

The First Liberal

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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There I was on a hot, rainy summer afternoon having finished the book I was reading and reluctant to do the waiting laundry. Procrastinating, I decided to watch a little TV. Flipping channels, I came across the Inspiration Network and as sometimes happens, my curiosity got the better of me and I found myself listening to a sermon preached by a young-looking man who seemed mighty passionate about what he was saying. Most of it I don't remember, but one statement stood out. He was talking about Adam and Eve and the text in the book of Genesis...something about what the Bible really says and declaring his -- the preacher's -- authority to know the Bible's truth and his responsibility to pass along that truth to others. This is fairly typical for the tradition of Evangelical congregations, but that is not what struck me. He was going along in what appeared to be a standard preaching format for Inspiration Network worship when he stopped his pacing back and forth across the stage to look the congregation in the face and he proclaimed, "The serpent in the garden of Eden was the first liberal!" A number of those in the congregation gave voice to their agreement and it was clear that the word 'liberal' was meant derogatorily, meant as an insult, meant as a link to the devil. Rather than being angry at the slight equating liberals with the devil as so often happens by fundamentalist Christians, I found myself agreeing with him completely. But not because I, too, saw it as a bad thing, but because I thought, "Aha! proof that we, religious liberals that is, were right there from the beginning!"

The Evangelical preacher quoted the text of Genesis 2:16-17. That's where God speaks to Adam saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." The preacher then turns to a little later in the text where the serpent speaks to Eve and Adam; Genesis 3: 1-6 reads, "Now, the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves." The preacher then points out that the serpent "twists to his own ends" the words and meaning of what God said. For the serpent does not lie, but tailors the truth to incite envy and desire from Eve and Adam for what would make them like God. That is not precisely what the serpent does. He does not twist God's words, but he questions Adam and Eve's blind obedience to God's commandment; he questions whether the understanding Eve and Adam have of those words is correct; he offers a different perspective, a different interpretation. Is that not exactly what religious liberals do with all sacred text?

The serpent in the Garden of Eden was the first liberal and I, for one, am proud to claim his questioning ways for myself. This piece of biblical text causes me to contemplate not only what was lost when Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden, but what did they gain as well? Is there another way of interpreting the fall of humanity that offers us something rather than only takes away?

Our liberal religious tradition says yes, we gained knowledge, which is never an evil or sinful thing, though it can be used to those ends; we came into the world, leaving the protective isolation of the garden for the experience of the whole existence; we were given the beauty of toiling for rewards, which often makes them sweeter. In an unkind view one could say that in Eden Eve and Adam were living like naïve children, where everything was provided and nothing was needed. Of course, many of us long for a time in our lives like that, where all is given easily and little is asked in return; where we need only think of a thing to have our desire fulfilled. It does sound beautiful doesn't it? But is it real? What would one strive for if living in paradise? What kind of person would you be if you did not have the experience of living in the world to form you? What would be the point of living, if you lived in heavenly paradise?

Maybe it's my Unitarian Universalist and New England upbringing that says, work is good and accomplishments feel more significant if you've actually endeavored for them, but I also think the cost of paradise is too great, for the cost is our knowledge, our knowing and our learning. I don't think many of us religious liberals would give up our ability to think and reason and question to forego death and gain immortality; to sacrifice the fruits of our search for truth, the lessons and wisdom we've gained or our freedom to apply reason to our convictions for a paradise of limited view. "The common denominator of all liberalism," writes A. Powell Davies, "is devotion to liberty... Liberalism is that which liberates. Its object is to loosen bondage, whether of the mind or of the person, whether of individuals or societies, and its motivation is the faith that human life can only reach its fullest stature through continuous liberation – through the struggle to be free.

“In religion,” he continues, “the liberal [has] stood for the unhindered use of the free mind in arriving at conviction. Truth declared to be more holy than any creed, more sacred than even the most sanctified of dogmas. [The liberal] refused to accept authoritarian ‘revelations’ which contradicted the revelation found in one’s own experience.” This is the religious liberalism that founded Unitarian Universalism. We believe in the freedom of all people to determine for themselves the essence, nature and existence of the holy. We are a tradition whose search for meaning and truth has sent us to the sacred texts of the religions of the world. Because we believe that revelation is not sealed and delivered all at once; and is neither owned, nor determined by one body of people, clergy or laity alike, we seek wisdom from all sources of human experience and knowledge.

This is the difficulty religious conservatives have with religious liberals. Religious conservatives “seek to preserve the teachings of particular and established ideologies.” Within religiously conservative congregations, regardless of theological identity, it is about discovering, naming and holding to the truth, not to the possibility of multiple truths. When the Inspiration Network’s preacher announced to the crowd that the serpent was the first liberal, he was in fact, likening alternative perspectives with an act of the devil, with an act of evil. That is not to say he was necessarily calling religious liberals evil, but it was clear in his tone that understanding and believing differently from what he or his tradition determined the meaning of God’s words to be was not permitted and simply wrong. I have heard it said that the problem with liberals is that they only see in grey, they can’t see a clear way through the fog; meaning that religious liberals see nothing clearly, nothing in black and white, nothing to be right or wrong, that we find it difficult to claim with any certainty an idea or belief, that we are paralyzingly subjective and malleable.

A common and even understandable criticism is that religious liberals believe anything and everything. While that is far from true, we do struggle with how to maintain a unified identity while creating as few barriers to belonging among us as possible. Though we live in a theological world of ambiguity and multiple ideas, it is the access to that variety that enriches, nourishes, and delights us on our religious journeys. For we find within the many traditions truths about ourselves.

As David Rankin writes,

Like the Roman Catholics, we have a long tradition -- extending back to the sun-baked desert of ancient Israel, the small rural villages of Transylvania, and the rocky shores of early New England.

Like the Jews, we have our heroes and heroines -- Servetus, David, and Fuller; Murray, Channing, and Emerson; Barton, Anthony, and Steinmetz -- to name only a few.

Like the Baptists, we have a system of democratic polity -- with the congregation as the ultimate authority, an elected Board, and a pulpit characterized by freedom of expression.

Like the Confucianists, we have emphasized the capacity for reason -- possessing a thirst for the fruits of wisdom and knowledge, and a reverent feeling toward the achievements of the mind.

Like the Hindu, we have an eclectic system of theology -- encouraging each individual to develop a personal faith which is not dependent on external demand.

Like the Humanists, we have our roots in the experience of the world -- as it is known through the medium of touch, and sight, and sound, and taste, and smell.

Like the Buddhists, we have an accent on the individual -- on the beauty, the mystery, and the holiness of each man, woman, and child -- as each is a sacred vessel.

One of the greatest mistakes we can make, writes James Luther Adams, is to suppose that all religion is good, or that religion is something sacrosanct, something that should be exempt from criticism, something that can escape the wrath of God. That is why I wholeheartedly agree that the serpent in the Garden of Eden holds the honor of the title the first liberal. For as a creation of God he understood that even what is believed to be the word of God is to be examined, questioned, turned over and around, as with all scripture, to determine the “actual range of application, intrinsic authority and dependability” of the text as A. Powell Davies puts it. It is this ability and responsibility to bring criticism to religious ideas and ideology that makes us liberal. It is the freedom to decide what the implications of a given sacred text or ritual are and what they mean to us that we are granted in being labeled liberal. As one such liberal, continues Davies, I glory in the accusation. I am a liberal without apology, a liberal without misgivings, a liberal without regret. I am an unrepentant liberal. And so too, was the serpent in the Garden, the one now known as the first liberal.

May it be so.