is received. It is only received when there are hands and hearts open enough to receive it. And the opening of fists into welcoming hands and welcoming hearts is our spiritual work....”

You’re probably asking yourself what has this to do with my topic of being inclusive in an exclusive world. I feel that understanding this history is important to understanding why in our congregations we have and do alienate members who have conservative or Republican ideas.

Now I believe church ought to be a place where we can and should talk about values. I also believe that church is the place where we should act on our values. But how to do that, is really the question.

Our current political structures are so extreme. The past national election was so extreme. Secretary Clinton's positions were vilified. The libertarian and environmental positions were marginalized. In the fears that Mister Trump's campaign exposed also encouraged elements of bigotry and intolerance to come out of the closet. Trump supporters were exposed as all being bigots. None of these extreme positions are totally valid. Categorizing anyone is not to welcome any of their inherent worth and dignity, and giving credence to any of the real issues represented. These real issues and the real solutions become obscured by seeing them as extreme. Let me explain with two examples, many Unitarian Universalists see or vision Christianity as the Christianity that the religious right portrays, the Christianity that rejects marriage equality or women's equality. I've heard that we UU's can't be Christians because we don't believe the whole resurrection story. But who says that is what it is to be a Christian? When we think this way, we are accepting a religious rights definition of Christianity and rejecting a liberal definition. Another example was with another congregation that I once served. The congregation was very much in support of women's right to choose. One member of the congregation who was trying for many years to have a child objected to any mention of the term abortion. She felt at odds with the congregation. We needed to affirm her feelings as well as the majority.

A few months ago I brought up to you a covenant that was developed in one of our Canadian congregations. Now Canadians are thought of as being polite and reluctant to

get involved in arguments. They are not. Their political system has become as divisive as ours, they just don't argue about health care anymore. Here's what I found:

We, the members of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Winnipeg, confirm our Covenant of Right Relations. As members, we seek to make our church a safe space for everyone.

We acknowledge that we are different from each other. We recognize that we are enriched by our diversity and that our differences will sometimes be a source of conflict. We acknowledge that we are all responsible for our own words and actions.

In this light, we covenant to:

- Nurture a safe and welcoming community.
- Honour each other's inherent worth.
- Assume good will on the part of each other. Let me restate that, that each of us is exhibiting goodwill.
- Listen to each other with care.
- Speak to and about each other with respect.
- Be honest with each other.
- Talk directly to each other even if differences exist.
- Ask for help when conflict is too difficult to handle alone.

Now I think that this covenant of right relations is easier to write than to live. But if we are to grow as a community of diversity so that we reflect what Eliot Spitzer states:

*“In the melting pot that is America, inclusive trumps exclusive. Whether it's single women, young adults, or minorities, alienating the rapidly growing voting blocs is not smart politics.”* Then we must find a way of maintaining, and honoring each other’s political diversity. I believe one of those ways is to understand the difference between liberal religion and liberal political positions. Liberal religion basically maintains that revelation is not sealed. This is to say that those universal truths which are part of our principles are evolving and not set in concrete for eternity. Like the move to recognize that quantum physics and relativity can move beyond Newtonian physics. The first minister to our Pilgrim forebears in Massachusetts, Pastor John Robinson in 1620, stated ‘The Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.’ In other words, the understanding of the Bible which was the supreme authority in his day and in his church was evolving.

Now I believe the way to do this is to affirm that we each including us ministers don’t have the final answer or maybe even the best answer on how to approach the injustice we see thrust on us by our society. That there may be some answers to injustice that may come from individuals or political persuasions that we don’t expect. And there may be problems that we will create for injustice in our solutions, i.e. law of unintended consequence. I believe for example that declaration of sanctuary city status may have

the opposite effect of concentrating national enforcement on an area that wouldn't be seen. Whereas enforcing the law as it is written provides many safeguards.

Another belief that I believe will help us become more inclusive is to tie our actions to our seven principles and not to the policies of individual political groups. Our seven principles which you each have in your pews and hymnals each week give us ample ammunition to fight injustice. The UUA and UUSC declaration of conscience that this congregation affirmed and Carla read should be a declaration we can all live. Within the next month and after this service in the program Center we will have one of those continuing discussions on how this community comes to consensus on racial inequality. I hope you will join us.

Finally for those of you who believe that this church is not the church you joined, because you are hearing so much about political injustice and talk about the current state of the nation. I believe we all have to remember that our primary reason for being here is to affirm each other in our spiritual journeys. The current state of the nation, I believe, presents the opportunity for us all to rethink and recommit ourselves to our own personal and our community journeys.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world, Amen.