

When I was in high school, I remember reading Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic *The Scarlet Letter*. Though it's never been one of my favorite stories (I'm not terribly fond of Hawthorne's literary style), it left a huge impression on me at a time before I had any clue I'd be a Unitarian Universalist one day, with a clear lesson on what happens when a community becomes moralistic and overly-judgmental. Set in a Puritan community in 1642, Hawthorne tells the story of Hester Prynne, a young woman who conceives a child in an adulterous affair and is condemned by her neighbors in the Massachusetts Bay Colony to wear a scarlet letter "A" on her dress in order to visibly bear the mark of her sin.

This is despite the fact that Hester chooses to live a fairly quiet life on the edge of town, earning a meager living through her needlework and generally not bothering anyone. In fact, Hester leads a life of selflessness, helping the poor and sick and generally making the village a better place to live. None of this is enough for the villagers, though, who can only see Hester as a sinner and cannot see the good she is doing in the world. She refuses to name her lover, and this, combined with her adultery, makes her an outcast in their world.

I think I remember the book so much because I've felt like Hester at some times in my life, judged by those who have, for one reason or another, felt superior to me by labeling me a sinner. I wonder if this is a universal experience, if we've all had times when we were on the receiving end of those who would worry about the beam in our eyes before they worry about the same in their own, to paraphrase Jesus?<sup>1</sup> If we compared stories, would we all have something to contribute, some memory of being cast to the edge of society and forced to become outcasts?

It's easy to view this sort of experience as something other people do. What Unitarian Universalists often forget is that the Puritans are our direct religious predecessors, direct parents

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:5, NRSV

of our own movement and creators of the congregational polity our religious movement holds so dear. Such legalism is not just a Puritan issue; it's a human issue as people struggle with how to treat those they disagree with, often on issues they see as intractable. Unitarian Universalism has succumbed to it just as often as other religions, so it behooves us to think about acceptance of one another and how we are to understand it.

As we examine our third principle this month, acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth, I want to ask some provocative questions this morning. How would we respond if a white nationalist wanted to join our congregation? What about a pedophile or a convicted rapist? What if that white nationalist wanted to fill in for me on a Sunday morning to provide a so-called balance to my anti-racist sermons or spout their views during congregational conversation or joys and concerns? How do we handle these situations?

Some people in progressive circles have adopted a version of a saying, "Love the sinner, hate the sin," to express their desire that they will still love a person despite their beliefs or lifestyle. On the surface, this saying seems like the right way to go. After all, Unitarian Universalism promotes a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, not the inherent worth and dignity of all ideas. If there's a way to separate the person from their ideas and actions, maybe we can still accept white supremacists and pedophiles without condoning their actions.

Indeed, this is the intention with the phrase as it was originally written. Its author was Saint Augustine, and it seems a straightforward statement: the sin is what we should be focused on, not the person committing it.

Yet there's problems with this solution, the biggest of which was explained by Indian political activist Mahatma Gandhi, who was very critical of this phrase. In his autobiography, he

writes, “Hate the sin and not the sinner is a precept which, though easy enough to understand, is rarely practiced, and that is why the poison of hatred spreads in the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Yes, there’s a reason Jesus said to “[l]ove your neighbor as yourself,”<sup>3</sup> not to love sinners as yourself: it’s hard to empathize with someone we have labeled. Those who use the phrase “love the sinner, not the sin” may well have good intentions, but they’ve turned the other person into an other, an object different from us and not simply a person with flaws just like everyone else. Seeing people whom society has judged as dredges as neighbors rather than sinners reminds us that we are not all so different, and that we need each other, no matter what we’ve done wrong in the past.

What we’re called to reject is the systems that encourage division, the sin, rather than the people who are caught up in the system one way or the other. This is why you’ll so often hear me talk about white supremacy instead of white supremacists, sexism verses sexist, ableism and not ableists. The -isms are the systems, the -ists labels we attach to people perpetrating what we judge to be bad behavior within such systems. I certainly fail at times as I’m just as much a product of the system as everyone else, but my ultimate goal is to dismantle systems, not exclude people.

This brings us to the tough part of our sermon: if we’re called to accept all people, regardless of their flaws, regardless of their place in the system, must Unitarian Universalists tolerate all behavior? Well, for the answer, I quote country music singer Aaron Tippin: “You’ve got to stand for something or you’ll fall for anything.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it can be tempting to take a

---

<sup>2</sup> Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*

<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:31, NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Tippin and Buddy Brock (1990). *You’ve Got to Stand for Something [Recorded by Aaron Tippin]*. On *You’ve Got to Stand for Something* [MP3 file]. Nashville: RCA Nashville.

position of moral relativism: that what is right is up to a person's individual interpretation of right and wrong without any other considerations.

Some would ask whether this negates what I just said. Well, no. A quote I've not been able to definitively source, attributed to a Unitarian Universalist Association staff member, puts it best: "We accept all souls, not all behaviors."

In other words, we don't label people, all of whom are flawed and mess up at one time or another. We do label ideas and behaviors.

To quote my colleague Emily Wright-Magoon, "[I]t is a misconception that to be a Unitarian Universalist you can believe whatever you want. It's correct that we are not a creedal faith: we do not all have to believe the same thing. But we are a *covenantal* faith: So if a person's beliefs cause them to relate to others in a way that falls outside our covenant, it ends up creating an unwelcoming environment for all."<sup>5</sup>

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't dialogue with people.

This doesn't mean we should exclude people automatically.

It does mean that our foremost priority isn't an interpretation of freedom of speech and democracy that requires us to sacrifice the safety of our members in favor of somehow pretending to hear all sides of every issue, an ideal that will lead us down that relativistic route. No, like our reading this morning suggested, we need a place where we can each go and feel safe in times difficult times of our lives, a place where, as our moment for all ages suggested, we are encouraged to prune old ideas that are outdated and replace them with new.

If we don't place limits, people won't feel safe coming to us. Those who no longer feel safe or accepted will simply leave the congregation, often without saying a word to anyone. Few

---

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Emily Wright-Magoon, "Hospitality and Covenant," Unitarian Universalist Church of Midland, Texas, October 1, 2017, retrieved October 13, 2017 from <http://www.uumidland.org/blog/2017/10/11/hospitality-covenant/>

want to be a part of a place where every idea on the free market is valued equally, where hate and misbehavior are tolerated on a regular basis because, to quote psychologist Jeremy E. Sherman, “If we tolerate intolerance, it spreads.”<sup>6</sup>

I would expand this to any behavior that puts us at odds with the mission and vision of the congregation as well as the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism.

So here’s my answer to the question of how I would respond if a white nationalist wanted to join our congregation: of course they’re welcome! If they’re willing to sign our book, with all the obligations that come with it, I will encourage them to spiritual growth, as the second part of the third principle encourages us to do. I won’t even label them a white nationalist, either in public or private.

However, that does not mean they get a free microphone to promote beliefs which are in violation of our way of being religious. No, not all ideas have inherent worth and dignity. They are welcome to worship with us, they are welcome to come see me for pastoral care, and they are welcome to find community within our walls. They are not welcome to use our congregation in a way to undermine the principles of Unitarian Universalism as well as our mission and vision.

The question will be asked: how do we decide what those limits are? Sure, the case of white nationalism is an easy one, but, for many behaviors and ideas, it might not be so clear-cut, such as the case with a person convicted of sexual assault who says they are reformed. I have no easy answers and I can’t tell you what you need to feel safe in our congregation, but I can tell you how our faith articulates these boundaries: covenant, which requires extensive dialogue and listening. We are a covenantal faith because we get to decide what limits we place on community and what we need to feel safe when we come together. A congregation without covenant is one

---

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy E. Sherman, PhD, “Be Intolerant of Intolerance,” on *Psychology Today*, January 6, 2015, retrieved October 13, 2017 from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/ambigamy/201501/be-intolerant-intolerance>

that has implicitly said they're not taking a stand on what behaviors are not welcome. The paradox is that, unless we identify which behaviors are conducive to community, we become an unwelcoming congregation.

This doesn't mean we have to force people to start wearing scarlet letter "A"s; the mistake of the townsfolk in *The Scarlet Letter* wasn't necessarily in standing against adultery (that's topic to debate another day!) but, rather, in condemning Hester as an outcast. But Aaron Tippin was right: you do have to stand for something or you'll fall for anything, and our faith stands for something through its use of covenant, a topic of covenant the board and I will be coming back to in future months.

I want to close with one more quote from Emily Wright-Magoon which illustrates beautifully our way of accepting one another and encouraging them to spiritual growth, the third principle, by equating it to hospitality:

Hospitality is welcoming all into our covenant; it's about the radical kindness of telling one another when we need to get back into covenant. Sometimes, it may not feel "nice" but it is kind, because we all need help learning how to live, and the better we can relate to one another, the more healthier the communities we will be able to be a part of and help create, and the more mutually nourishing relationships we can enjoy.<sup>7</sup>

Our faith doesn't exclude the person. It doesn't label them or suggest we try to fix them. It does invite them into our covenant, our way of being religious. And we'll continue working to dismantle the systems these beliefs and behaviors come from while we're at it.

May we be a community that engages in hospitality and nourishes relationships.

---

<sup>7</sup> Rev. Emily Wright-Magoon, "Hospitality and Covenant."