

“Conscience and Democracy in Our Association”

A Homily by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
as part of Union Sunday

at

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How do more than two hundred thousand Unitarian Universalists in over a thousand congregations find their common voice in matters of conscience on matters of import to our congregations and our larger world? Not easily. The right of conscience that is individual doesn't morph smoothly into a witness of conscience that is communal. In this sanctuary this morning there are probably as many positions of conscience on peacemaking, for example, as there are people here.

Imagine that each of you is a congregation. Each of you is a member of an association that is non-hierarchical, meaning no higher body can tell you what to do. Our challenge is to discern through conscience and conversation and study and action what we might give voice to as a common ground policy on issues that you have chosen. Daunting as that is, we can do it. We're doing it right now as over 120 of you – that is, over 120 Unitarian Universalist congregations – are intensely engaged in a Congregational Study/Action Issue on Peacemaking. And many more of you – that is, many more of our congregations – just voted in a Congregational Poll to determine which newly proposed Congregational Study/Action Issues will be on the agenda of our General Assembly in June, when we'll likely select a new issue that will run concurrently with Peacemaking for four years of study and action.

Long before our principles and purposes were adopted in 1986, we as Unitarians and then Universalists and then Unitarian Universalists have been taking stands on matters of conscience. In 1963, two years after merger, for example, delegates adopted a General Resolution on the Reform of Abortion Statutes. *Roe v. Wade* was ten years off! Our principles and purposes, 23 years away! In 1967, delegates passed a General Resolution on Freedom of Dissent, one of the policy statements that provided grounding for our 2004 Statement of Conscience on Civil Liberties. In 2006, delegates adopted Peacemaking as the Congregational Study/Action Issue under a new system that extended our attention span from two years to four – not enough time to bring about world peace perhaps, but enough time for peacemaking, kaleidoscopic as it is, to take root in congregational conscience. In 2009, General Assembly delegates will consider a Statement of Conscience on Peacemaking. If adopted, it will become Association policy. If implemented it will become cause for global rejoicing!

Conscience and our journey into democratic practice go back to the beginning of who we are religiously – to the writings of third century theologian Origen of Alexandria, one of our earliest Universalists; to the free thinking unitarian-minded Arius of the 4th century, whom the Emperor Constantine overruled, making the Trinity a mandate of the state; to the 16th century Transylvanian, Francis David, who proclaimed that “we need to think alike to love alike;” into the 19th, 20th, and 21st century Unitarians and Universalists who have spoken out and lived out the tenets of a free faith and the hard and messy stuff of democracy.

We are religiously grounded in a struggle with our conscience individual and communal. We are called by our faith to give voice to our conscience individual and communal. We are challenged through our current social witness process to do this through deep listening, disciplined study, cross-congregational collaboration, and actions of conscience that bring to life our Statements of Conscience. It's a process by which we take our faith beyond the doors of our sanctuaries and parish houses into our libraries and town halls and board rooms and public squares and sometimes into our State Houses and Halls of Congress. Is it foolproof? As long as any of us can be foolish or fooled, it is not. Does it stretch our spirits and call us again and again into a larger circle of conscience and democracy in which our faith is grounded? Why not take the fifth and find out – that is our Fifth Principle of covenanting to affirm and promote “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” Amen.