

Promoting Religious Tolerance©  
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet  
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I made the decision more than a month ago to speak today on the issue of religious tolerance. I didn't know then just how timely this topic would be. As I was making the decision I knew that religious intolerance has been intensifying of late in our country as well as in other parts of the world. And I was all too cognizant of statements made and actions taken by the President of our country specifically targeting people of the Muslim faith. Targeting them for no other reason than their religious affiliation. For example, the President has repeatedly used the phrase "Muslim terrorists" in a general way, not referring to anyone specifically. And in campaign speeches he promised to restrict the ability of Muslims to come to the U.S. But he didn't stop at just making statements which demonstrate his prejudice and animus. He went considerably further than that. Once elected, he put forth three separate Proclamations intended to restrict travel to this country. Each of these "travel bans," as they have been referred to, focused either entirely or predominantly on countries in which the population is mostly Muslim. These travel bans were clearly established as a way of fulfilling his campaign promises. All three of these Proclamations were then found by a variety of Federal judges and courts to be unconstitutional. But on June 26th, the U.S. Supreme Court, by a slim 5 to 4 margin, overturned the rulings of the lower courts. By a one vote margin, the Supreme Court reinstated the President's third Proclamation prohibiting people from seven nations from coming to the U.S.

In striking down the rulings of the lower courts, Chief Justice John Roberts asserted that "The Proclamation is squarely within the scope of Presidential authority..." He went on to write, "Plaintiffs argue that this President's words strike at fundamental standards of respect and tolerance, in violation of our constitutional tradition. But the issue before us is not whether to denounce the statements. It is instead the significance of those statements in reviewing a Presidential directive, neutral on its face, addressing a matter within the core of executive responsibility. In doing so, we must consider not only the statements of a particular President, but also the authority of the Presidency itself." In other words, if a person holds the Presidency in this country, their clearly stated intent matters little if at all. Instead, it is the power of the office which must be protected first and foremost. In his concurring opinion Justice Anthony Kennedy alluded to this when he wrote, "if further proceedings are permitted, it would be necessary to determine that any discovery and other preliminary matters would not themselves intrude on the Foreign Affairs power of the Executive." To me, this decision and the logic behind it smacks of a belief system that was disavowed when our constitution was ratified 230 years ago last month. The belief system I am referring to is that the ruler of the country can do no wrong. The power of their office protects them from the transgressions they initiate and institute. It seems to me that we find ourselves in a situation today similar to what is contained in the old story commonly referred to as the emperor has no clothes. And to make the matter worse, those who are in positions of responsibility, those who are supposed to protect all of us from such obscenity and callous disregard for the law and rights of others, are simply turning their heads and walking away from their responsibilities. History has shown us what can happen when

the ruler of a country, whether king or queen, emperor, premier, prime minister, or president, holds or assumes unchallenged power and authority.

I know that I am not alone in my concern about the current state of affairs in our country, not just in regards to religious intolerance but involving other issues as well. Many of you have spoken to me of the distress you feel regarding the direction our country is currently headed. And with that distress can come a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Helplessness and hopelessness are common emotions when a person finds themselves in a situation that is beyond their capacity either to comprehend what is occurring or to alter the course of things. I have a sense some of us have been all too familiar with one or both of these emotions of late.

So where do we find hope, support and encouragement in these difficult times? I believe there are a number of places we can turn. I mentioned previously that history offers examples for us to look to. In regards to dealing with the issue of religious intolerance, history, and in particular, Unitarian history, offers a clear counterpoint to the religious prejudice, discrimination and persecution that is present today.

The counterpoint I am referring to came about as a result of the Diet of Torda. The Diet of Torda was not intended to help a person lose weight or live a healthier lifestyle. This Diet wasn't at all about food. Instead, this Diet was a one-time gathering which occurred in 1568. It was a gathering of delegates from the Three Nations of Transylvania, the Hungarian nobles, Transylvanian Saxons, and Székelys. The gathering occurred at the behest of the Transylvanian king, King John Sigismund, who was the one and only avowed Unitarian king in history. Out of the Diet of Torda came a document that is often referred to as the Edict of Toleration or more specifically the Edict of Religious Toleration. This Edict offered protections against religious persecution. Here is one segment of the statement; "Let no superintendent or anyone else act violently or abusively to a preacher. No one may threaten another, on account of his teaching, with imprisonment or deprivation of office..."

We may not view this statement as radical today, but in January of 1568 it was both extremely radical as well as heretical. For those of you who may not be all that familiar with western religious history, the sixteenth century saw the birth of the Protestant Reformation. It was a period of time when people were being executed for having beliefs different than the beliefs of those who were in charge within the Christian traditions of that time. It is quite probable that you have heard of Martin Luther, the founder of Lutheranism, and John Calvin, the namesake of Calvinism and a dominant figure in the Christian Reformed Church movement. These two men were significant contributors to the Protestant Reformation during the sixteenth century. Calvin was alive when the Edict of Toleration was enacted and, to say the least, he was displeased with it. Prior to the Diet of Torda, Calvin had referred to King Sigismund's doctor, Giorgio Biandrata as "a monster who could foster more monsters."

Three men worked diligently to establish the Edict of Toleration. They were King Sigismund, Giorgio Biandrata and Francis David, author of our responsive reading this morning. All three of them risked the threat of death as they promoted religious tolerance. They promoted religious tolerance during a period of religious intolerance that was at least as intense as we are experiencing today. The example they set 450 years ago is something we can look to for hope and for inspiration in these challenging times.

As I think about this anniversary of the Edict of Toleration in light of the situation we find ourselves in today, I ask myself this question. What steps might I, might we, take today to emulate both the level of religious tolerance that King Sigismund, Georgia Blandrata and Francis David exhibited and promoted as well as the courage they displayed? This is a question I would encourage each of us to ask ourselves individually and to ask one another collectively. While I don't have a definitive answer to this question, I have some ideas that I would like us to consider.

First, I would ask us to consider what each of these people did as individuals. Clearly, each of them were willing to publicly support the concept of religious tolerance. In my time as your minister I have been witness to the high degree of religious tolerance that is present in this Fellowship and what I have observed lifts my spirits. There is something each of these men did however that is frequently lacking, both in our Fellowship and in our larger religious movement. Each of these men regularly and consistently identified their own religious affiliation as the reason for speaking to and working on the matter of religious tolerance. And they identified themselves as Unitarians when doing so put them at risk of being imprisoned or even killed because of their religious beliefs. My experience is that, generally speaking, we Unitarian Universalists tend to be reluctant to specifically identify our religious affiliation and religious values when we share our thoughts and concerns about any number of issues. I am well aware that there are a variety of reasons for a reluctance to talk about religion in public situations. Many of the reasons I have heard are both understandable and reasonable. I have not heard anyone tell me, however, that they don't speak publicly about their religious affiliation for fear of imprisonment or death. When it comes to discussions about religious intolerance, I believe that stating our religious affiliation clearly as we are sharing our perspectives matters. And it doesn't matter just a little bit, it matters a lot. Identifying our religious affiliation as we speak to the topic of religious toleration makes it clear that we, as individuals, will not be pitted against another person based solely on their religious affiliation. Stating our religious affiliation makes it clear that we are part of a religious community that is open, accepting and inviting. And it indicates that we are supported and encouraged by our religious community to confront religious intolerance where it shows up in our community and our country. It also conveys to those who belong to a religious group that is being targeted that we are willing to address prejudice, discrimination and hatred in its many forms. Stating our own religious affiliation when speaking against religious intolerance communicates to those who are feeling targeted that we are there for them and that we are willing to stand with them.

Second, I would ask us to think about how these three men worked to make the Edict of Toleration possible. As I said earlier, the Edict came out of a gathering of people who together decided that religious tolerance needed to be the law of the land. None of us are in a position to make religious tolerance the law of this nation even though that is what ought to be. But as a religious community, we can, in accordance with our Social Witness Policy, adopt a position and/or a public statement that the Fellowship, as a whole, is in agreement with. Such a position or statement could promote and support not only religious tolerance but religious diversity as well. If together we took the steps needed to create and approve such a statement, it would allow me or others in the congregation to state publicly this Fellowship's position in support of religious tolerance.

Taking a position or adopting a specific statement surely would be consistent with our newly adopted Mission Statement: “We: Welcome Diversity, Act for Justice, Foster Spiritual Growth, Inspire Compassion, Nurture Community.” I can tell you from personal experience that when I have been able to state publicly what the congregation I serve supports, my words get more attention and have more impact.

These are two of many options we might want to consider as we seek to promote religious tolerance. I am certain there are many other possibilities. My hope is that we will continue to have discussions on this topic. And that from those discussions we will take actions to change the direction our country is currently headed in. As we engage both in discussions and in actions, I would encourage us to remember these words by Francis David. “We don’t have to believe alike to love alike.” In the days ahead may we work for justice by spreading love. Let us spread the kind of love that can erode prejudice, dissolve discrimination and wash away hatred which is based on fear. With these words in mind then, I send you forth in love. May we go forth with a clear sense of purpose, with decided determination, with invigorated inspiration, and with heightened hope. And as we go, may we share our love and our faith with all people, regardless of their religious affiliation or persuasion, just as those who worked to create and establish the Edict of Religious Toleration did 450 years ago.

So may it be.