

“Going Out of Business?”

Sermon by Rev. Bert Steeves (read November 14, 2021)

June 19, 1994

A few weeks ago, during the morning worship service, Anne Verret-Speck sat on the stairs here surrounded by members of the Young Church and ably explained to the children my retirement. One bright five-year-old, seeking further confirmation and clarification, sought out his parents later and asked, “The man who does all the talking—is he going out of business?”

An excellent question and one which deserves a response. Our orthodox Christian kin in religion take their texts from either the Old or New Testament, that is, from the Psalms or Proverbs, from Exodus, Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. My fellow Unitarian Universalist clergypersons range widely for their inspiration: from poets, from historians, from contemporary theologians, even from *The New York Times*. This morning...I will take my text from the mouth of a five-year-old: “The man who does all the talking—is he going out of business?”

An excellent and perceptive question, but to a five-year-old or to adults with childish minds, a disappointing answer will be forthcoming. Children demand structure and absolutes. The truth as they see it is simple: right or wrong, black or white, good or bad, it either *is* or *isn't*. We adults are so annoyingly ambiguous. “Wait and see,” “perhaps,” “maybe,” “it depends.” I too fall into the adult category, that kind of exasperating person who does not have all the answers, who unfortunately sees both or even several sides of the picture. So to the question “Is he going out of business?,” the answer—to a child—is a vague and evasive one: “The man who does all the talking—is he going out of business?” Well, yes and no.

I will no longer be selling my wares from this pulpit, so, in a manner of speaking, I am going out of business. But the wares that I have been selling these many years, are the convictions that make up my life, so I will continue to advocate these Unitarian Universalist convictions. Why must I continue advocating by example these convictions may best be understood if I paraphrase stanza 17 of Robert Frost’s poem about New Hampshire:

“Do you know,

Considering the market, there are more [Sermons] produced than any other thing? No wonder [ministers] sometimes have to seem So much more business-like than business men. Their wares are so much harder to get rid of.”

What are these wares, these convictions that I have been advocating? I am sure I do not need to remind you that we Unitarian Universalists *do* have convictions. We have beliefs. We are not free to believe *anything*; we are free to believe what our reason and experience persuade us to be true. We know that we are finite, and that we cannot know ultimate truth. We have not final truth in our grasp, no inside track to the truth. While we must remain open to truth yet to be known, as Lowell wrote, “Time makes ancient truth uncouth, we must upward and onward be to keep abreast of truth,” we must also be faithful to the truth that we do know. We must reserve the right to change our minds in the light of new knowledge and insight, but we have to act on what we do know. Time demands choice. Although we make mistakes, even grievous errors, our faithfulness to our convictions should be timeless.

One of these continuing convictions is the unity of humankind. This conviction, of course, runs deep in the Universalist tradition of universal salvation. The conviction, likewise, is markedly clear in the Unitarian tradition of belief in the dignity of all persons. There is almost unanimous agreement among us that the whole human race is the entity to which we can give our ultimate commitment. There is one human family. No sect, no nation, no class, no theology nor ideology deserves our final and absolute loyalty. Nothing less than the welfare of the human species; the beloved community of humankind past, present, and future deserves total dedication. It is true that on many occasions, serving one nation or serving one community or serving one church will be the most appropriate means for an individual to serve humankind. After all, we are limited in what we can do, and many times the specific service where we are is more effective than to aid humankind in a general way. Yet, our small contribution must help toward the goal of a unity

“Going Out of Business?”

June 19, 1994 page 2

of humankind. Whenever we are convinced that the service to one nation or community or class is contrary to the welfare of humanity, we should desist and search for other channels of service. We must abhor all that divides people by creed, class, gender preference, religion, and race. We must resist all that throws people into ghettos of place or ghettos of mind and spirit. *Isolation is damnation!*

A second conviction we hold in common is what is called *the sacredness of the mundane*. Perhaps, you would prefer it be called “the religious in the secular,” or “the extraordinary in the ordinary,” or as Bill Schulz calls it, “the holy.” The point is that there is but one world—the natural world. Truth is truth. Beauty is beauty. Goodness is goodness. Whether these are found in religions and churches or in laboratories or studios or concert halls. Whether they are found in the Bible or poems or the dramas of Shakespeare or the classics of Homer or the writings of philosophers or the insights of ordinary people. We do not reject the world, but seek to sanctify it by making it more nearly conform with the good, the true, and the beautiful as we come more fully to understand those values.

In passing, let me note that it is not merely the good we seek. One of the things we must resist from our Puritan heritage is the tendency to reduce religion to morals. We must have room in our churches for not only the search for the good or “ethics,” but also for the true or “knowledge” and beauty or “aesthetics.” All of these are a part of religion and the deepest need of our human nature. We must shun the demand that everyone conform to our life-style. We must beware of fanaticism and self-righteousness in every form. We need a tolerance for the values of those other than our own. We need to seek to understand the meaning in them. We need to find religious meaning in the place where we are, among the people with whom we live and work, and in the events we experience. Religious experience is found not necessarily in holy books or pious words, but it is actually found in the way that we understand and live through what happens to us day by day. We need to find the divine in the human, the eternal significance in what we might call “commonplace”—every bush is aflame with God for the person who has eyes to see. The rest

sit around and eat blackberries, or as Blake wrote, “To see the world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour.”

A third continuing conviction could be stated this way: we believe that people should live by *conviction* rather than by *convenience*. Now, it is convenient to let someone do your thinking for you, to accept their beliefs rather than to think out your own. It is convenient to run with the crowd, to follow the leader, to be caught up in the fad of the moment or the catch-words and slogans. It is convenient to go along with the creeds or theology of a church you really don’t believe. It is convenient to stay home from the church you *do* believe in. But when we live by conviction, the result is different. We feel a responsibility to use our freedom to support what we do believe. We know that in fellowship there is strength, but without us there is no fellowship. We want to count; we want to be counted among those who are responsible for the increase of the good and the true. We carry the continuing conviction that our freedom is to believe the truth, i.e. the truth persuades, the mind, that rings true to experience, no matter what the consequence or convenience. Truth is not to be rejected because it is old, neither is it to be rejected because it is new. Conviction of any kind is rejected only when it does not ring of the truth. As we know, truth changes, grows, is enlarged by the minds of humans.

At our best, we are disciples of advancing truth. If we revere the Hebrew prophets or the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, it is not because of supernatural authority, or the words of the Bible, or even because it is “the thing” to do. No, rather it is because the truth speaks through these men, because the divinity of the human soul shines more brightly in their lives. This is a divinity we can believe in. Far from denying it; we can affirm it. But the test is not dogma, but by what it manifests of righteousness and truth. The light from their lives makes the darkness of ignorance around us a little brighter. I like the words of the ancient prayer that goes:

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth,
From the laziness that is content with half-truths,

“Going Out of Business?”

June 19, 1994 page 3

From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
O God of truth, deliver us.

We believe that living by conviction rather than convenience is the way to peace and truth.

Finally, I think that most of us would accept, for lack of a better term, the old phrase “salvation by character.” We are not in the tradition of St. Paul, who maintained that we are saved by faith alone. We judge people by what they do rather than what they say: “deeds, not creeds,” “actions, not words.” And as Jesus observed we are judged as we judge. We do question the activities of those who are merely self-serving, exploitative, cruel, oppressive, dehumanizing; however, the criteria by which we judge is not mainly verbal but behavioral. We believe that people do create heaven and hell.

You know this concept well, and perhaps need no further words from me. But it is a continuing conviction that I would remind you of this day. We were not born into the world burdened by “original sin,” a sin inherited from Adam or from anyone else. We are born in to the world with a blessing to be individuals and to realize our powers, talents, and uniqueness. We are born ignorant of what we might become, ignorant to the divine potentials slumbering in our hearts. There is no inherent defect in our nature because of animal inheritance or original sin to be washed away. We all have the capacity to strive, to overcome, to realize something of the divine potential within us. We are endowed with reason to learn, to examine, to gain knowledge, to evaluate, and to pass on to the oncoming generation what is most worthy and valuable.

On the group level, we have come to be known as the cultural or spiritual lag, that something which holds our society and us back. But everyone as an individual and as a group has the capacity and the power through insight, through hoping, through working, yes, through praying, to make the best out of their lives, to know the good, to do the good, to understand, and to follow that which makes for individual growth and expands the quality of life for all people. We work out our salvation as we live our lives in *this* life. Our

religion does not take away our uniqueness, our individuality, our right to think for ourselves, nor does it lay upon us a heavy burden of inherited sin to be washed away.

I am reminded of Gertrude Stein, who once remarked about Paris: “It is not what Paris gives you: it is what she does not take away.” When you stop to think of the meaning underlying those words, it is quite profound. You might say, it is quite a gift.

The remark of Gertrude Stein’s about Paris could be made about Unitarian Universalism. Our church may not give you everything you may wish in religion. It does not grant the false but comforting feeling of an “easy salvation.” But think of what the church does not take away.

We may not stress “new-birth,” “born again” salvation so often preached today. We may not give you a complete, ready-made set of doctrines and dogmas that are “officially correct.” But, again, think of what we do not take away. We insist upon the freedom and right to experience the power of religion in our own way. We hope that all of us will use this power to become more sensitive and aware of our lives, and to change our theological opinions, if and when we feel the need to do so.

We may not give a fixed ceremony that will be forevermore, but think of what we do not take away: the right to be part and to participate, to shape ceremony, to be a contributor to tradition, to use your powers and thought as a participant in shaping a common life and to celebrate that life in your own way.

We may not give you an official way to express your religion in the proper words and accepted beliefs and practices, but think of what we do not take away. You have the right to be leftish or rightish or centrist and to find your own personal expression of religion. You can be sure that not only will someone agree with you and also someone will disagree with you, but your way and you yourself will be accepted and appreciated.

In our time, there are many forms of supposed salvation. Quite apart from the cults of traditional religion, we have the secular substitute versions

“Going Out of Business?”

June 19, 1994 page 4

of salvation. There is, for example the Erhard Seminar [ed. note: Werner Erhard led intense “training seminars” in the 1970s and 1980s that promised personal transformation through rejection of the past. The seminars were accused of cult-like treatment of participants]. Note what they take away as they give you their modern version of the old religious authoritarianism. They first take away your right to your own beliefs. In their language, “your beliefs are ‘bull’” and these people are “asses.” What of their conception of life? You are nothing but a “damn machine.” To find salvation along this secular route, it gives you a psychological version of the fundamentalist “sawdust trail.” [Reliance on charismatic fundamentalist preachers and their ultra-conservative theology of salvation] Look what they take away as they program you to salvation. They take away your self-respect and individual integrity, freedom to think and to make personal choices, and supplant these with a groveling submission to authoritarianism and personal indignities.

People often think of what religion can give them. Think now and then, rather, of what it takes away. In this regard, think about what the Unitarian Universalist approach *does not* take away: freedom, your right to individual belief, the gathering of wisdom from many traditions, the process and the means to be a person with inner harmony, personal achievements, and the expectation that you will never outgrow the need to keep growing.

There is, of course, much in fact that Unitarian Universalism does give us. It is important also to realize what we do not take away. We do not take *you* away—your dignity as an individual, your uniqueness of personality and character. No one else can take your place. No one else can perform your service in your way.

Here, we count. We count as we contribute and as we are. We count in the church and we count in the community. At this moment, there are forces on the earth, of which the church may be only a small part, that are working making this world a global village, toward the unity of humankind, toward universalism in which the dignity of the individual is assured. We are a church universal. There is not a better term than the

word “church”—an *ecclesia*, a gathering of a congregation of all who live by conviction, not convenience, who accept the responsibility for the community which gives life. The church universal which holds ancient wisdom and seeks modern thought, which recognizes in all prophets and religious founders and all scriptures a unity, and through all find a continuity which rejects all that separates and divides and always magnifies fellowship in peace. The church universal which seeks truth in freedom, justice in love, and individual discipline in social duty. The church universal which shall make one day all sects, classes, nations, and races one fellowship. Unto this church and to all its members, known and unknown, throughout the world, let us pledge the allegiance of our minds, our hands, our hearts.

This, then, is the business I have been in these many years. I will not be doing business from this pulpit, but I will still be in business as long as I am able. Perhaps I can answer that young person’s question, “The man who does all the talking...is he going out of business?” by paraphrasing John Morley: “The great business of a minister is to be, to do, ... and to depart.”

Amen.