



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Love in the Face of Injustice,”
a sermon given by student minister Dawn Fortune
on November 27, 2011

Injustice confronts us every day. Through our television sets, our radios, via the internet and newspapers, we are bombarded with images and stories of brutality and oppression in our world.

In recent weeks, I have seen video clips of police officers spraying pepper spray into the faces of protesters in a variety of geographic locations. Seattle, New York City, Oakland, California. In some images the police have mean, hateful expressions, and in some cases, as in the University of California Davis images that flooded the internet recently, the oppressors show very little emotion in their brutality. I’m not sure which is more disturbing: the hate or the indifference.

The image of the Davis campus police officer as he sprayed seated demonstrators has gone viral, much like the video clip of a white-shirted police captain in New York City pepper-spraying corralled protesters a few weeks before, and that of the face of an octogenarian woman in Seattle, face dripping with pepper spray and the liquid used to treat chemical burns being helped through the crowd by two young men.

Many of us know those images. If I close my eyes, I can see them again and again, repeated in slow motion, and my heart recoils in horror. How can anyone DO such a thing, I wonder.

Our brains unhinge a bit at this kind of thing. It stretches what some can imagine one person doing to another. How can a person fire a weapon at unarmed people? How can police brutalize non-violent demonstrators? How can an armed officer spray chemical weapons into the face of an 80-year-old woman, or at a non-violent teenager seated on the sidewalk?

Well, there is some science to this phenomenon. Sociologists and ethicists have long studied the ways humans “other” each other. Systems of power are designed to protect themselves, to maintain the status quo. People who have power must do some curious mental calisthenics in order to treat those who do not have power in ways that would be otherwise unacceptable. Because, really, would any of us spray harsh chemical agents into the face of our child? Or the child of a neighbor or co-worker? Not in any circumstance I can imagine at the moment. But if we can get our brains to accept that that child is in some way “other,” or less than us in some way, it becomes easier.

People in power – in this case, the police – dehumanize the people they oppress. It’s one of the things the mind must do in order to treat other humans in decidedly inhumane ways. Taking away

a person's humanity enables us to silence their voice, or at least to ignore it in some way. Making a person, a group, a race, a class some kind of "other" allows us to believe that we are not morally accountable to them for our behavior.

Soldiers are taught to dehumanize their enemy. Police are trained – sometimes formally, sometimes informally on the job – to dehumanize categories of people in a variety of ways – troublemakers, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, and civil libertarians, anyone who disturbs the peace in a particular way. White people long believed that other races were so different that they were not deserving of basic human rights, like voting rights, protection from discrimination and violence and lynching. Regrettably, some still do.

The point is, though, that taking away a person's humanity allows us to treat them as something less than fully human. It allows us to live in a world of "us and them" as opposed to a world of "all of us together." When we take this "othering," that we have been taught, add conflict and then mix in a little fear, and there is a dangerous – truly chemical – reaction that happens. The human body is rigged for "fight or flight." Adrenaline kicks in and it is powerful. This is something we can recognize and accept. So add conflict, some confusion, shouting, a healthy dose of dehumanization of the "other" and human beings can behave in inhuman ways.

I want to be very clear here. I am NOT justifying police brutality. I am not excusing racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, able-ism, or any other isms anyone wants to name.

Bad behavior is bad behavior, just as vulgarity is vulgarity, no matter whose mouth it comes from. I believe in holding people accountable for their actions.

What I am doing here is humanizing all people. ALL people. Even the ones wearing the riot gear. Their behavior is deplorable, but they are still human beings, and as such are as deserving of affirmation of their personhood as those huddled masses cowering before them. This is what Universalism means to me: the inherent worth and dignity of ALL people. Not just the ones who are easy to like.

I have been reading this week from "A Treatise on Atonement," by Hosea Ballou, one of the founders of Universalism, written over a century ago. It was radical stuff back then, and it caused quite a stir. Ballou made an argument for universal salvation, and universal atonement. He said that because people were finite, we were incapable of infinite sin. Sin was a temporary state that ended when we left this mortal coil. But sin was not limited to action, he said. If a thief walks past a store and wants to steal the merchant's wares but does not for fear of being caught and punished, does that make her any less of a thief? By the same measure, if the fear of punishment is what keeps a person from committing an act of sin, the person is not virtuous. Virtue comes with the desire to do good and to not do evil. It is the desire and the intentionality, that constitute sin, more than the action, and that desire ends with the human's life.

God, said Ballou, was infinite. That's why we call this entity "god" after all. As an infinite being, god's love is infinite as well. As is the divine's capacity for forgiveness. Thus, to sum up what he was saying, there is nothing finite humans could do – there was no sin so great – that the infinite

love of god could not forgive and overcome it. What is it that humans could do that would merit infinite punishment? And what manner of god would mete out infinite punishment on human beings created in limited, finite form? It makes no sense, he said. Either everybody gets into heaven and god is indeed infinitely loving or nobody gets in and god is infinitely cruel and not deserving of the title “god.”

This treatise is one of the founding pillars of Universalism. At the turn of the 19th century, it caused outrage and cries of heresy. The notion that people would behave themselves without the threat of eternal hellfire and damnation was contrary to what other Protestant ministers of the day were preaching. Indeed, Ballou lamented that he heard from other clergy that without the commandments and prohibitions against sin, that they would throw themselves fully into wanton indulgence.

In some states, anyone professing to be Universalist was not permitted to be a witness in court or serve on a jury. After all if the oath ended with “so help me God,” and we believed that there would be no hellfire punishment for lying, could we be trusted to be truthful?

Hosea Ballou had more faith in the human condition than that. He believed we were all capable of doing good, without threat of eternal punishment. He believed that we were made in god’s image and that we were capable of greatness, and that when we fell short, the infinite nature of the divine was sufficient to secure salvation for all.

Universalists gathered in 1803 in Winchester, New Hampshire to draft a formal profession of faith called, curiously enough, “The Winchester Profession.” It was a creed like many others, affirming a belief in the Trinity and in Scripture. But it did something unusual. It stated a belief in one god, which is not unusual in itself, but it went on to say “whose nature is love...” The idea of “god is love” was spoken clearly as such for the first time in a creed.

The Winchester Profession went on to state “We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men.”

It is this philosophy of the divine as love and that love is universal that supports our modern version of Universalism. Our first principle states that we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people. We are free to think and believe as we like, but we do have a covenant that we have made with each other and the world that says, there is inherent worth and dignity in each of us.

So here we are back at that notion of ALL people again. I want us to leave here today with a new sensitivity about how oppression and systems of power work. Oppression begins with stripping a person’s humanity from them. Oppression begins when we “other” someone, when we judge them as less than human in some way, and not deserving of all the rights and privileges we afford other human beings.

Remember those images I talked about a while ago? The image of the police officer in riot gear spraying student demonstrators with pepper spray? It was incredibly easy for me to think unkind things about that man. Who could do such a thing? He displayed all the emotion of a man spraying ants on his patio. Such a person must truly be an animal, a brutal machine devoid of feelings, something so far from what I understand a human to be that I cease to look at the human being behind the abhorrent behavior.

And now I am in trouble.

I have begun to do exactly what oppressors do. I have dehumanized the man based on my judgment of his actions. He is still a man. He is still a mother's son, perhaps someone's husband, or father, who goes home at night and hugs them and loves them and maybe hates his job or maybe likes it. He is human. It does not serve us, or him or justice to demonize him.

If we view this man as a human being, it is more difficult to wish hateful things upon him. Just because I assume he has done that to the people he sprayed does not give me license to strip him of his humanity and heap abuse upon him. I am called to protect his humanity, to affirm and promote his inherent worth and dignity.

I can do that while still calling for the behavior to stop, and I can very, very angry. I can. But I must be mindful of how I make that call.

I can call for brutality to stop. I can even name officers and demand that they be held accountable for their behavior. But I can do it without demeaning them or me.

I am going to switch now from my personal behaviors to that of the community of which I am a part. I am not alone. I am not unique. I think it is safe to examine what we – as a community, as a culture – do with and to one another; how to stop hurting and start loving a little more.

Let us begin with the little things we do that diminish others. Let us stop name-calling. "Oh, but I don't call names," you say? Let's look at our language. Do we use the slang "cops" instead of "police officers"? Or do we use much more unpleasant terms, like "bullies" or "jack-booted thugs"? Do we say "politician" with a verbal sneer or do we say "United States Congressperson" or "City Councilor" or "elected public servant"?

Remember now, this is about people, not their behavior. We can treat people with dignity even when they behave in undignified ways. We can call our young people "children" or "youth" or "young adults" without calling them "kids," which is what a juvenile goat is called. This language exercise might remind some of you of those days in the early Women's Liberation movement when there was a media campaign to educate people to call women "women" and not "girls." Girls, we learned, was a way to reduce a woman to a child's status in a verbal relationship, to set up a dynamic of unequal power. Same thing goes for calling an adult black man "boy," a retail clerk or waitress "hon," or "little lady." It's a way to demean someone subtly, gently, to reduce their authority and stature in an almost silent and invisible way.

Let us commit to adjusting our language, and our thinking, as much as we can this week; to be mindful of how words can serve to strip the humanity from people. Let us, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., refuse to demonize the oppressors. Let us use love to change the world.

This morning we sang the words to “Love Will Guide Us,” including the verse that ends “you can change the world with your love.” We can do that. We believe in love, we believe in the power of goodness, the power of love, the power of hope. With intention and mindfulness, we can change the world. I offer you this morning these words attributed to the Buddha, from the Dhammapada:

Never does hatred cease by hating in return;
Only through love can hatred come to an end.
Victory breeds hatred;
The conquered dwell in sorrow and resentment.
They who give up all thought of victory or defeat,
May be calm and live happily at peace.
Let us overcome violence by gentleness;
Let us overcome evil by good;
Let us overcome the miserly by liberality;
Let us overcome the liar by truth.

The words of the Buddha.

Only through love can hatred come to an end. Let us overcome violence with gentleness. Let us overcome evil with justice. You can change the world with your love. We can do this. This is who we are, what we believe. It is a challenge, yes, but we are up to it. If we are to Stand on the Side of Love, this is what it will look like. Baby steps at first, but we make progress with each step. Love WILL guide us.

Blessed be. Amen. Namaste.