

## **“Choosing Beloved Community Over Individualism”**

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Individual rights are highly valued in this country. The idea that individuals have rights is so important that it is contained in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

As I stated last Sunday, we all know that the lofty ideals contained in that sentence have never been true or actualized for all people of this country. The idea that every individual has a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, however, is something that many of us agree with. Many of us would also agree that such rights are unalienable, whether or not we attribute them to a Creator.

The desire for freedom, and the individual rights such freedom would entail, were factors that motivated many of the early European colonists to leave their homelands destined for this continent. Many of those early colonists had experienced oppression of one kind or another in their land of birth. They believed a better life could be found here—a life where they would be able to use their individual skills, talents and abilities more freely and more fully. The hopes and dreams of those early colonists nurtured the ideas of individual freedom and individual rights that would eventually find their way into our Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. Over time, those hopes and dreams have also nurtured and fostered something many of the earliest settlers may not have imagined. Those hopes and dreams also fostered and nurtured the rise of individualism both as a belief and as a cultural value.

What I just stated requires some clarification. There are several different definitions of the word individualism. The first two definitions of individualism I found in the dictionary refer to an aspect of the word that the Rev. Dr. Fredric Muir mentioned in our reading this morning, namely individuality. Individuality deserves to be held in high regard. Several other definitions, however, address concepts much larger than individuality. These definitions refer to things such as, and here I quote, “the doctrine that individual freedom in economic enterprise should not be restricted by government or social regulation.” And an even more expansive and concerning definition of individualism states, “the doctrine that self-interest is the proper goal of all human actions.” The word “egotism” is included in that definition.

What the definitions I just shared indicate is that individualism doesn’t refer to one specific thing. Instead, the word “individualism” has multiple meanings that exist on a continuum. Some of the definitions I can support. I am unwilling, however, to lend support to certain definitions of the word. The last two definitions of individualism go against the values that are contained in several of our UU Principles. And I am unable to comprehend how either of the last two definitions of individualism are compatible with the section of the Preamble that I shared a few moments ago. More than that, the foundational belief within both of these definitions—specifically that individual rights take precedence over communal rights, is incongruent with any form of government—let alone a government that is based on the use of the democratic method. And neither of these definitions are conducive to building a vibrant and healthy community of any size.

In spite of this fact, there are many people in this country who are ardent supporters of the last two definitions of individualism I shared. I would imagine all of us have seen or read about examples of this type of individualism over the past several months. Here are a few examples I can think of. A significant number of people believe that being required to wear a mask to prevent the spread of the COVID virus is an infringement on their individual rights. A number of Montana businesses flouted state and local mandates related to business hours and building occupancy levels that were established to counter the pandemic’s spread. And our 45th President cited the right of “freedom of speech” to defend his actions on January 6 when he told an angry group of supporters to go to the Capital and “fight like hell.” The subsequent actions, which were a direct response to those words, cost some people their lives, as well as their inalienable right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The Supreme Court of this country has previously ruled that the freedom of speech

contained in the Constitution does not give a person the right to certain kinds of speech. You can't yell fire in a crowded enclosure such as a movie theater. Doing so would infringe on the rights of others and endanger lives. Telling a large and angry crowd to go "fight like hell" had the same results as yelling fire.

These are just a few recent examples of the kind of individualism identified in the latter two definitions I offered. I am sure any of us could cite others. Not all of the examples of individualism are as clear or as pronounced as the ones I just mentioned. This type of individualism has been pervasive in the culture of this nation for so long, that it is easy to miss, or even gloss over, examples that aren't as blatant or destructive as the ones I just mentioned. And because the definition of individualism involves a continuum, we may not always recognize what is at play in some situations—whether what is involved is an issue of individuality or of individualism that puts the interests of one person above the interests of the community.

There may be another reason we may not recognize when this individual above community type of individualism is at play. In our reading this morning, Muir suggests that this individual above community type of individualism exists within Unitarian Universalism. If you ever get access to the full lecture from which this morning's reading came from, I encourage you to read it. You will get a very clear idea of his thoughts on the prevalence and the harmfulness of individualism that is in our midst. I had the opportunity to hear him deliver that lecture to a gathering of hundreds of UU ministers at the 2012 UU Ministry Days. I found what he shared to be both troubling and motivating.

Returning now to what I was saying earlier, we may find it difficult to acknowledge or accept that what Muir is stating is true. Acknowledging that individualism is pervasive in Unitarian Universalism likely conflicts with how we perceive ourselves and the religious community we are associated with. The kind of individualism I have been talking about goes against the values we hold. And yet, as Muir points out, Ralph Waldo Emerson continues to be held up as a nineteenth century exemplar of the Unitarian branch of our faith tradition. Emerson is highly admired even though an important part of his message involves the individual above community type of individualism that I have been talking about. Let me be clear here. I am not disparaging Emerson as a person. What I am calling into question is his penchant for exalting the individual over any other person, or the community. That type of message is very similar to what we have been hearing and witnessing for the past four years. And it is the type of message that those who invaded the Capital Building would have agreed with wholeheartedly. That should set alarm bells off for all of us.

The type of individualism that Emerson was espousing and promoting in the 1800's can be witnessed in Unitarian Universalism still today. It is present both within our congregations and within the ranks of our ministers. I offer the following situations I have been witness to as examples. Over the past dozen years, I have twice been involved in the process of having a ministerial colleague removed from "Fellowship" in the UU Ministers Association. Being removed from "Fellowship" is similar to being defrocked in the Catholic Church. In both situations, the colleague had been involved in inappropriate romantic relationships with congregation members. These ministers put their own individual wants and desires above what was best for the religious communities they were serving. The inappropriate romantic relationships these ministers engaged in did harm to their congregations and to the profession of ministry. In one of the instances, I know that the behavior also did harm to the congregant the minister had the relationship with.

I have also witnessed many situations in which congregation members acted in ways that align with the type of individualism described in the latter two definitions. To ensure that I am not pointing a finger at a specific person, I offer examples where it isn't possible to identify a specific individual. At the 2019 UUA General Assembly in Spokane, Washington, I was witness to two examples of the kind of individualism I have been talking about. If you have never attended a General Assembly, often referred by the initials G.A., you may not be aware that these events involve large numbers of UU's. Typically, G.A. attendance registers in the thousands, which was the case in Spokane. The hall where the main meetings were held was packed with chairs. And as is typical, there were several large video screens where what was occurring on the stage was being projected. And again, as is typical at G.A.'s, there were sections of chairs that were clearly marked off and reserved for specific groups, such as the Youth Caucus, the LGBTQ Caucus and UUA staff to name a few. And there were also spaces reserved for people who are mobility challenged. On two occasions during that

G.A. I witnessed a UU congregant sit in a section which was reserved for a group of people they were not a part of. Both times I saw someone approach the person to inform them that the section was reserved and request that they find another seat. And both times the response was a refusal by the person to honor the intent of those who created the reserved section as well as the person who informed them that the section was reserved.

And here is one last example that I witnessed in a small UU Fellowship of about 50 members. One Sunday morning, a first-time visitor attended the Sunday service of this particular Fellowship. The visitor, who arrived almost 15 minutes before the start of the service, sat near the front of the sanctuary. They didn't sit in the front row, but near the front. This Fellowship held their services in a church that would easily seat three times their membership, so there were plenty of open seats. A few minutes before the service was about to begin a person who was part of the hospitality team approached the first-time visitor. You might think, as I did, that the person on the hospitality team would then proceed to offer a warm welcome to the visitor. That is what we might expect but that didn't occur. Instead, the hospitality team member informed the visitor that they were seated where the hospitality team member's family sat every week. Ouch! But there was something even more troubling about this situation. I later learned that this wasn't the first time something like this had occurred. And after each incident, not a single member of the congregation spoke with the hospitality team member to let them know their behavior was problematic. As you might guess, this Fellowship had difficulties attracting and keeping new members and friends.

I share these examples not to disparage any person, any congregation or our larger faith community. I share these examples because I believe it is important for all of us to recognize that our UU communities are not immune to the type of individualism that puts the wants and desires of the individual above what is best for the community. I share them because I believe what all of us want for our Fellowship, our larger UU community, our country and even the world is to create a cultural norm where community has no less value than the individual. I believe that when the rights of the community are recognized and respected by enough of us, we can reach the tipping point—the tipping point where the culture of individualism that is predominant in this country can be transformed. Such a transformation is needed if we ever hope to reach the goal that is stated in our Sixth Principle—“the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.” This goal will never be possible as long as the type of individualism I have been speaking about reigns supreme.

Achieving the goal of world community will not be easy. And the goal will not be achieved quickly. For this goal is, in actuality, the goal of creating the beloved community that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of when he was alive. The goal is something that people who have been oppressed have been dreaming of and hoping for for a very long time. Today, our country and the world are in desperate need of the goal that is stated in our Sixth Principle, the goal of world community, a beloved community for all people. May we seek to open our eyes to, and expand our awareness of, the culture of individualism that is so pervasive in our communities. May we commit ourselves to identifying and naming individualism that is harmful to others. And may we strive to learn ways to nurture and support community that benefits all people while respecting the individuality of every person.

So may it be.