

A Public or Private Church?

A Sermon Delivered on November 15, 2009
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“With public sentiment, nothing can fail;
without it, nothing can succeed.”
-- Abraham Lincoln*

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Reading: by progressive evangelical author Jim Wallis from *God's Politics - Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (p. 31, 36)

God is personal, but never private. And the Bible reveals a very public God. But in an age of private spiritualities, the voice of a public God can scarcely be heard. Private religion avoids the public consequences of faith. In particular, affluent countries and churches breed private disciples, perhaps because the applications of faith to public life could become quickly challenging and troubling...

Most of the biblical prophets... would offer a quite searing indictment of contemporary American society... Whether conservative or liberal Christians, or members of other faith groups, or just spiritual seekers, we are all guilty of succumbing to a diminished religiosity that is characterized by privatized belief systems, devoid of ... prophetic and social witness... - ultimately nothing more than "small-s" spirituality that is really only ad hoc wish fulfillment or a collection of little self-help techniques we use to take the edge of our materialistic rat-race lives...

People now commonly say they aren't "religious," just spiritual... and never with any challenge from any quarter. But the problem for all of us well-meaning "spiritual folk" is that we've lost the social, unifying, and liberating aspects of ...faith....

Reading: by the Unitarian Universalist author and church consultant Michael Durall from *The Almost Church Revitalized* (p. 6)

You can perform a simple test to determine the extent to which your congregation takes a public or private stance. Just look for the "outreach" or "social action" line item in the church's budget. This line item is separate from denominational or district dues.

Mainline Protestant congregations, churchgoers most like UUs in socioeconomic terms, maintain a budget line item for outreach of between 10 and 29 percent, with the national average being 16 percent. This money goes to people who are less fortunate, beyond the church's four walls. These are churches whose primary orientation is outward, toward the community. If the line item in your congregation's budget is appreciably less, or nonexistent, this indicates an inwardly focused congregation...

If UU congregations wish to engage the world in more meaningful ways, they will need to become more outward-oriented, public churches that challenge members to reach new segments of the population with a very different message.

Reading: by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (*Essential Writings*, p. 67, from *The Sun My Heart*)

There is no phenomenon in the universe that does not intimately concern us, from a pebble resting at the bottom of the ocean, to the movement of a galaxy millions of light years away.

All phenomena are interdependent. When we think of a speck of dust, a flower, or a human being, our thinking cannot break loose from the idea of unity, of one, of calculation. We see a line drawn between one and many, one and not one. But if we

truly realize the interdependent nature of the dust, the flower, and the human being, we see that unity cannot exist without diversity...

If you are a mountain climber or someone who enjoys the countryside or the forest, you know that forests are our lungs outside of our bodies. Yet we have been acting in a way that has allowed millions of square miles of land to be deforested, and we have also destroyed the air, the rivers, and parts of the ozone layer. We are imprisoned in our small selves, thinking only of some comfortable conditions for this small self, while we destroy our large self. If we want to change the situation, we must begin by being our true selves. To be our true selves means we have to *be* the forest, the river, and the ozone layer. If we visualize ourselves as the forest, we will experience the hopes and fears of the trees. If we don't do this, the forest will die, and we will lose our chance for peace.

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Why did you come to church this morning? What is it you were you hoping to find?

Were you hoping for an opportunity to sit quietly and reflect on what's going on in your life? To soothe frayed nerves, and regain a sense of calm. Were you hoping to hear some fine music and singing? Perhaps intellectual stimulation or religious inspiration? Or are you here because you are a parent and value the kind of religious education we offer our children?

The last time we as a congregation made a concerted effort to determine what it is that draws most of us here, all of these things were mentioned. But the single most significant aspect of church involvement most of us identified was something else. Something implicit in all of our activities, and yet in some way strangely elusive. What most of us seek here, above all, is community.

That's why community figures most prominently in the mission statement we adopted four years ago. Our mission, we say, is to build community, seek inspiration, promote justice, and find peace. Building community is what is most important to us.

Now some of you may not be surprised about this. Some of you were involved in the drafting of our mission statement, and others of you may have read it in church publications or heard it mentioned from the pulpit.

But I have to tell you, the fact that we have identified "community" as the single most significant aspect of our church home, means a lot. It says a lot about who we, as a church are, and what we want to be.

* * *

You see, “community” is not always the first thing that leaps to mind when thinking about the central tenets of our faith. In many ways, UUism is all about the opposite of community: individualism.

Unitarian Universalism arose during a period in western religious history when conformity of belief was a defining factor in Christian communities. The faithful needed to subscribe to very particular church doctrines. They needed to profess belief in creeds carefully crafted by ancient church fathers. And those who were unable or unwilling to do so were branded heretics, declared outcasts, sometimes imprisoned and sometimes killed.

Unitarians and Universalists were heretics, unwilling to simply swallow the doctrines professed from on high. They had their own interpretations of biblical truth, their own understanding of what Jesus and the Hebrew prophets were trying to teach. Rather than bowing to established church order, they believed in the authority of every individual’s god-given powers of reason and critical thought, our powers of conscience and compassion. The task of distinguishing religious truth from error, the task of telling the difference between right and wrong, this duty rests with every individual. No one can do this for us.

Religion is a deeply personal affair. Just as each of us are distinct individuals, each of us with a distinct perspective, shaped by our upbringing, our culture, our genetic make-up, likewise the religious convictions we embrace in light of our distinct life experiences, are unique.

Emerson put it this way, he said, “God enters by a private door into every individual.”

Our religious individualism is very compatible with the individualistic spirit so well-developed in American society.

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In his bestselling book “Habits of the Heart,” the sociologist Robert Bellah examined individualism and commitment in American life. He discovered Americans sometimes “make a rather sharp dichotomy between private and public life.” He says, many Americans see their primary task as “finding themselves.” They imagine this involves separating themselves not only from their parents, but also from larger communities and traditions. They think fulfillment can be found in oneself, and in relation to a few intimate others, safely within the private sphere. Implicit in this approach lies a negative view of public life.

But this exceedingly individualistic approach is a mistake. Bellah writes, “on the basis of what we have seen in our observation of middle-class American life, it would seem that this quest for purely private fulfillment is illusory: it often ends in emptiness instead. On the other hand, we found many people... for whom private

fulfillment and public involvement are not antithetical. These people [exhibit] an individualism that is not empty but is full of content drawn from an active identification with communities and traditions.” (p. 163)

Bellah concludes, “perhaps the notion that private life and public life are at odds is incorrect. Perhaps they are so deeply involved with each other that the impoverishment of one entails the impoverishment of the other.”

We may think our personal happiness is best sought and found within the boundaries of our private lives, but research shows that is not the case.

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The Unitarian Universalist minister and former President of Meadville/Lombard Theological School, William Murry, once reflected on the work of our congregations. He wrote,

“Too often we have understood our task as relegated to the private sphere, the personal lives of our members. Too often we have preached sermons on trivial and inconsequential subjects rather than address the significant issues of our times. In a word, too many of our ministers and churches have retreated into the safety and security of the private sphere and have little or no public ministry, and that is tragic.”

Jim Wallis sees similar dynamics in mainstream American religious life. Speaking in theistic language, Wallis makes a fine distinction by pointing out that God is personal, but not private.

The divine enters our lives in deeply personal ways, but is not limited to our private lives. There is a personal individual dimension to faith, but the sacred lies not only within us.

Wallis says, if we look carefully into our biblical and other holy texts, we will see that God is deeply concerned with public life, and not merely private piety. God is concerned with our responsibilities for the common good, not just our own personal religious experience.

“The place to begin to understand the politics of God,” Wallis writes, “is with the [Hebrew] prophets... What were their subjects? Quite secular topics really - land, labor, capital, wages, debt, taxes, equity, fairness, courts, prisons, immigrants, other races and peoples, economic divisions, social justice, war, and peace...” These are the very public issues of greatest concern to God, expressed memorably in the words of Isaiah, who said our task is to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share our bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into our house.

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Religion, at its best, helps connect the private and public dimensions of our lives, each serving to deepen and broaden our experience of the other. The word “religion” itself

reminds us of this meaning. It comes from the Latin *ligare* which means to bind together, like in “ligament,” to connect. *Re-ligare* means to re-connect. Religion seeks to bind together again dimensions of our lives that too easily exist in isolation.

Wallis tells a personal story of how he first realized the crucial connection between the private and the public realms of religion. As a young man he worked at a variety of jobs in inner-city Detroit, side by side with African American young men his age. And he attended black churches, as well, and invariably learned a lot about the realities of racism.

One day, when he was visiting the white church of his parents, he got into an argument with one of the elders about racism and what he was learning in the inner city. Wallis remembers very clearly the words with which the elder brought the conversation to an end. He said, “Christianity has nothing to do with racism; that is a political issue and our faith is personal.”

Wallis walked away from that conversation convinced that he could no longer be a part of a Christian church. He spent years active in the civil rights movement and in political organizing. It wasn’t until much later, that he discovered a more progressive school of Christian thought, which affirmed that religious devotion and social responsibility cannot exist in isolation, but must go hand in hand.

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Michael Durall, says, that even though most UU congregations are involved in a number of small social action initiatives, we cannot claim the status of a “public” church. We cannot claim that the greater good is our primary purpose.

Durall believes, if our congregations want to engage the world in more meaningful ways, we will need to become more outward-oriented public churches that challenge members to reach new segments of the population.

He writes, “our Universalist heritage reminds us of the great human family of which we are a part. Expanding this family is one of our highest and noblest callings. This is the true definition of diversity, the public church that we should create, one that reaches out to those in need.” (p. 21)

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Thich Nhat Hanh tells us all phenomena are interdependent. “There is no phenomenon in the universe that does not intimately concern us, from a pebble resting at the bottom of the ocean, to the movement of a galaxy millions of light years away.”

If we remain imprisoned in our small selves, thinking only of some comfortable conditions for this small, private self, we will destroy our large self, the world in which we live. “If we want to change the situation, we must begin by being our true selves. To

be our true selves means we have to *be* the forest, the river, and the ozone layer.” Only then will we find peace.

* * *

In his work as consultant, Durall has visited many of our congregations across the country. He asked members why they come to church and what they hope their churches might become. Their answers expressed deep yearnings. They said:

- I wish my church had a more significant and visible community impact.
- I hope for a willingness of my congregation to live more boldly.
- I wish we accomplished great things, or affected lives...
- I yearn for a church where service is the core, and not at the edges.
- I wish this church took some risks.
- We're too comfortably settled in.
- I wish we weren't so penny-pinching, and gave more to the needs of the world.

These answers reflect what I have heard members and friends of this church say. Whether we are able to fulfill these yearning depends on us.

May we have the courage to build a community that reflects our true interdependence, our true selves. For in our deepest heart we know injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

May we have the courage to build a community in which we share of our lives freely and generously, a community which is nurtured within the walls of this church, but which extends far beyond these walls. For in our deepest heart we know we have so much to give, and we have so much to gain.

May we have the courage to build community together, each doing our part to create a better world.

Amen.