

As a way of welcoming our new members, I want to go off this morning on a little free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

ONE

In the long and often tedious history of philosophical debate, one of the oddest, and perhaps most misunderstood, occurs in Christian scripture, the Gospel According to John 18:37-38:

Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?"

Jesus answered, "You say [rightly] that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in Him at all."
(NRSV)

In Christian tradition this scenario is usually viewed as a Roman almost getting it right; almost discovering the truth that the Roman Empire would, soon enough, embrace to the exclusion of other belief systems. This is exactly how a Christian, writing some seventy years after the event reported, would want to spin the story—good Romans hungry for the truth, bad Jews trying to kill their messiah.

A bit of reflection, however, I think makes the story a bit more interesting.

It is important to realize that most Jews did not live in Palestine at the time Pilate was working there. In the ancient world, old things were greatly admired, and the Romans knew that Jewish religious tradition had been around for a really long time. Jews were valued as scholars in the Roman world and were given special license, out of respect from their very old religious tradition, not to worship the state gods of the empire. The majority of Jews lived outside of Palestine and considered their Palestinian relations a bit backward and out of touch. And headed for trouble if the zealots didn't wake up.

So the first misunderstanding when we look at that scene is the respect that Pilate had not for the rebellious rabble but for what he saw as an ancient and venerable religious tradition. Maybe, in other words, despite the Christian report we have, Pilate really wanted to know what this Jewish prophet had to say about truth.

Secondly, we don't know Pilate's religious bent, nor do we know how educated he was. Pilate, however, would most certainly have known about Stoicism and its radical wing, Cynicism, which was in the air and water of the era. One of the great New Testament scholars of our time, John Dominic Crossan, argues that Jesus, with his sandals and his staff and his wandering without visible means of support, much more closely resembles Cynic philosophers than any known Jewish tradition of the time. Perhaps Pilate thought Jesus had fallen under the spell of Cynic philosophy. Perhaps Pilate himself was a Stoic. If he was, Pilate would have most likely known Zeno's definition of truth. It:

arises from that which is; is stamped and impressed in accordance with that very thing; and is of such a kind as could not arise from what is not.

The Stoic understanding of truth was, in other words, materialistic; what we nowadays would call "scientific." Pilate, any Stoic for that matter, would have had no interest in reports of miracles in the countryside. And, when Pilate got his answer concerning the location of the kingdom Jesus inhabited—not of this world—he may very well have been reminded of the rejoinder of the Cynic Diogenes who, when asked his citizenship, responded, "I am a citizen of the world (cosmopolite)." If Pilate was a Stoic, he probably believed that all human religions reflect a legitimate quest of truth and meaning and are all reflective of the same basic realities. He would have seen the kingdom of Jesus, as the citizenship of Diogenes was seen, as a philosophical construct, one of no danger to political power structures.

Thirdly, Pilate's understanding of truth was perhaps influenced by a famous discussion of truth by Aristotle, in which Aristotle thinks though the "truth" in two claims:

There will be a sea battle tomorrow.

There will not be a sea battle tomorrow.

When and how can either of those statements be “true” Aristotle asked? It’s a good question. A statement can be made, after all, such as “we will be greeted as liberators in Iraq” with every belief that the statement is true. Or at least **WILL BE** true. The problem is that the sincerity with which such a statement is made is no guarantee of the truthful predication of such a claim.

That may be why, in the story of Pilate and Jesus, the scene shifts immediately from Pilate’s question “what is truth?” to his statement, “This guy hasn’t done anything wrong.” After all, it’s all in the intonation. What if the Christian reporting is way off here, and instead of getting all dewy eyed and asking Jesus “What is truth” in all the tones of sincerity, Pilate was beating his fists against his head and shouting “What is truth?! Are you kidding me here?” After all, when you are running a province rife with rabid religious terrorists, someone’s philosophical take on truth is probably not what you choose to execute him about.

If Pilate indeed was this git-‘er-done sort of guy, we’ve all met him a few times. He is the reason we talk about elevator speeches in Unitarian Universalism.

“Do you believe in Jesus?” Well. . . uh. . .um. . .

“Do you believe in the bible?” Well. . . uh. . .um. . .

“Do you believe in an afterlife? Well. . . uh. . .um. . .

“Do you believe in GOD?” Well. . . uh. . .um. . .

Well, is this Unitarian Universalism a religion AT ALL? Well. . . uh. . .um. . .

“TRUTH? What is truth?”

When my kids were little, they let in a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses one night. “Have you ever thought about God?” they wanted to know. “Well, as a matter of fact, I happen to have this entire bookcase filled with books on that question,” I said. But, of course, they weren’t asking; they were telling.

It’s not that we don’t know the answer to these questions. It’s not that we’re trying to be squishy or slippery. It’s just that we take these questions very seriously. We don’t tend to think they lend themselves to easy answers. And so we hum. And then we haw.

What IS truth?

Well, it's a slippery thing. And squishy. In semantics we speak of the "truth conditions" of a sentence. Meaning and truth are separate problems. For example, if I say, "It is snowing in Minnesota," this sentence has meaning whether or not it is snowing. But the sentence meets conditions for being true only if it is demonstrably snowing in Minnesota. The sentence can sometimes be a mistake; sometimes it can be a lie. It can even be a malicious lie. And so can be statements about God.

I for one don't believe Unitarian Universalists ought to be "anti" anything. Anti is not a spiritual value. It's politics, it's par for the course; in religious matters, it's off the mark. The difficulty in being oppositional—and in the realm of religions, being non-dogmatic and non-creedal is perceived as oppositional—the difficulty of being oppositional is thereby creating opponents and then becoming the thing that your opponents accuse you of being. Many UUs express the belief that being non-creedal and non-dogmatic is somehow "religion lite." I beg to differ. That is living up to the cliché others have created. The name of this place is NOT "I Like It Like That." The path of a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" is anything but "lite." (And thanks, by the way, for sitting through the explication of a Christian text this morning; for some of you that is fingernails on a chalkboard.)

The free and responsible search for truth and meaning comes with two very difficult requirements: I have to freely and responsibly search for truth and meaning AND I have to respect you, and you, and you while you do the same thing.

That's not easy work. It's a heck of a lot easier to sit around assuming everyone thinks—or at least ought to think—exactly as I do.

Listening is a spiritual practice. A tough spiritual practice. It's not easy to listen—I mean REALLY listen to someone you don't agree with or you think is making a really dumb decision. It hurts to listen, hurts more than some of those pretzel-y yoga positions. Yet, knocking someone upside the head is NOT

a spiritual practice. And doesn't show respect. So, the next time someone from another faith tradition comments concerning how easy Unitarian Universalism is, tell that person we practice the most difficult spiritual discipline of all: we LISTEN to each other.

The name of this place is not "I Like It Like That." The name of this place is more like "This may not be how I or anybody else would like it to be, but this is as close as we can get to how it is." (Another long name, even longer than MVUUF!)

Creedal statements are ABOUT conformity of belief.

What purpose does conformity serve? I won't argue that there aren't lots of times when conformity is preferable. I will, however, argue that in the realm of the human spirit conformity is death.

That is why Unitarian Universalist congregations are COVENANTAL groups, not creedal groups. To join us, a member does not promise to believe as we believe; a member promises to act as we promise to act. Rather than a creedal relationship, we enter into a covenantal relationship.

My favorite covenant is in our hymnal, number 473. It is adapted from the writing of a nineteenth century Unitarian minister, James Lila Blake. That covenant reads,

Love is the spirit of this church
and service is its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love,
And to help one another.

That about sums it up as far as I am concerned. Love and service. Peace (even if there is not peace) and truth (even if there is no truth) and helping one another (even if we can never do enough). There's nothing esoteric; nothing metaphysical; nothing totally impossible; but it's a darn difficult covenant to

keep nonetheless. Love isn't easy; plus, we get tired of serving and we don't feel peaceful. We don't feel peaceful or loving or even accepting.

Yet we promise each other we will keep at it. That is the way of the free church tradition.

TWO

Last Sunday we heard from four of our own about their spiritual journeys. I'm always amazed when I hear of the spiritual journeys of Unitarian Universalists. The long process—and often the pain—of our religious journeys are stories of hope; stories of becoming. Yet when I reflect on those stories—and when I reflect on my own story—I also feel a little scared: I found a spiritual home in Unitarian Universalism almost by accident; and that's pretty consistent in other stories too. It seems so accidental.

And then I get into what I call my “evangelical UU” mode: people are suffering because they haven't found us. People are going through their lives questioning, doubting, thinking, but they haven't found a way out of their questions. Haven't found a community where questions are OK. We have to get the word out. We have to save souls too. From the jaws of bad religion. And I can define “bad religion.”

Allow me to propose an idea to you: I believe that religions and religious ideas are only dangerous when they do not allow for a feed-back loop. That's the problem with the story of Pilate as it appears in the Gospel of John: it is written from the perspective of later Christian thinking and does not allow for a feedback loop. In the story as we have it, Jesus has the Truth—capital T Truth—and Pilate doesn't get it. That's why, in a Twentieth Century version, the musical “Jesus Christ Superstar,” Pilate asks a couple more questions: “What is truth? Is truth unchanging law? We both have truths; are mine the same as yours?”

That might lead to an interesting discussion.

Perhaps that's why science often makes more sense than religion: science ASSUMES a feedback loop; science assumes questions and updates and new discoveries. But so does myth and story and poetry! What happened to religion? Where's the feedback loop?

I believe that our free church, covenantal tradition allows for feedback. There's no pope; there's no bishop; there's no hierarchy of inquisition here. A Unitarian Universalist minister makes no claims about being magical, or possessed with deep or secret knowledge. I don't make any claims about being more enlightened or farther down the spiritual path than you are. All I'm saying is that I'm trying. In our tradition we have a free pulpit, but we also have a free pew—you get to talk back. No: you are REQUIRED to talk back if you think I'm off the mark. I have the freedom to consider a Christian text, because I think it reveals a truth; you get to say, Why didn't you make the same point from a Zoroastrian text; I'll email it to you."

In that case, we both learn something. We go a little farther down the path. . .together. We can "dwell together in peace, seek the truth in love, and help one another."

You know, it appears that Luther really thought the Pope would change his mind, if only he could see some things. Luther tried. There was no feedback loop. No accountability. Religion turns nasty when there's no feedback loop. Our tradition exists because our forebears insisted on finding the truth, wherever that might lead. That is our tradition. It's a good one, I think. So let's go on, in that tradition, dwelling together in peace, seeking the truth in love, and helping one another.