

If I Only Had One Sermon To Preach

by Rev. Robert Edward Greene

Delivered at First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton on September 8, 1996

[Note: This sermon was Rev. Green's last sermon delivered prior to retirement from parish ministry]

READINGS:

In 1927, the Church Advertising Department of the International Advertising Council proposed that for Lent, ministers all across the nation deliver a sermon on the theme, "If I had only one sermon to preach." Twenty-one of those sermons then were collected and published in a book under that title edited by Charles Stelzle (1)

This morning I would like to read excerpts from two of those sermons, and again I remind you these were written in 1927.

The first is from a sermon entitled "Twin Perils," delivered by Daniel A. Poling, then and for many years afterward minister of the Marble Collegiate Reformed Church in New York and one of the most notable of American preachers.

The armistice in the Great War was signed in the forest of Compiègne, near a village called Rethondes. The document was completed in a railway carriage which is now exhibited in Paris near the tomb of Napoleon. At the spot where the actual signing took place a monument has been erected bearing the inscription "Here succumbed the criminal pride of the German Empire." Though that inscription was written by the French, their haunting fear today is that the inscription is not true. It is this fear that makes peasants restless and statesmen sleepless. At that monument bearing the inscription "Here succumbed the criminal pride of the German Empire," pride and fear meet and make common cause. The pride of Germany humiliated and embittered, seeking revenge, walks arm and arm with the fear of France for her future. Pride and fear, these are the major forces working, and thus far working successfully, to complicate and defeat all efforts toward the reassuring of the world.

Does it not seem that our generation is troubled with international hysteria? Certainly there has been enough to make the nations nervous. Remember that pistol shot at Sarajevo! Explosions that wreck cathedrals and baptize funeral parties with the blood of innocent victims, revolutions that seethe among four hundred million yellow people, do not soothe our already overtaxed nerves. And international politics but reflect our individual lives and our personal relationships. We are living today in an atmosphere of terror. Returning to our apartment, I saw that drilling operations at the foundation of the building to be erected immediately at the north were practically completed and that the contractor was ready for dynamite. Instinctively I question, "What is the chance of that disturbing our building?" We no longer take anything for granted. We live, not in trust, but in terror. And remember: those who so live so die! The individual who is afraid to eat lest he be poisoned starves, or what he does swallow disagrees with him. The business man who continues to distrust his associates inevitably governs his transactions with them accordingly and is distrusted by them. The man who looks into every dark corner for an

enemy and never finds one is vastly worse off than the happy-go-lucky individual who stumbles at last into an ambush. The latter was at least happy until his trouble came, though I admonish you against emulating and following either of the two. But such fear is a pestilence and a delusion. (2)

The second reading is from a sermon entitled "What Is A Religious Life?" by John Haynes Holmes who spent his entire ministerial career at the Community Church of New York and was perhaps the greatest Unitarian preacher of this century.

. . . The true objective for the individual who would live the religious life, in our inherently materialized civilization, is the reconstruction of the social order in such ways that wealth shall be equitably distributed as well as abundantly produced, that the many shall have what they earn rather than the few what they seize, that riches and poverty shall be alike abolished in the equal enjoyment of the common good. We must seek, in other words, that great revolution of economic democracy, which is the true successor to the recent revolution of political democracy. Mankind must be made a brotherhood. . . .

Here, now, is the second requisite of the religious life. We must be the friends, the advocates, the champions of the oppressed. This does not mean. . . mere charity. There is more, infinitely more, involved here than the giving of alms and sympathy to those less fortunate than ourselves. Charity as such belongs to the moral life, and in so far is good and beautiful. But beyond this is the exaction of the religious life--that we shall recognize these unfortunates to be our brothers, that we shall lift them up and place them in our world where they may be one with us in privilege and joy, that we shall demand justice and equality for the meanest of the race. These down-trodden and oppressed are with us still, be sure of that! . . . Religion demands that we shall espouse the cause of these unhappy men; not that we shall pity them merely, but that we shall deliver them, through the foundations of society be cracked by our endeavor. This is the task of the religious life. . . . So Theodore Parker prayed from out his own great soul, when he said—

"Give me the power to labor for mankind,
Make me the mouth of such as cannot speak;
Eyes let me be to groping men and blind,
. . . and to the weak
Let me be hands and feet."

. . . In this do we have the third distinctive quality of the religious life. If we would be religious, in the truest sense of the word, we must know no creed or class, no race or country, but only the family of humankind. No so is it with morality! The moral man can be parochial--tie himself up to some single group of men, and know nothing beyond this group. His world can be his country, and his only friends his countrymen. But the religious man can stop nowhere short of the circumference of the globe. Wherever men are, there are his brothers. Wherever a mouth speaks, a hand labors, a heart sorrows, there is his post of service. The religious man can feel no prejudice, cherish no fear, give way to no antagonism and hate. He can hide behind the walls of no single sect, wrap himself in the flag of no single country. If he sees a man, of whatever breed or color, he must simply love him, that is all; and thus in his love, which is his religion, fulfill the promise of that day when

"Nation with nation, land with land
Unarmed shall live as comrades free,
In every heart and brain shall throb
The pulse of one fraternity." (3)

IF I HAD ONLY ONE SERMON TO PREACH

If I had only one sermon to preach -- and in a sense I do -- I suppose I would sum up all that I had to say on the most vital of subjects.

Would I turn then to theology? Most of those in Stelzle's book so chose. And I am interested in theology; I think theology is important as the basis for religion. But I also think that theology is the plague of religion and I have had my share to say about it and about the need to replace faith with reason, mythology with humanity. Perhaps my greatest disagreement with orthodox religion, indeed, is that there are other things more important than theology..

Would then I look instead to philosophy? Certainly wisdom is essential to a good life. But philosophy has a tendency to get lost among the stars. I would want to be practical -- I would want to speak about what is important in the life of people and in the living of that life.

Would I devote my address then to Unitarianism Universalism? Undoubtedly Unitarianism Universalism is of great significance to my life and to yours-- it is a religion that has much to offer people and I have had much to say about it. Yet to restrict myself to any one sect would provide for far too narrow a scope.

Would I concentrate then on humanism? To me, humanism is the basic foundation for a meaningful and satisfactory religion. For me, nothing is more fundamental. Of all these topics I have mentioned, this would be the greatest temptation, for humanism underlies all else that I have to say. And yet it does not say enough. Humanism is important but not adequate. Humanism is a vital foundation, but if I had only one sermon upon which to build a church, I would perceive that it is the church which is the visible object, important as may be the foundation upon which it is built.

On the very first page of the very first sermon in Stelzle's collection, Dr. Joseph Fort Newton observes that every preacher has but one sermon to preach, no matter how many subjects he may select or how many titles he may use. It is the story of his own heart, the truth made real in his own experience and vivid in his vision, and he can tell no other triumphantly. Whatever text he may take, whatever art of exposition he may employ, he is ever telling the one truth HE has learned by living; the "one beauty he was sent to seek."

I have felt one message, one drive through my life. If I were to take a text, it would be from John Haynes Holmes, "Mankind must be made a brotherhood;" humankind must be made one family.

That is the story of my heart. That is the truth of my vision. In the realization of one humankind alone lies the hope of a better life for each and every individual. I went to law school seeking that objective. Finding that path impossible, I changed to the ministry and

to the Unitarian Universalist ministry specifically because here I found others -- people like Steve Fritchman and Harold Scott and Curtis Reese -- who believed too that human responsibility is at the core of religion and the human task at the heart of its endeavors.

The failure of religion is that 70 years and three wars later (counting only those in which the United States was involved), we are in the same position of pride and fear as described by Daniel Poling. Even this week, we once again have chosen to use the armaments of war and destruction to demonstrate the tragedies of power rather than seek to resolve the issues of human disunity that plague Iraq and the Middle East and the world in which we live. The prisons are crowded beyond capacity as through them we vainly seek to protect ourselves and our property.

We live in a world, we live in a community of mutual distrust and fear. We have looked to see what separates us and easily we have found answers. But we never have looked to see what we have in common.

Years ago, I entered my first class at the University of California with Jacobus ten Broek -- blind in the eyes but brilliant in the mind. The first question he addressed to the class was, "What is a man?" It seemed like such an easy question. A person is physically describable -- a person has a head, a body, arms, legs. But, asked Dr. ten Broek, suppose that person had lost a limb -- was he then no longer a man?

Alright. What distinguishes a person then is our mental capacity, the ability to reason. But, asked Dr. ten Broek, suppose that person was retarded?

Speech then -- it is the capability to communicate, to comprehend, to translate sounds into language that defines a person. But, asked Dr. ten Broek, suppose that person is dumb, voiceless?

And so the seemingly simple question was left up in the air, wholly unanswered. I still know no single attribute by which to define a person. But I can recognize my fellow human being. I can distinguish him or her from any other species of animal. They may be Caucasians or Negroes or Orientals; they may be Catholics or Protestants; they may be Britons or Indians, they may be Rotarians or Kinwanians, and so on ad infinitum. But each is a human being first, and each belongs to any of numerous other categories second.

This is what I mean by brotherhood, this is what I mean by the human family. It is the recognition that all humankind partakes in a single and interdependent whole. We all have the same roots, the same family. Essentially, most basically of all, we are each a part of Homo sapiens.

"Mankind must be made a brotherhood"; humankind must be made one family. I dare to say it even now when American wars with Iraqi, Russian with Chechnyan, Israeli with Palestinian, Hutu with Tsutsi. What are these people but human beings? Some of them may be power-hungry, even as are some among us. But a great many more of them are struggling just to live a little bit better, even as are a great many more among us.

I dare to say it now even as the President yields to the politically popular. The solution to the conflict with Iraq, to the ongoing disruptions in the Middle East, to the tragic tribal violence in Africa, to the ethnic nationalism in eastern Europe is to see the enemy as a human being! -- a human being with needs to be fulfilled, and the first of those needs is to live.

These are needs that cannot be resolved by war -- thousands of years of human history ought be proof enough of that.

These are needs that cannot be resolved by communism nor by capitalism. These are needs that can be met only when we recognize that he whom we hate and fear is but a human being who shares with you and with me a common aim -- a happier and more satisfying life.

These are needs that can be met only when we come to know the person our governments designate as our "enemy" and having met that person discover that we share common hopes and a common dependence. From these, once recognized, can then arise a common trust.

"Mankind must be made a brotherhood"; humankind must be made one family. I dare to say this even as whites would deny equality to blacks and as blacks and Hispanics and just about every other minority propose to separate themselves out of our common society. I dare to say this even as the preservation of ethnic/racial identity becomes a liberal subterfuge by which to sustain the segregation that remains so manifest still in our schools, in our communities, in our nations. The Unitarian psychologist, Kenneth Clark, whose testimony was so crucial to the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, warns us all that

"There is absolutely no evidence to support the contention that inherent damage to human beings of primitive exclusion on the basis of race is any less damaging when demanded or enforced by the previous victims, than when imposed by the dominant group.... The white liberal who accedes to black separatism so hastily and benevolently must look to his own reasons, not the least of them perhaps an exquisite relief."

I say that whites are human and blacks are human. I say that Americans are human and Hispanics are human. And I dare to say this even as Americans shut their borders to further immigrants and ignore the impoverishment that drove our forbears to these shores even as today it drives Mexicans and others across these imaginary lines of separation we have drawn.

I say that we need to recognize the basic problem. The black wants a better life, too, just as does the Mexican and every other person who has crossed or who crosses the boundaries into American. They are not rejecting our values; they just want to participate in our values. They want what they think the American has. But the American, and particularly that growing number of poor Americans, want to protect what they have. They fear the black and the Mexican and the immigrant; they seem them as a threat to their security and to their seeming superiority.

The solution is for white and black and yellow, for American and African and Mexican to see each other as human beings. The solution is to see each other as a person with

needs to be fulfilled. Our world economy can support all of us. But unless we are willing to make use of it to benefit all of us, the only end will be a useless conflict to the detriment of all of us.

If I had only one sermon to preach, I would stress the interdependence of all human beings. We cannot live alone. We depend on each other for all the necessities of life.

Our economic well-being depends on a variety of soils and minerals and physical attributes spread throughout the globe, on a variety of talents and skills and capacities spread through humanity.

Our political well-being -- indeed our very life itself -- depends on understanding the reality that we all live together. In this modern world more than ever, any political conflict literally endangers every individual whether it be from nuclear confrontation or fanatic terrorism.

And encompassing both of these, superseding them, is the religious, or what some may choose to refer to as the spiritual. It is that innate sense of principle that lies within the human consciousness, that essential understanding of those moral values which are the common heritage and the common teaching of all religions. Forty-six years later, after a lifetime of thinking and learning and experiencing, if I were back in Jacobus ten Broek's class and again asked to define what is a human being, I would answer that it is one who comprehends those religious, moral, human values and who sees to implement them as best one can in one's own life. Anyone who does not do so -- no matter their physical characteristics, no matter how great their mind, no matter how charismatic their speech -- is inhuman.

If I had only one sermon to preach, I would say, "Mankind must be made a brotherhood; humankind must be made one family." That is my one sermon and I have preached it here and I will preach it in whatever format as long as I live. This is the one task that calls me; this is my one message.

But it is a task for every individual. It is for each of us to strive to reach it and spread it. It is for each of us to create that feeling and that sensitivity within ourselves. It is for each of us to teach it to our young.

If I had only one sermon to preach, I would say with Kenneth Patton,

"The commonwealth of [humanity] is ours to build. . . .Look into yourselves for the fire and the fury. . . . Ours in the world, the universe and life, if we will make it ours by the largeness and strength of our love. . . . Ours in the commonwealth of [humanity], now and tomorrow, building and to be builded."

Notes:

1. Charles Stelzle, *If I Had Only One Sermon To Preach* (N.Y. and London: Harper & Bros., 1927).
 2. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96, 100-101.
 3. *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 84-85, 88.
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