

**Channing Memorial Church, Unitarian Universalist
Ellicott City, Maryland
The Reverend Susan LaMar, Minister
from December 10, 2006, Worship Service**

Reading Baruch 5:1-5

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.

Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting; for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven.

For God will give you evermore the name, "Righteous Peace, Godly Glory."

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them.

Musical Interlude Minuet from "Orpheus" Ch. W. Gluck

Reading From *Sabbath* by Abraham Joshua Heschel

The saintly Rabbi Judah ben Ilai, was, personally, given to severe self-denial and austerity "I do not wish to derive any pleasure from this world." He said. Yet his advice to others was that the ideal path lay midway. Life is likened unto two roads: one of fire and one of ice. "If you walk in the one, you will be burned, and if in the other, you will be frozen. What shall one do? Walk in the middle."

Sermon

The Radical Center

That second reading always reminds me of one of my father's favorite jokes, about the meaning of the term "average." If a man stands with one foot in a bucket of ice, and the other foot in a bucket of hot coals, Dad would say, on the average, he is comfortable.

Which brings us right in to today's reflection – is there any such thing as average? Not really – average is an imaginary place, somewhere in between other things. Mathematically it is an imaginary *point*. Religiously, it probably exists somewhere in between the radical fundamentalists and the radical secularists – so it would not be a point, but a whole, big territory. Spiritually, I like to think of it as an imaginary playground – lots of space within which to move around between extremes, where thinking and reflecting and pondering can occur. The golden mean. . . everything in moderation . . . the middle way . . . so much wisdom points us to the center.

There is a well-known teaching story in the Zen tradition that illustrates the behavior of one who finds the steadying power of the middle way. (I have to include a Zen story in honor of the Buddha's enlightenment day this past Friday!) It is told that during a time of civil war in Korea, a certain general led his troops through province after province, overrunning whatever stood in his path. The people of one town, knowing that he was coming and having heard tales of his cruelty, all fled into the mountains. The general arrived in the empty town with his troops and sent them out to search the town. Some of the soldiers came back and reported that only one person remained, a Zen priest. The general strode over to the temple, walked in, pulled out his sword, and said, "Don't you know who I am? I am the one who can run through you without batting an eye." The Zen master looked back and calmly responded, "And I, sir, am one who can be run through without batting an eye." The general, hearing this, bowed and left.^[1]

Wouldn't it be nice to be able to be that centered and steady?

I've been thinking about this a lot lately because of a phrase used by the columnist E.J. Dionne in a column a couple of weeks before the election. He used in a political context a phrase that I hadn't happened to hear before, although it apparently has been around a while. He said, "There has long been talk about the rise of a 'radical center,' made up of voters essentially moderate in their philosophical leanings but radical in their disaffection with the status quo."

Although he was using the phrase in a political context, it caught my imagination spiritually. It sounds at first like an oxymoron. How can something be both radical and centrist at the same time? We usually think of radical as meaning extreme. But radical really has to do with "from the root." Going to the root or origin. And we often think of the center as being just that – in the middle, avoiding taking an extreme position, or perhaps focusing on compromise between extreme positions. The image that comes to mind is that of a continuum along a line, with the center in the middle.

But what grabs my imagination about the term "radical center" is that it changes the shape of that image for me. It takes an image that is essentially a line segment with two ends, and pushes the whole middle – everything except the two points at the end, down into the earth. It turns it into the roots of a tree that can grow and change and produce fruit, and seeds and future trees. It takes the passivity that sometimes is connoted by the idea of "center" and converts it into a vibrant, growing, ever-changing . . . unnamable, but calling us into action . . . mystery. Sounds a bit like something else, doesn't it?

Let me try another image for the same thing. Last week there was a letter in the Ask Carolyn column from a young woman describing a situation where she and her fiancé were having a disagreement about how they would spend Thanksgiving after they got married. Each of them had come up with what they viewed as a "compromise." The trouble was that neither "compromise" solved the problem. I want this, you want that, so we'll split the difference . . . Oh yay! . . . we'll both be unhappy! (I see that kind of reasoning in pre-marital counseling all the time!) But as Carolyn . . . I think rightly . . . pointed out, they were both missing the point. The question isn't how to find a compromise, an average, but rather how they are going to plant their new marriage, their new family, in fertile soil. (Those are my words, not hers.) They have to plant something that will grow its own roots.

So it is not just the “middle way” of Buddhism, or the “everything in moderation” of Aristotle. It is a dynamic process of engaging the extremes, by going actively . . . and radically . . . into the vast territory between. But it has to be done without showing hatred or contempt for any of the extremes. Rather, we have to figure out how to keep growth happening, keep conversation happening, movement toward what has been called the Kingdom of God, or Commonwealth of God, or what I last week called “Great Imagining.”

My particular interest about this sense of a radical center has to do with how to do this in religious conversations, with individual people with theologies very different from mine and with religions that are very, very different from Unitarian Universalism. People who might even plant themselves on one of those extreme points. And it isn't a matter of “oh you believe what you want and I'll believe what I want and we'll all live happily ever after.” We are all on an ever-shrinking planet together – a round planet, and our roots are going to be entangled whether we want it to happen or not. It isn't easy, particularly if they don't want to engage in conversation with me. But that doesn't mean that I will change my mind about wanting to be part of the conversation. It does mean that I might have to work really hard at finding ways to be in the conversation – and invite others in as well.

Two of our adult religious education offerings in the last couple of weeks have challenged us to think about how to enter some of these conversations in very concrete ways. The one I want to talk about today occurred the week before last, when a large group of us gathered at the church office to view the film “An Inconvenient Truth” and discuss its implications. The film [in case any of you have missed it] is Al Gore's presentation of the dangers of global warming, and the escalation of its dangers to the earth.

During the discussion which followed, a particularly interesting question was raised. One person said that he works with people who claim, despite all the scientific evidence to the contrary, that the issue is nonsense – not because the science is wrong or being misinterpreted, but because God will take care of it. If you are like me, when I hear that kind of extreme position, it pushes every button in me, driving me to the other extreme . . . bringing out my residual atheist, and viewing the other party across the great chasm of that center. So how do we get back *into* the radical center?

So I've been thinking about that the past couple of weeks. There is another way to engage the conversation. It requires us to have and be able to use religious language and concepts, with confidence and with ease. Ideally, with as much confidence and ease as the extremists do. Invoking God is a power move that trumps the conversation, bringing it to a screeching halt. That is the general with the sword . . . don't you know that I could run you through without batting an eye?

The question for us is . . . how do we prepare to have the calm response of a Zen master? How do we, like the Zen master, use the same language to equalize the power, but in a totally different way?

For there is other powerful religious language that can be used to keep the conversation going, even without compromising your own theological position. And I think it can gently pull all parties toward the radical center.

In a conversation about global warming, alluded to above, one might say, for example: “Tell me more about your tradition. Who does your tradition say that God is?”

A response like that does at least three things. First, it expresses interest in someone else’s tradition. “Tradition” is a powerful and charged word in religious discussions, because it is one of the sources from which most religions draw their authority. Asking about someone’s tradition shows profound respect for them – respect in its root meaning of “to look again.”

Second, the question “Who do you say that God is?” is resonant of Jesus’ famous question, “Who do you say that I am?” – a question that is deep in the psyche of conservative Christians (and some of the rest of us, too!) It is straight out of scripture, another source of religious authority, therefore adding to the charge – but turning it in a positive direction. By asking that question, you have entered the conversation on their terms – also a profoundly respectful act.

Third, it sets the stage for you, at an appropriate moment, to say something like: “Hmm. That’s very interesting. In *my* tradition”

Of course, then you have to something to say. What does your tradition – Unitarian Universalism – teach? And how do you translate it into religious language? And say it with complete calm and equanimity?

Well, you might say something like, “My tradition teaches that each of us is ‘called’ – *very charged religious word, because it implies a call by God* – to witness – *another charged, religious word* – and testify – *charged again* – to the truth. My tradition teaches that humans are given responsibility for stewardship (*charged word again*) of the earth. I believe that Al Gore and the scientists who are studying this may be prophetic (*another charged word*) . . . in the way they are speaking the truth as they see it.” And then you can go on with something like “and, like the prophets in scripture (*charged word again*), much of the time they were ignored by the people. But I think I choose to listen this time. My tradition teaches respect for the interdependent web of all existence (*our seventh principle*). My tradition teaches that humans are God’s agent’s on earth.” Or if you are uncomfortable even with that amount of God-language, you could say, “My tradition recognizes human agency in saving the world.”

See how are these kinds of responses like the response of the Zen master to the general? They assume a common culture, a common root, a common language. They don’t attempt to convert, or judge, or put down. They simply communicate. Comm-unicate – unite with. That is the beauty and the glory of it. It is a way of putting on the robe of righteousness. It assumes one can stand upon the height and see to the east and to the west.

It is a radically different way of being in and of the world. It places a premium on the ability to be together even among differences. Because of course there aren’t just two points at the ends

of a line segment, anyway. There are many, many ways to be extreme . . . think of points around the circumference of a circle. Yet there is so much more territory inside that circumference.

The harder part of being like the Zen master is to have his calm, steady, equanimity even when provoked. Learning a few religious principles and a little religious language is a piece of cake compared to that. Those swords can feel pretty threatening, and it is easier to walk away or rise to the bait and respond in anger. Yet that doesn't change the fact that we are still together on the same planet, part of the interdependent human web together.

If you listen very carefully to that Zen story you notice something. You notice that the Zen master did not try to take away any of the general's power. Quite the opposite. He affirmed it and handed it right back to him . . . and by so doing he equalized the power between them. We want to be able to do that with others.

In Zen tradition, of course, the sword that is being talked about isn't the general's sword at all. The sword is our internal reaction to the perceived threat. It isn't the words of extremism that are the sword. It is our visceral reaction to them. It is when we react with "Grrr. . . that person is an idiot" . . . reaction is the sword. So spiritually, it is *that reaction* that we have to both affirm and hand back to ourselves, so that we can respond with . . . equanimity. . . temperance . . . moderation. That interior work gives us the inner strength to be able to then draw it forth when in relationship with others.

And that takes practice and patience. There aren't a whole lot of places where we are reminded to do that and given the opportunity to practice. But church is one of them. Church opens a place where at least once a week we can stop and review how we're doing with that inner work, and how we are bringing it out into our relationships. It reminds us that all those sitting around – on either side, in front, and in back of us are doing the same thing . . . we are not alone.

So how are you doing?

^[1] Told in Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*. (Boston: Shambhala) 1987, p. 75.