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A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning

In 1516, Erasmus, the Dutch scholar and humanist, published a new translation of the Christian New Testament. This was a time of great intellectual ferment, within the church, and within the larger world. For centuries, the only available version of the Bible had been the Latin Vulgate, translated from Greek by St. Jerome in the 4th Century. This Vulgate Bible existed only in hand-written manuscripts, and it was available only to the priests. But movements to make the Bible available to the common people had begun. In the 14th Century, John Wycliffe translated the Bible into English. Wycliffe thought that the common people should have access to scripture so that they could judge its meaning for themselves. Later, Jan Hus, of Bohemia, argued that the Bible should be available to lay people and that communion should be served to the laity as well. And then, in the mid-15th Century, Gutenberg invented the printing press, opening up the possibility that the Bible could be much more widely available. The first printed on Gutenberg's press, in 1456, was the Bible.

To make his translation, Erasmus compiled whatever Greek manuscripts he could locate. And he produced several successive translations, each one correcting earlier mistakes and mistranslations. In his work from Greek manuscripts, Erasmus found a curious thing!! The existing Vulgate Bible contained the only known scriptural reference to the existence of the Trinity. The New Testament contains several books attributed to a writer named "John." There is, of course, the Gospel of John, and then there are three short letters, also attributed to this same writer. In the Vulgate, the First Letter of John, chapter 5, verse 7 reads as follows (translated from Latin, of course):

For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost:
and these three are one.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, of course, there are references to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but this was the only passage in which the three were also said to exist as one. Well, Erasmus found, working from Greek manuscripts, that this wasn't what this passage said at all. What it said (once again in translation) was;

And the spirit is the witness, because the spirit is the truth.

There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and these three agree.

Somewhere along the line, the original Greek had been changed to include the Trinitarian language. The original passage, far from talking about three in one, was a reference to a requirement of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) that there had to be three witnesses before a person could be convicted of a crime. So what Erasmus found through his scholarship was that this sole scriptural reference to the Trinity was spurious and should be expunged. For Unitarian Universalists, Erasmus's discovery was very significant theologically, just as his publication of a new translation was a radical act.

[Pause – change direction]

This fall, we have been discussing what Unitarian Universalists believe. Just what do we stand for? And we have been doing that in the context of our UU Seven

Principles. In our fourth UU Principle, we covenant to affirm and to promote “ a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Erasmus was not, of course, a Unitarian; nor did he leave the Roman Catholic Church during the Reformation. What he did, however, embodied the spirit and substance of a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Once his translation appeared, church officials tried to get him to change this passage from First John. Erasmus said that he couldn’t find the Trinitarian language in any of the Greek manuscripts he had worked with, but he would change it if someone could produce a Greek manuscript containing the Trinitarian language. No such Greek manuscript was ever produced. So Erasmus followed his scholarship where it led him; he applied his reason; and he stood by what he had learned. He published the results of his research, even though it marked a radical departure from prevailing thinking, and even though it led to a serious outcry from the Church establishment.

Erasmus managed to avoid being branded a heretic, but many of his contemporaries did not. John Wycliffe was forced to return to his parish from the University, but he escaped further punishment. Jan Hus was not so lucky. He was declared a heretic by the Pope, and he was burned at the stake. Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician, who wrote a book called “On the errors of the Trinity,” was also burned at the stake -- in John Calvin’s Geneva. Erasmus managed to stay out of major trouble by not pushing the theological implications of his discovery. He wrote:

Is it not possible to have fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit without being able to explain philosophically the distinction between them?

Despite Erasmus’s scholarship, the Trinitarian formula from the 1st Letter of John still appears in some Bibles to this day. I checked a number of translations, and most current Bibles, such as the Revised Standard and New Revised Standard, the Modern Language Bible, the Living Bible, and so on, accept Erasmus’s view and treat 1 John 5:7 as a passage about three witnesses. But, 500 years after Erasmus’s time, King James versions of the Bible still use the old Trinitarian language!! And so does the Gideon Bible that we gave to patients during my chaplaincy internship at San Francisco General Hospital!

So, guided by the example of Erasmus, let’s think together about what it means to be committed to a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Certainly, as we have discussed here on earlier Sundays, it means that we are committed to the use of reason in the practice of our faith. We use our mental abilities to examine our theology and our worldview, and we reject doctrines that violate our sense of what is reasonable. But how do we actually apply this principle in practice? What does it mean to affirm a free and responsible search for truth and meaning?

[PAUSE – CHANGE DIRECTION]

Well, it may seem like a bit of a leap from Erasmus – and the search for truth and meaning -- to Thanksgiving, but bear with me a moment. When I was growing up, Thanksgiving dinners were marked by heated discussions about both religion and politics. My father was the theist in the group and also the most conservative politically. The family friends with whom we always had Thanksgiving dinner were definitely in the Humanist camp. The father in that family was an atheist. The two mothers were somewhere in the middle, but they definitely had their views as well. We kids joined quite happily in discussions about both theology and politics. (The youngest child was

kind of intimidated by the conversation, so he usually spoke through a hand puppet, “Jocko.” Actually, we heard quite a lot from Jocko during our conversations).

I remember fondly this image of a large table surrounded by family engaged in lively conversation. And I especially remember the bravery with which people, including the children, spoke about matters of faith. I really admired the courageous clarity of Al, the atheist, who thought life was way too serious to be telling religious fables about it; who maintained a strict honesty about how the cosmos was created; and who was unwilling to embrace any idea that could not be proven. And I admired, and envied, my father’s certainty about the existence of a God, whom he saw as a kind of benevolent father, and to whom he spoke, in private moments, and in public prayers. But I knew that neither of those stances worked for me. I knew that I had to try to figure things out for myself. I was always the questioner, the seeker, the trouble-maker in our discussions.

And I treasured those discussions, the arguments, the times we would get exasperated with each other; and yet how we could hold all our differing views in a loving embrace. We could still treasure each other, with a hug, a kiss, a pat on the back. Well, here in this congregation, we’re not a family; we are a Fellowship, a spiritual community of choice. And yet, it is tempting to see us as a big noisy family gathered around a table at Thanksgiving. Clamoring for attention and space, annoyed with each other at times, but quick to love. And quick to defend one another against anyone who would impose rigid doctrine on one of us. I like to see us sometimes as all sitting together at a giant dinner table, passing the turkey and the mashed potatoes, even as we speculate about the existence of God and how the world was created.

In our adult education class “The Changing Face of God,” we have modeled that kind of loving disagreement. We come with many perspectives, from atheist to theist with just about everything in between. We disagree about just about everything having to do with theology; we argue; we get frustrated sometimes. But I think we always see ourselves as members of a loving family, as sisters and brothers who are all who seeking. And we strive to create a vocabulary that helps us to understand each other.

And this is where we come around again to Erasmus and to our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. How are they connected with this faith community that I liken to a large and noisy family? We are each of us, individually, and as a fellowship, engaged in a search for truth and meaning. It is a free search, because we undertake it without being encumbered by creeds, or doctrine, or dogma. It is a responsible search, because we listen to each other, we learn from the world around us, from centuries of accumulated wisdom, and because we are willing to change our thinking to encompass new ideas. It is a search, because we recognize that we are on a path of discovery; that we are not at some fixed point of belief. And it is a search for truth and meaning, because we seek to go beyond the concerns of our everyday lives, to gain understanding of whatever it is that – for us – is transcendent.

A couple of years ago, in Ft. Worth, TX, Bill Sinkford, the president of the UU Association, gave a sermon that stirred up a lot of controversy. He believes – as I believe — that we have a message of good news for a world that badly needs it. But – he argued – we need to expand our vocabulary, to be able to develop our faith fully in our own lives and to be able to share it with others. He pointed out that our UU Seven Principles, which we have been discussing this fall, frame a broad ethic but not a

theology. They contain no hint of the holy, no mention of the awe and wonder we experience at the mystery of the universe. Many UUs interpreted Sinkford's sermon as a call to return to Christianity, or to bring "capital G God" to center stage in our congregations. Rather – I think what Bill Sinkford was calling us to do was to honor our commitment to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning -- by exploring how we might develop a "language of reverence" that would speak to a broad cross-section of humanity. And that would enable us to speak to the hunger that people feel for ways to find meaning in this incredible universe of ours. Sinkford says that;

we need some language that would allow us to capture the possibility of reverence, to name the holy, to talk about human agency in theological terms – the ability of humans to shape and frame our world guided by what we find to be of ultimate importance.

For UUs in recent years, the struggle over the language that we use has tended to play out in the context of "Humanist" vs. "Theist." Although many of us – myself included – might not feel that either label applies to us. Many of us probably feel areas of sympathy with each of these, as well as with many other religious and secular categories. Is it possible to find a "language of reverence," that speaks to both humanists and theists; that speaks to atheists, and agnostics, and theists; to Buddhists, to Jews, to Wiccans, and so forth. I think it is possible, and I think this is a big part of our task in living out the principle of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We need to find language that takes us deeper in our theological searching. We need to find language that encompasses our commitment to human reason, our commitment to the ethical position laid out in our seven principles, and that also speaks to our desire for transcendence. Listen, for example, to the words of David Bumbaugh, a professor at Meadville-Lombard Seminary in Chicago, and a committed humanist:

Humanism . . . gave us a doctrine of incarnation that suggests not that the holy became human in one place at one time to convey a special message to a single chosen people, but that the universe itself is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in hummingbirds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living thing.

Isn't this a language of reverence, calling us to explore the larger meaning of things? And consider the following words of a UU theist, the Rev. Forrest Church, pastor for many years of All Souls UU Church in New York City:

The power which I cannot explain or know or name, I call God. "God" is not God's name. God is my name for the mystery that looms within and arches beyond the limits of my being. Life force, spirit of life, ground of being, these too are names for the unnameable which I am now content to call my God.

Isn't this also a language of reverence, that speaks to the theological diversity that we bring to this UU movement? And can't we find many areas of common ground for a language of reverence? What about the gratitude and awe we feel for life itself in all its crazy manifestations, for love and for wisdom, for the miracles and mysteries of the universe?

Don't they call us to a language of reverence?

And what about our commitment to compassion, caring, and kindness for others, founded on mutual respect. What about our stance of welcoming all, of embracing the stranger in our midst?

Don't they call us to a language of reverence?

What about our commitment to justice, to integrity, to fairness, to dignity for all, to peace?

Don't they call us to a language of reverence?

And what about our commitment to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning? And our heritage of free enquiry that extends through giants such as Arius, and Erasmus, and Michael Servetus, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker, and James Luther Adams?

Doesn't our search for truth and meaning call on us to develop a language to enable us to deepen our own searching, and to share our message with the world?

Doesn't our search for truth and meaning call on us to develop a language of reverence?