

Barbara Clifford - Sunday 5th September 2010

Service Theme: The Church and Learning

The idea for today's sermon comes from me observing my two grandchildren, Riley and Sophie. Since Riley was born two years ago it has been quite a learning experience for me. Perhaps, when I had MY son and daughter, I did not have the time to watch their mannerisms so closely. Watching Riley and Sophie, now 9 months old, as they grow and explore, as they learn about this world and its people, is amazing. Even brother and sister, raised in a loving house with both sets of grandparents very active, are different. Being a Nana isn't all fun and games,, but it mostly is!

For months now Sophie has been very suspicious, even fearful, of strangers while Riley seems never to have gone through that stage. Riley is a sociable baby and has never been afraid to say 'Hi!' to strangers. When we are walking in the park and someone passes, his little hand goes up and he says "Hi!". If they do not answer he will repeat his greeting,,, several times. There are few people who refuse him a smile and reply.

Another example: When Riley hears music, whether at home or in a public place, he starts to dance, shaking his hips and hands and smiling broadly. He dances like no one is watching him. His spontaneity is charming but I know that when he is an adult such uninhibited dancing in public could get him into trouble.

Another example: Riley loves to walk. Ever since he got up on two feet, he has wanted to get out and walk, walk, walk. When he's not walking, he is running. He's a human dynamo and taking him for a walk is a combination of being in awe at his determination and being in fear at his headlong rush towards potential danger. He WILL learn to stop at the kerb and be especially careful of cars – cars which he is currently mad about; he WILL learn to listen to warnings about mess in the grass verges; he WILL learn to cautious about spooking large dogs – but until he learns, our adult responsibility is to exercise the control he has not learnt but needs. Splashing puddles is great fun, but doing so when other people are passing can complicate life.

So today I'm thinking about control and spontaneity, two sides of a coin. I have more questions than answers, but then that's Unitarianism, isn't it? As we get older we get less spontaneous, more habit-bound. We are taught that one of the goals of religion is to release our real inner selves, to be spontaneously open to the spirit, to follow our own path without submitting to any external authority, to be sensitive without judging. To dance, as Riley does, as if no one were watching. But we also learn that the world is a dangerous place, whether the local dangers are cars on the road, rivers that flood, drug addicts and dealers, heat that can absorb the water out of bodies, or strangers that would harm us. Our practical living in the world and our spiritual development can split – and in some people this split can lead to rejection of the world or rejection of part of their self.

Who we are, how we relate to other people, how we relate to our natural world, what our path in life or what our place in society are – these are religious questions and religions have traditionally provided answers and guidance intended to enable people to live fully and intended to enable society to function smoothly.

Perhaps too smoothly. Karl Marx described religion as the ‘opium of the people’, giving people a false picture of a capitalistic society and providing illusions which prevent people from seeing the truth. Marx believed that religion helps to keep the poor and oppressed in their places. By offering comfort and support and future promise, religion made their suffering more bearable. By appearing to give solutions to problems, religion tended to prevent people from trying to solve their problems – in particular it discouraged them from trying to overthrow their oppressors.

Not all religion is like this, of course. Some religions emphasise social justice; some preach revolution and one of the tendencies in today’s world is for all conflicts to become religious conflicts. Both those in power and those seeking to overthrow power use religion to explain why their actions are God’s Will. The Christian Faith teaches the 10 Commandments and has tended to support stability and the politically /economically powerful, but both Christian mystics and Christian liberation theology supporters have moved against oppressive social stability from within. Other faiths also have some kind of inner conflict between those who use tradition and teaching to bolster authority and those who use religion to subvert authority. A contemporary struggle in much of the world is equality for women, with feminist theology leading the thinking of those who demand change from patterns of exploitation and inequality. In Britain, while this theological argument has largely been settled, the practice will take many decades before sexual equality is achieved. Unitarians in Britain and North America have been in the front line trying to extend Freedom and Tolerance to those whose sexual patterns used to be, and still are, condemned by traditional religions.

Sociology of Religion is the study of what religion means to society, what the role of religion is in society. Those who study Sociology of Religion have identified social control; social education/ value formation; transmission of values; sense of worth for individuals and groups. Marx certainly saw religion as on the side of social control and authority. Others have noted the role of religion in personal fulfillment. And others yet have focused on the way religion motivates social justice.

Religion changes our lives by providing rules and authority or it can change our lives by encouraging personal spiritual development. Of course, it does both, but as I look to the future, to the world when Riley and Sophie will be adults and doing their bits to shape society, where is the role of religion? His parents and grandparents will be the main source of his ethical teaching and example, but when these six adults are **not** part of a cohesive religious community (as might have been normal only a generation or two ago), the ethical guides we provide for him are intensely personal and limited to our experiences. Wheels will be re-invented all over the place.

Our society and most industrialised societies around the world are much more secular than they were when we were children and the rise of fundamentalism in response to this has not resulted in a very good press for religion, pushing even more people in society to turn their backs on religion. Just this week, the famous scientist Prof Stephen Hawking, said that the **origin** of the universe can be explained using just the laws of physics. Since the time of Galileo there has been conflict between religious authority and scientific inquiry, but the last refuge of those who would keep a special role for God has been that “He” created everything and started it off. This is now under serious attack.

Unitarians have generally been much more positive about scientific inquiry and insights than most religious groups – in fact, in the days when individual scientists could make basic and significant discoveries, many of them were Unitarians, or at least religious free-thinkers. Our values of Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance enabled us to accept scientific discoveries while adapting our religious teachings to new worlds. But can even our religious community exist in a society dominated by secularism?

John and I were very impressed by what we saw of the results of religious training among the Unitarians in the Khasi Hills, India almost nine years ago. The churches there are generally plain unheated concrete boxes with windows that have no glass. Electricity, when available is not reliable. Even in winter (when we were there) the services are well attended by adults and children. We went to a couple evening services and at one of them the lights suddenly went out in the middle of the sermon. Pitch black with some 30 children from 3 years to 12 years sitting on the floor towards the front in three rows. Candles eventually arrived, but meantime **the children sat quietly and waited patiently**. No argy-bargy, no taking advantage of the dark for a carry on. The service resumed where it left off. We were also impressed that adults and older children were able to sing the words to the hymns without books.

Which leads me to some further questions – many more questions than answers, as I said.

If we want Riley to grow up to be friendly and open and spontaneous without endangering himself, is this **only** a family responsibility or does the Unitarian religious community have an important role in helping him learn? How can our faith help the next generation when so few of them have direct contact with us, even when some parents or grandparents have contact? How do we move from Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance to helping him (and others of his generation) keep his zest for life from being pushed to the edge of his personality? Not just Riley, of course, but all children that any members have any responsibility for.

Today’s world is largely a secular world with intense religious conflicts, not a religious world. The number of countries where political authorities consult with religious authorities before taking actions is very small. Can tomorrow’s world build on the lessons of the past if the main social tool for maintaining and building value

loses its salt? Can the Golden Rule compete in a material world without the support of religious communities? Can individuals carry this on their own shoulders without the support of value communities? And if we manage this, what stops society from splitting into millions of little competing pressure groups substituting politics for religion?

Church attendance has declined for generations in Britain and we have put various Faiths on relatively equal footing outside the centre of our lives, but this does not mean that people are less religious. Some people prefer to worship in the privacy of their families or become members of smaller private groups or worship Nature in natural settings. In today's society people do not need a church setting for either one-to-one contact or social identity. Contact can be by phone or even across the world with email, skype and social networks to keep in touch. Modern technology has brought about vast changes to society. In Glasgow we are refurbishing our building and we are also refurbishing our website. Perhaps in a few years we will broadcast our worship via the web to reach the homebound, or even those on holiday abroad. We already have our services placed on the web site, but it is unclear if they are read. Maybe after each service we should have a way for everyone who wants to, to comment. In this way we would have interaction. More and more church buildings are serving multipurpose activities and our church is no exception. Just as one more local example, John and I recently visited the St George's Tron Church and admired the refurbishment that made much of their space available by removing pulpit and pews – this space is no longer reserved for “sacred” activities. Unitarians have long held that worship space is usable for secular activities and it is the people at worship that make any space sacred.

Unitarianism attracts those who want to apply reason to their religious thinking. We emphasise tolerance, freedom and personal contribution, so lessons from the past are not presented as absolute rules. Is this enough of a message for the modern age? If our message of personal spiritual fulfillment is not linked to actually doing something to make the world better, and if the church community does not live as a hub of social justice, will we deserve to continue?

The latest Inquirer has an article by Rev Vernon Marshall about finding life's purpose and he concludes his article with a quote from *Spiritual Liberation* by Michael Beckwith. “Participate in the co-creative dance of life, not as a successful problem-solver but as an individual who is taking full possession of your spiritual inheritance of joy, love, harmony, and creativity. You are not here to merely survive but to soar... Let us all become lionhearted spiritual warriors knowing that right on the ground where we now stand we may apply our soulware of happiness and uplift ourselves and all beings.”

I conclude my thoughts by asking another question: If the goal is to participate in the dance of life fully, can this happen without energetic religious communities to encourage us, to teach us, to keep us aware of each other's needs and to keep us aware of our own failings?

