

“Faith of the Free”
Sermon by Sharon Wylie
July 4, 2010

I want to talk with you this Independence Day morning about some of our history. OUR history, the history of those of us in this room. I want to talk about the history of those of us with our own opinions and ideas about what to believe about God.

I’m going to talk this morning about people and things that happened a long time ago, about some of the people who died defending what we now know as our Unitarian Universalist principles. People who died so that we could be here this morning, as part of this Unitarian Universalist Congregation. There was a time where any one of us in this room could have been sentenced to death for holding the beliefs that we do today. If you believe that Jesus was a man, not God; if you believe that there is no God, or you’re not sure if there’s a God; if you believe there might be many gods; if you believe that the bible is not the word of God—any one of these ideas is a heresy, and at various times in history, having these beliefs was a crime punishable by death. We are a room full of heretics, and I call on us today to remember our heretical ancestors and their legacy of fighting for religious freedom.

The word “heresy” is defined as an opinion or doctrine at variance with the orthodox or accepted doctrine, esp. of a Church or religious system. In religious contexts, what is “heresy” has historically been defined by the Roman Catholic Church. The word “Unitarian” refers to the belief that God is one, not the Trinitarian idea of a father, son, and holy spirit. So Unitarianism is a heresy, as

defined by the Roman Catholic Church. The word “Universalism” refers to the belief that there is no hell, and that all humanity is saved. So Universalism is also a heresy, as defined by the Roman Catholic Church. Of course, Unitarian Universalism has grown to mean more than these ideas about one God and salvation for all, but I think if the Roman Catholic Church looked VERY closely at us now, there’d be a longer list of heresies for us than just two.

I want you to know and remember that the word “heresy” comes from a Greek word meaning “to choose.” We choose for ourselves. That’s our heresy.

Although there were some questions about the divinity of Jesus during the early formation of the Catholic Church, the accepted Church doctrine came to be that Jesus was part of the holy trinity—the father, son, and holy spirit—and that he was fully human AND fully divine. This was Church doctrine for centuries, and Church doctrine was the law of the land. Church and state were united, and crimes against the Church were punishable by civic authorities.

But then Gutenberg began printing the bible in 1455, and people began to READ it. Before this, people had always been told by the Church what the bible said. They’d been told by the Church what to believe. But now, those who could read had access to their own copies and could read it for themselves.

Not only THAT, but with the invention of the printing press, people could also quickly publish and distribute NEW ideas. Everything changed.

What we now call the Protestant Reformation began in 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to a Church door in Germany. Protestant ideas began to

spread, and it's important for the rest of our story to remember that Protestants did NOT see themselves as starting a NEW religion. They wanted to REFORM the Catholic Church. They saw themselves as purists, wanting to return to a TRUE form of Christianity, and they were just as concerned with orthodoxy as the Catholic Church was.

So...our stage is set for our first real ancestor, a man with some serious questions about the teachings of the Church. Michael Servetus was a Spanish lawyer, physician, and theologian, a man who liked to argue. In three different publications he argued the trinity has no biblical basis, meaning, if you READ the bible, there's no evidence for an understanding of a Trinitarian god. In 1531, he published *On the Errors of the Trinity*; in 1532, he published *Dialogues on the Trinity* and *On the Justice of Christ's Reign*. All three of these publications argued against the Church's doctrine of a Trinitarian God. Servetus applied REASON to his theology, just as you and I would today.

These writings were condemned by both the Catholic Church AND the Protestant Reformers, and Servetus went underground to avoid persecution. He left Spain, changed his name, studied medicine, and worked as a physician for the next 14 years. But like many of us who think we are right about something, Servetus couldn't let the argument go. In 1547, he initiated a correspondence with French theologian John Calvin, one of the leading Protestant Reformers and one of the most powerful men of the time. Calvin strongly disagreed with Servetus' opinions on the trinity and tried to "correct" his beliefs. Servetus was not persuaded and,

instead, continued to try and convince Calvin of the error of HIS beliefs. When Calvin sent Servetus a copy of Calvin's book *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Servetus sent it back with his own criticisms written in the margin. Calvin was not amused and cut off correspondence with Servetus.

Although we cannot know for sure, it seems to me that Servetus enjoyed the rigorous intellectual debate of this correspondence, never understanding that Calvin did NOT. To John Calvin, matters of the trinity and Church doctrine were not matters open for debate. They were matters of life and death.

In 1553, Servetus was captured by the French Inquisition. He escaped, he went to Geneva, and he went to Calvin's CHURCH, presumably to try—once again—to convince Calvin that Servetus was right in his understanding of the nature of God. Calvin promptly had him arrested. Servetus was tried for heresy and convicted. On October 27, 1553, Michael Servetus was burnt at the stake along with his books.

His dying words were, "O Jesus, son of the eternal God, have pity on me!" If his dying words had been to Jesus, ETERNAL son of God, he would have been in conformance with Church doctrine. To his dying breath, he remained defiant.

What a really obstinate guy. Right? My partner, Peter, calls this portion of our history "the history of bullheadedness."

If you knew you were going to be burned alive, and all you had to do to live was say you believe that Jesus is God, would you say it? Would you be willing to die for your Unitarian Universalist beliefs?

They're just words, after all. History—particularly the time period we're talking about—is filled with people who converted, who recanted, who hid, who said what they needed to say to stay alive. For those of us in the room with families, I think it's a no-brainer. I think it's absolutely significant that Servetus was not married and had no children. He was free from responsibilities to others.

All of that makes sense to me. And...when I think I'm right about something that's important to me, it's really hard for me to let it go. I REALLY understand Servetus continuing to hound Calvin. I think he really respected Calvin and just kept thinking he could CONVINCED him. Servetus clearly wasn't a people person, clearly didn't see that Calvin was very angry. And I think that Servetus just couldn't bring himself to say he believed something he didn't.

Most of us in this room who were not raised Unitarian Universalist have had moments in our lives when we could no longer bring ourselves to say we believe something that we don't. For many of us, this was not an easy thing, and we live with rifts in our families, conversation topics that must be avoided, perhaps people we LOVE but don't see anymore. If we could bring ourselves to say we believe something that we don't, we would not be Unitarian Universalists.

In 1539, Katherine Weigel—eighty years old—confessed her faith in God but refused to say that she believed in Christ as his son. She was burnt at the stake in Krakow.

In 1566, Giovanni Gentile published an attack on the doctrine of the trinity entitled *Antidota*. He was beheaded in Bern.

In 1568, Francis David influenced the proclamation of the Edict of Torda, a declaration of religious tolerance in Transylvania. When Transylvania subsequently fell under Roman Catholic authority, David was sentenced to prison, where he died in 1579.

In 1611, in Warsaw, Iwan Tyskiewicz refused to take an oath in the name of the trinity and refused to take his oath on a crucifix. His tongue was cut out for his blasphemy, he was beheaded for his rebellion, one hand and one foot were cut off because he had thrown the crucifix to the ground, and then his body was burnt for his heresy.

In 1662, after 15 years spent in and out of prison for his heretical writings, John Biddle was arrested while holding a worship service in a private residence in England. He was once again sent to prison, became ill, and died there. He is known now as the father of English Unitarians.

In 1941, the founder of the Unitarian Church in Czechoslovakia, Norbert Capek, was arrested by Nazis on charges of treason. He was tortured and executed a year later at the Dachau concentration camp in Germany.

Would you be willing to die for your Unitarian Universalist beliefs?

Today we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, a document primarily authored by Unitarian Thomas Jefferson. I find the most famous sentence of the Declaration to be a powerful summation of what we now call our Unitarian Universalist principles: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with

certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Wouldn't Michael Servetus have enjoyed life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

We in this room do not have to decide if we would die for our beliefs. Our founding fathers recognized the dangers of uniting Church and state and ensured their separation in the First Amendment to our constitution. They saw that freedom of religion was connected to freedom of the press, freedom of the people to gather, freedom of the people to protest government actions. We choose for ourselves what to believe. We choose if we even want to attend church at all.

The fight for religious freedom is not over, even in the United States, even with our constitutional protections. The pentacle, for example, is a symbol of Neopagan faith in the same way that the cross is for Christians and the Star of David is for Jews. The pentacle is a five-pointed star in a circle and represents the five elements—earth, air, fire, water, and spirit. It took a lawsuit for the United States Department of Veterans Affairs to add the pentacle to its list of approved emblems of belief. These “approved emblems” are those that can be included on the grave markers that honor deceased U.S. military veterans. Prior to the lawsuit, Neopagan veterans were not allowed to have the pentacle on their grave markers. The approval of the pentacle as an emblem of belief came in April 2007. The First Amendment was adopted in 1791.

The news regularly reminds us that freedom of religion is vulnerable. Two employees at a cable company harassed physically and verbally because they are Jewish. An apartment resident told that she may not use the building's community room to hold a bible study with friends. A Baha'i Center destroyed by fire, likely the work of an arsonist. A 16-year-old Sikh student with his turban set on fire by another teenager. A Muslim woman having to file a lawsuit in order to wear her headscarf in the workplace.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to be at the forefront of the fight for religious freedom. The religious pluralism that we embody in our congregation here and within our denomination must be a guidepost for the wider culture. We know that we don't need the same belief system in order to share values and a vision of a better world.

The next time you find yourself talking with someone whose political or religious beliefs differ from yours, I hope you will take the time in talking with that person to find the values you hold in common. I will suggest that love of family is a good place to start. When we can begin to name the things we have in common, we will find that our differences do not have to divide us. This is our hard work to do, and it is radical, transforming work. We cannot meet the challenges facing our world—challenges of poverty, violence, environmental destruction, corporate greed, social justice—we cannot meet these challenges if the only thing we can think to do with those who disagree with us is to avoid the difficult conversations.

May we be like ambassadors from a strange land, a land where differences—even serious differences—are respected, rather than feared. Where people can talk to one another with love and understanding, certain that there is common ground to be found. Certain that we are all seeking safety and wholeness, even if our methods for finding these things might differ from one another. May we be the ambassadors teaching our strange and unusual ways to a world desperately in need of connection across divisions, desperately in need of community, not isolation. May this congregation and this denomination be that strange land from which we journey out into world, and may this be the home we return to when, tired from our work in the world, we need comfort and solace.

Our religious ancestors died for the religious freedoms that we enjoy today. We are here in their spirit. Life and liberty is ours to enjoy. Lift up your voice. Be not afraid. Happy Fourth of July.