

Rev. Stephan Papa
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Sermon: "Would You Rather Be A Goat?"

Consider if you will the story of *Job*, who was tested by both his God and Satan; he was a most pious person, affable and affluent. He and his wife had a large and happy family, many sheep and goats, much land. He was respected, honored, blessed, the best of the upper-middle class, until all this was taken away by the deity on a bet to see how he would react. His children, his home, his possessions, his health, all were wiped out tragically. With running sores, excruciating pain, he rent his clothes, a traditional symbol of grief, sat down and wept.

Picture if you will this poor man once a leading citizen, now bereft sitting in the landfill on the edge of town, on a dung heap, scrapping his sores with a piece of broken pottery. Three old friends come, and sit with him; they speak he remains silent. Finally he speaks. Would he, as his wife suggested, curse God for his misfortune and die instantaneously as they believed one would for doing so? Would he accept his friend's judgment that his suffering was deserved through some sin of his own, which was the common explanation for ill-fortune at the time? No, he argues with his friends and with his God. He sits in agony on the dung heap, still a person of dignity and integrity.

For several years I presented a Unitarian Universalist view of the book of *Job* at a high school literature class. In order to be fair and demonstrate the variety of interpretations possible, the teacher had a Rabbi, a Priest, a Protestant minister, and me as guest speakers.

Apparently our various analyses were really different. The traditional Christian understanding of the story is to highlight the power of the Almighty, our utter dependency, and Job's sin of pride. On the other hand, my focus was on Job's stubbornly arguing with his God as well as his friends. He doesn't give up in face of the maelstrom even when God forcibly points out their power differential, the fact that Job is a limited human and not in control of creation. God roars from the whirlwind, "Shall a fault finder contend with the Almighty?" (40:2) Well, yes, that is exactly what he does, but Job is not "a fault finder" he just wants to understand the Almighty. He argues with his friends saying that their traditional interpretations of "Why bad things happen to good people" are simplistic, illogical, ineffective for him. Job contends with "The Creator of the Universe." Of course, he loses, says, "You're the boss," but he doesn't give in to man-made interpretations, only to the evidence of his own experience. He says to God, "I will question you.... I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee..." (42:4-5) Now he believes, is appropriately contrite and obsequious, which I imagine we would be, if presented with such evidence.

Unitarian Universalists are not like Job's friends, we do not accept the explanations given by the traditional authorities in religion. We are more like Job; we disagree with their narrow, interpretations and conventional moralism. Like Job, we argue with "The Creator of the Universe." Like him we lose, but perhaps as Carlyle said, "Life is one long quarrel with God, but we make up in the end." We'll see.

In any case, like Job, Unitarian Universalists are people for whom human dignity and personal integrity are high priorities. Contrary to what traditional religions contend, we are not just prideful people, rather we are so concerned with human dignity and integrity that intellectual honesty is of utmost importance to us.

And dignity and integrity are not just taken as personal preferences for Unitarian Universalists, we posit them as attributes inherent in everyone. That is a faith statement for sometimes they are hard to see. For example, there are stories in the news of people who do cruel things to other human beings; it is hard to maintain belief in the “inherent worth and dignity” of murderers and torturers.

Dostoevsky has a story about a soldier who stomped a man to death to see if there was a spark of the divine inside. It is hard to imagine any divinity in this military man, and yet he was someone’s son, probably loved to some degree, some mother hoped he would turn out alright, and prayed for his soul when he didn’t. I believe there was within him even at the moment of committing such an atrocity something more than just hate, fear and anger. Something inside of him that hoped to feel love, to feel better about himself; surely he had an inclination that his behavior was wrong and felt some sadness, and pain, if not compassion for his victim.

It is not in fear, anger, nor desperation, but in faith that we posit dignity and integrity in all humanity. We hope it is there in everyone; we imagine it in our selves; we believe at least in the latent spark, the potential, for we have seen it in the people of integrity and dignity we know and admire. We have seen it not just in traditional saints, but in sinners. We have seen it not just in people like Job who believed and was pious, but in those who don’t believe as well.

In Elie Wiesel’s book, *A Jew Today* he writes of a true story told him by a young man about his father and a soldier in a Nazi death camp: “Facing the inmates assembled...the two men seem to be acting out an unreal scene. ‘Deny your faith and you will eat for an entire week,’ the officer is yelling. ‘No,’ says the Jew quietly. ‘Repudiate him and I will protect you.’ ‘Never,’ says the Jew quietly. ‘Never? What does that mean? A minute? In a minute you will die. So then, you dog, will you finally obey me?’ The inmates hold their breath. Some watch the officer, others have eyes only for their comrade. ‘God means more to you than life? More than I? You asked for it, you fool!’ He draws his gun, raises his hand, takes aim. And shoots. The bullet enters the inmate’s shoulder. He sways, and his comrades in the first row see his face twist. And they hear him whisper the ancient call of the martyrs of the faith: ‘Adoshem Hu Haelokim-Adoshem Hu Haelokim—God is God, God alone is God.’ ‘You swine, you dirty Jew,’ screams the officer. ‘Can’t you see I am more powerful than your God! Your life is in my hands, not in his! You need me more than him! Choose me and you’ll go to the hospital and you’ll recover, and you’ll eat, and you’ll be happy!’ ‘Never,’ says the Jew gasping. The officer examines him at length. He suddenly seems fearful. Then he shoots a second bullet into the man’s other shoulder. And a third. And a fourth. And the Jew goes on whispering, ‘God is God, God is...’ the last bullet strikes him in the mouth....’ I was there,’ his son tells me [Wiesel writes]. ‘I was

there, and the scene seems unbelievable to me. You see, my father...my father was a hero...but he was not a believer.” (157-158)

Such courage is witness to a dignity and integrity, which are not confined to those of orthodox belief, but reflect a commitment and spirit we may little understand, but greatly respect. Integrity and dignity demand sometimes that we stand up not just for what we believe in, like our own righteousness, but that we stand up even for what we don't believe in, other people, ourselves, the goodness of life, a loving God, for example. Unitarian Universalists believe in human dignity and integrity for ourselves and for others, and when we don't quite believe it, we try to act as if we did—stubbornly, as if arguing with the Deity, steadfast with dignity and integrity.

Unlike traditional Christianity we do not create an ideological conflict between the concepts of human free will and that of an all-powerful, all-controlling deity. To fully grant dignity to the individual we affirm their free choice, and any divine being consequently must be seen as limited, affected by us. That limitation does not diminish the deity for me, but rather makes my relationship closer because I see we are partners, co-creators. Process theology and humanism are compatible, whereas traditional Christian theology in my view gives at best an ambiguous message if not a contradictory one about human dignity.

A religion such as ours affirms human dignity when it speaks of there being a spark of divinity in everyone; some say we are all children of God. But, even some who affirm this universal concept seem to view people as children in need of protective custody. Because Unitarian Universalists place greater emphasis on the spirit in humans, rather than on the words of religion, we trust the individual person more than most; we have a higher evaluation of their being and potential. Because we put such value on an individual's dignity, we insist on affirming their autonomy and maturity, so they are free to act with integrity.

What does this particular theological distinction mean in terms of our way in religion? It means that we have been and need to be in the forefront of the struggle for freedom and equality. We have been in the vanguard of the fight against slavery and for women's suffrage. We were the first to ordain women, homosexuals, bi-, queer, and transgender people to our ministry because we affirm their “inherent worth and dignity,” and need now to affirm their right to marry; and we need to act for women's reproductive rights once again.

What does this principle mean in our everyday individual lives? In addition to our broad commitments to the pursuit of justice and peace, and the search for autonomy and integrity, it means that we treat everyone we meet with respect.

As Unitarian Universalists we affirm both the individual's dignity and integrity. These two are not the same. All people deserve our respect, that is, they are worthy, have some dignity by virtue of their humanity. Integrity on the other hand is more of an internal attribute; it means congruent, consistent, honest, and only the individual can ascertain its existence for themselves. We can not give the latter to someone else, but may help them develop it, if we treat them with the former.

This is something I try to do in my counseling. It is very easy for a minister to fall into the trap of giving advice. It saves time. And sometimes people ask for it. However, it is not necessarily the best thing to do. Not only because your advice may be wrong, but because the goal is to help that person grow more capable and confident.

So, in order to keep affirming the person's dignity and integrity, support them, but if you respect them, try not to control them by telling them what they should do. Lord Chesterfield said, "Most... [people] would rather have you hear their stories than solve their problems."

Just as maintaining dignity sometimes demands that we stay silent and listen, so there are times when it is necessary to speak up and act. It may be about confronting some injustice, the dignity of others, or our own.

I remember when my first marriage ended. I still loved my ex-wife, but I couldn't live with her and keep any self-respect. I could not maintain my dignity with integrity. Most divorces are caused by the loss of them, not the loss of love; it was my dignity and integrity that needed to be repaired.

As Unitarian Universalists we affirm "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." This requires either faith and hope, or courage and conviction. At times we may need the patience to listen, and at other times the imagination to act. Without action there may be little integrity. With it we give dignity to others and ourselves. We need to act, speak up, for people, for justice, for God, whether you are a believer or not.

It is hard to believe in humanity. Most religions separate the divine and the human and make one or the other hopeless. Our Unitarian Universalist faith is in dignity and integrity, both the goodness of the divine and the human. In fact, we proclaim they are continuous "for better and for worse." We are humanists; we believe in people, in the spark inside everyone, their potential. People are not perfect, but they are worthy of respect. We have the potential to make the world better. We cannot do it alone. And we are not alone. As Martin Buber, the great Jewish theologian, said, "There is a spark in everyone, in everything God has made." By appealing to it we help it grow.

William Ellery Channing, the founder of Unitarianism in America, wrote: "I do and I must reverence human nature.... I know how it is despised, how it has been oppressed, how civil and religious establishments have conspired to crush it. I know its history. I shut my eyes on none of its weaknesses and crimes...but injured, trampled on, and scorned as our nature is, I still turn to it with intense sympathy and strong hope. I bless it for its kind affections, for its strong and tender love, I honor it for its struggles against oppression, for its growth and progress under the weight of so many chains and prejudices, for its achievements in science and art, and still more for its examples of heroic and saintly virtue. These are the marks of a divine origin and the pledges of a celestial inheritance; and I thank God that my own lot is bound up with that of the human race."

It is hard to believe in humanity, just as hard as it is to believe in a God; but I have seen something of both; I have seen dignity and integrity that have inspired me. I have some faith, a little courage, some hope, and free will. We

can choose to embody the dignity and integrity that is the essence of the continuum that is divinity and humanity. It's a quixotic opportunity, this being human. And, I choose to conclude with a question in a song. Oh, it's hard being human, but... "Would you like to swing on a star...? Carry moonbeams home in a jar.... Be better off than you are...or would you rather be a goat?" Amen.