

READING from "*The Prophethood of All Believers*," by James Luther Adams

A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in human history of human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not attempt to interpret the signs of the times, is not a prophetic church. We have long held to the idea of the *priesthood* of all believers, the idea that all believers have direct access to the ultimate resources of the religious life and that every believer has the responsibility of achieving an explicit faith for free persons...[W]e need also a firm belief in the *prophethood* of all believers. The prophetic liberal church is not a church in which the prophetic function is assigned merely to the few. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through their discussion the thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional) with the intention of *making* history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only through the [prophethood of us all] can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways

Prophets
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Over 1,000 Unitarians and Universalists gathered in Syracuse, New York in May, 1959 to discuss and vote on a 44 page document that had taken three years to write and over sixty years to envision. The document titled the "Plan to Consolidate", included the Constitution, the bylaws and principles and purposes of a new religious organization that would eventually be called the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The Unitarians and Universalists gathered separately to vote on the language that would create the new association. There were long and sometimes heated debates about what the name of the association should be and if there should be annual or bi-annual meetings. Warren Ross writes in his book about the history of our Association, [The Premise and the Promise](#), "Some seventy-five amendments were offered to the plan, and each had to be moved, seconded, debated, and voted on. And since the Unitarians and Universalists were meeting in separate sessions, all wording down to the last comma, had to be identical; any change by one group had to be adopted by the other." This must have been nirvana for fans of Robert's Rules of Order and would make any tensions or conflicts we have in our congregational meetings look like the minor leagues.

Of all the issues that were debated only one caused deadlock and threatened to stop the consolidation – the wording of the statement of principles in the UUA bylaws. Ross writes, "There were

three factions: the traditional theists who wanted a reference not only to God but to our Christian heritage; the “universalist” theists who preferred acknowledging the “great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition”; and the humanists, who would just as soon do without reference to any deity.” After much discussion and disagreement at 1:30 in the morning both groups agreed that the Unitarian Universalist Association would be united “to cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man”.

I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been to craft and affirm these words which had to capture the history and the hopes of two proud, religious traditions. Despite the fervor the words caused in 1959, they were not quoted or held up very often in the next twenty-five years. In 1984 they were re-written and revitalized to become the principles and sources that are listed in the front of our hymnals today. The seven principles and five sources were approved with far less strife than in 1959. The sixth source was added in 1995. So today we covenant to affirm and promote our seven principles and we acknowledge that the living tradition which we share draws from many sources.

This morning we are beginning a two month series looking in depth at each of our six sources. Most of us do not have the same awareness and regard for the six sources as we do for the seven principles. The seven principles challenge us and guide us in how we live our lives. In a way they can be considered the Unitarian Universalist version of the Ten Commandments. The seven principles and the Ten Commandments are both easy to put on a wall or maybe even on a card we carry in our wallets. Both the principles and the commandments are the ‘sound bites’, if you will, of the religious traditions they were born in.

Now I love our seven principles. They challenge us, they challenge me, to live my life in a way that can be an example of what it means to be a good and loving person. But as my colleague, Earl Holt, the minister of King’s Chapel in Boston has observed, “the average Rotary club could probably affirm them.”

The sources describe who we are and where we have come from. I consider them the six rivers that form the ocean that is Unitarian Universalism. To understand how our religious tradition came to be and the theologies and stories that make us who we are today, we must study the six sources. They are - from my reading of the world’s religious traditions - unique to us. No other tradition I know of proclaims as we do, “Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.”

Each of us drink from these six sources, they are the well-springs from whence our principles, our covenants, are born. While we may drink more heartily from one source than another, we cannot fully practice or understand Unitarian Universalism fully acknowledging and if not embracing, at least welcoming, the wisdom and inspiration each source contains.

The source we are reflecting on today reminds us that the “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love” are part of our religious and spiritual DNA.

Several years ago I found an effective way to study both our seven principles and six sources. I sit in silence and meditate on each and every word, reflecting and sometimes journaling on how that word impacts my life. Which words do I embrace? Which do I reject? Which do I wish to go deeper with? I find today’s source not only one of the longest but also the most provocative. What words jump out at you when you reflect on this source? Men? Women? Prophetic? Challenge? Confront? Evil? Love?

When I first read this source I embraced it right away. Not because I really understood it but because it affirmed one of my most important spiritual practices. When I became interested in the spiritual and, eventually, religious life, I began reading biographies of men and women who had made a difference in the world, so that I could learn something of their faith and what made them tick. I started putting quotes of these famous – and sometimes not so famous – men and women on my answering machine every day. This was in the early 1980’s when many people hated to leave messages on machines, and I hoped these words would inspire people and maybe even entice them to leave a message.

After doing this for about two months I began to get two or three “regulars”; people who had originally dialed the wrong number but liked the message so much they would call back a couple times of week. I bought books of quotes just for my answering machine; it was good practice for someone who would grow up to be a minister one day.

In my early twenties I began to collect these prophetic men and women, Helen Keller, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, John F. Kennedy, Buddha, Albert Einstein, Jesus, Abraham Lincoln, and put them in my imaginary spiritual hall of fame. Whenever I had a problem or a question I would turn to their words, and their lives, for comfort, guidance or inspiration.

When I found Unitarian Universalism in 1994 and made a cursory review of the sources, I was excited to find that this source seemed to affirm what I thought I had been doing for many years – drawing upon the wisdom of the prophets to live a better life.

When I entered seminary and started studying the Bible I began to deepen my understanding of what I think this source is really reminding us to do. The stories of the prophets were, and are, my favorite stories in the Bible. The prophets, people like Moses, Amos, Isaiah and even Jonah, felt compelled to speak out about injustice wherever and whenever they saw it. Even though they, initially, did not want to be the person to speak out.

The Hasidic scholar, Abraham Heschel, described the prophets by writing “The prophets take us to the slums and are scandalized by what they see. To us a single act of injustice – cheating in business, exploitation of the poor – is a slight; to the prophets it is a disaster... a catastrophe, a threat to the world. The prophet is strange, one-sided, an unbearable extremist.”

My study of the prophets, and my reflection and meditation on this source, have helped me to understand a very important word in this source which for many years I think I consciously or subconsciously skimmed over. That word is challenge.

You see we Unitarian Universalists generally love to claim the prophets of our religious traditions. We wear t-shirts with the names of 50 famous Unitarians or Universalists on them. People like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony, Linus Pauling and Rod Serling to name just a few. We do this, in part, because it is often easier for us to point to people who had Unitarian or Universalist connections, maybe even beliefs, than it is to articulate what our beliefs individually and collectively are as religious people. Emerson, for one, probably would not be a fan of our t-shirts. He once chided, “You should seek for your God within yourself not in persons of bygone ages.”

I agree with St. Ralph that we must seek God or truth within ourselves, but I know that men and women of bygone ages *can* be invaluable in our seeking.

And that is what the prophetic words and deeds of men and women can do if we remember their challenges as well as their names. Dorothy Day, the Catholic social justice activist who many people referred to as a saint once said, “Don’t call me a saint. I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.”

Too often we dismiss the prophets’ words and deeds that easily. We hear the stories of men like Theodore Parker writing his sermons with a gun by his side so he could protect runaway slaves as they moved through the Underground Railroad, or women like Julia Ward Howe organizing the first mother’s day for peace around the world, and feel good about ourselves because we practice the same religion – more or less – that they did. But we don’t always ask ourselves which powers and structures of evil must we confront.

I have come to understand that the essence of the second source is not the prophetic words and deeds of the brothers and sisters who have come before us. No the essence, the richness, the message of this source has given our living religious tradition is to be challenged to confront evil with justice, compassion and love by those words and deeds.

Evil is one of those words that we shy away from as religious liberals. This is the only source where evil is mentioned. These are strong words, words that some of us really do not want to hear. But to be in the Unitarian Universalist religious tradition is to claim, to own, a heritage of speaking out against injustice, oppression, racism, homophobia, slavery, and unjust war. The words and deeds of the prophets must not only inspire us they must challenge us to take action, to use our religious faith to make the world a better place through compassion, justice and love.

Forrest Church, one of our most eloquent and articulate ministers, writes in [A Chosen Faith](#), the best book that has been written on our sources so far: “Our heritage reminds us that we are a faith of deeds not creeds. According to the second source...we can be proud of many of our Unitarian and Universalist forbearers who did precisely that.

But what about us? What does our pride of identity avail us, if the extent of our own moral exercises is limited to clucking our tongues, throwing up our hands, and – when we do finally act – issuing an occasional smug and ineffectual manifesto? The answer is absolutely nothing. Right-wing fundamentalists marshal far more energy, money, and talent to advance their narrow creed, than we do to transform the world according to our own Unitarian and Universalist vision. Our slogan, “deeds not creeds”, thus becomes a mockery.

In the face of this, we are left with two choices. One is to climb off our moral high horse; the other is to learn how to ride. Both are preferable to high-minded and sophisticated resignation, but only the latter represents the promise and fulfillment of our faith.”

The promise and fulfillment of our faith. This is what the second source is really all about. We are surrounded today by powers and structures of evil. As one of our most recent prophets, James Luther Adams, said in our reading this morning, we need a firm belief in the prophethood of all believers. We need a congregation where the words and deeds of the prophets who have come before us inspire us and, most importantly, challenge us to confront evil, wrong, with compassion, justice and love. This is really hard work. It is much easier to turn away, to get lost in our spiritual or theological seeking and forget that injustice to any one, affects all of us.

I was drawn into Unitarian Universalism because it was a religious tradition that affirmed there were many paths to the truth, to God. When I first came around I confess I was looking for a community where I could deepen and enhance my spiritual life; I was not looking for a place where I could become more of a social activist. When I entered seminary we spoke about two types of ministry – the pastoral and the prophetic. We were asked which type of ministry we were called to – the pastoral simplistically described as being with people in all the joy and pain of life, counseling and encouraging them; or the prophetic – speaking out about the injustices and oppressions of life, challenging ourselves and our congregations to engage in social justice work. I thought the pastoral would be where I lived most often.

But I have discovered that no minister – and I would dare say no person of faith– can have a healthy and whole life without being both a pastor and a prophet. The job of a preacher it has been said is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Which means sometimes I must do my best to challenge us to confront the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. Even if, **especially** if, we don’t want to think about those structures of evil. It is much easier for me and I suspect for most of you, to look away, to metaphorically hide our heads in the sand, instead of standing up to injustice, to oppression and responding with compassion, love – and most of all action.

That is why we need the prophets’ words and the strength and courage that come with a religious community united in working for justice. A community and tradition like ours.

I leave you this morning with the words and deeds of one of our most famous prophets, the Unitarian minister James Reeb. In his first sermon at All Soul’s church in Washington, DC in 1959 he said, “Is there nothing worth risking one’s life for? Are there no dreams or goals so important that we risk our own destruction to gain them?” On March 9, 1965 James Reeb lived out those words when he was murdered in Selma, Alabama after he heeded the invitation of another prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr., to come south to march for civil rights. In 1966 42 people, inspired and challenged by the message and meaning of James Reeb’s life and death, founded the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Durham and Chapel Hill that we call ERUUF today. We must never forget that this congregation was founded in large part in response to the challenge and the life of one of the prophets this source speaks of.

May the words and deeds of the prophets live in our hearts and souls; may their lives challenge us as we find comfort and inspiration among each other to change the world with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love. May it be so. Amen.

CLOSING WORDS:

Thomas Jefferson: It is in our lives and not our words that our religion must be read. Let us go forward leading lives and crafting a religion that would make any of the prophets proud. Go in peace.