

10/3/10 Sermon

"50 – An Association Sunday Sermon"
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Excerpted in large part from Erik Walker Wikstrom.

There's an irony here, perhaps. Does anyone see it?

For some time now our Association has been engaged in an effort to overcome the assumption by many, when they first discover us, that we're some sort of new phenomena.

"No way," we say. "We've been around for a long time."

We point to our storied "heretical history", noting our Transcendentalist ancestors in the 19th century, and our presence in colonial America.

We point even further back to our heritage in Europe - to David Ferenc and King John Sigismund and the Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience of 1563 in Transylvania, for instance.

Some even go so far as to bring up Arius in the second century as the first Unitarian Christian (after, perhaps, Jesus himself, of course).

And, of course, Universalism also has a deep and rich history – many scholars believing it to be the most common interpretation of Christianity prior to the 6th century and pointing to, for instance, the Alexandrian school of the first century as a prime example.

So we have spent considerable time and effort attempting to solidify our *bona fides* as a religious movement. We've been in the game for a while.

Yet here we are today, excitedly celebrating our 50th anniversary. Fiftieth. Five zero.

In doing so we're saying that our Association is a mere five decades old which, in terms of the religions of the world, is less than the blink of an eye?

So which is it - ancient and venerable tradition, or adolescent newcomer?

What we're celebrating is the merger in 1961 of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America into what we now call the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Fifty-one years ago this

association did not exist; there were two separate and distinct religious traditions. Fifty years ago the two became one.

It wasn't easy. Unitarians and Universalists of that era were not entirely simpatico with one another.

It was said at the time that there were Universalists who were afraid that the Unitarians were going to swallow them up . . . and Unitarians who were afraid that they were going to get heartburn.

It had been a process. In fact, the first discussion of merger between the Unitarians and the Universalists had occurred in a Unitarian convention back in 1865, ninety-six years earlier. No one can accuse us of rushing into things. No shotgun wedding for us.

Yet here we were, come together as one Association of Congregations, the result of a merger of two denominations - each with a long, deep, and rich history; with stories of women and men whose courage and commitment and conviction helped give shape to who they were; with prophetic visions of a future that was yet to be.

And in this coming together, something new was born, related to yet distinct from the traditions that gave it birth.

Modern Unitarian Universalism is not simply the continuation of its two predecessor movements pureed together - it is like red and blue coming together to create purple.

What it was is still in there, but what it is, is different.

In this it is not unlike other religious traditions that have developed over time. Christianity itself, for instance, developed from its roots as a sect of Judaism.

Note, that I did not say it "evolved," because that would imply that it was an improvement in some way. As a Jew, the thought that Christianity is the completion of my faith of origin is an insult.

Rather, the two traditions coexisted for some time, each tradition developing along its own path, until eventually they separated when their differences became greater than their similarities.

It might be interesting to look at Christianity around C.E. 50. Paul left Antioch and began his Aegean Mission. His letters to these congregations are

the earliest documents now contained in the New Testament. This was the time of his first visit to Corinth and he wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians.

Two years later, in 52, Paul arrived in Ephesus and wrote a letter to the Galatians and his letter to the Corinthians.

Two years earlier, in the year 48 C.E., leaders of the Jesus movement gathered in Jerusalem for the so-called Council of Jerusalem to discuss the recent mission to the Gentiles. (This is described in chapter 15 of the Christian scripture called *The Book of Acts*.) This was a crucial time for this fledgling movement.

Until then, their message had been shared most often with people more or less like each other - Jews who shared a religious and cultural context. Now, it was attracting non-Jews and a crucial question was being raised - should these new converts have to first fulfill Jewish law (that males be circumcised, for instance, and that everyone follow dietary laws) before they could join the movement, or should they be allowed to join just as they were? The thought of adult circumcision would have put me off of becoming a Jew (*lol*).

In essence, the question came down to this: as the movement grew, should the newcomers have to change to fit into the movement, or should the movement have to change to welcome the newcomers?

Here we are at our 50th anniversary as an Association. We've come a long way.

Women now make up over half of our ordained ministry, and we not only can say that we have numerous "Welcoming Congregations" but that we're largely a "Welcoming Movement."

In our own way we have changed since our origins.

UUMAN has evolved away from its intentionally theist beginning to a more eclectic congregation today. Change has been part of our pattern and will continue to be as we become more welcoming of our multi-cultural families and future.

Yet, we find ourselves at a crossroads not all that dissimilar to the early Christians at the Council of Jerusalem.

Looking ahead we see a world that looks quite different than the one in which our Association has grown; quite different than the one in which most of us were born into. By 2050 European Americans will no longer be the majority of the U.S. population - we will be a multicultural nation in a way our rhetoric has only hinted at before. This is the heart of the anti-immigration issue, I believe, and is what scares the Tea Party so much.

How will we respond? Will we require all newcomers to our faith to adopt the "UU lifestyle" and mold themselves to fit into the "UU culture"? (And we might argue about some of the specifics but we all probably have a pretty good idea of what that means.)

Or will we allow our movement to change, to grow, to morph as it adapts itself to these newcomers – holding on to the heart of what makes us who we are as a religious people yet allowing it to find ever new expressions in ever changing environments?

This latter approach worked out pretty well for Christianity, didn't it?

It can work for us also. We have a growing number of multi-cultural families and must come to terms with the challenge of welcoming those who for the moment don't look like the majority but that is where we are headed and that my friends is a good thing and reflects the real world.

Today is Association Sunday. Not only here, but across the country congregations are thinking about these things – remembering our past, considering our present, and imagining our future.

Our Universalist ancestor L. B. Fisher was once asked where the Universalists stood on some contentious point of theology. He famously replied, "We do not stand. We move!"

We have the opportunity - as individuals, as a congregation, as an Association of congregations - to continue that movement. What we do here, what they do at Emerson in Marietta matters; what they do in Athens; what they do in Macon; what they do Portland, OR matters. It really does.

Each of us, doing the work we do day in and day out, individually and collectively, creates the future of our movement.

We decide.

May we do so with the wisdom of the ancient tradition that we are, and the spontaneous creativity of the adolescent that we also are.

May we grow together in Roswell and become a voice of moderation and progressive religious thought in this conservative area. May we fulfill the vision of those who founded this congregation.