

Sermon delivered at Berrien UU Fellowship November 26, 2006

“Scratching the Itch of Traditional Christianity”
by Beth Lefever

In April of 1997, I was leafing through the March/April issue of the UU magazine, *The World*, when I noted a blurb regarding a sermon writing contest on the topic of UU women, or on any one UU woman in particular. I, who have always loved to put words to paper, gave it some thought and decided to give it a try.

The deadline for the contest was upon me before I really got under way, but I nonetheless persevered, intrigued by the thought of writing a “sermon.” Several weeks later, I attended a Worship & Arts Committee meeting, sermon in hand, and as we attempted to cover the four Sundays of the minister’s upcoming vacation, I offered my services.

Those of you who know how difficult it can be to find speakers for Sunday services will not be surprised when I tell you my offer was quickly and enthusiastically accepted.

I was scheduled, I preached, and I fell in love, entering into an intense and emotional affair that continues to this day, my affair partner being “the pulpit.”

Intemperate being that I am, I soon took on other affair partners, as well: the people, the parish, pastoral care, outreach, social justice work. In short, I fell in love with parish ministry – with Unitarian Universalist parish ministry.

Nine years later, having followed my bliss, I am in seminary, honing the skills that will enhance the ministry you have called me to provide, a ministry that I can only hope blesses you as it blesses me.

Knowing that I would be busy this week with end of quarter work at school, I pulled that first sermon out of the files to see if it was worthy of repeating here at BUUF. After spending almost as much time reworking it as I might have spent writing a new sermon (and let that be a lesson to me), I decided to use it. This is that sermon.

Before I begin, however, I feel that I need to clarify a few things.

First of all, I don’t think of myself as a feminist – which is not to say that I am not a feminist – an important distinction. I think feminism, which, when the idea was new to me as a young adult, impassioned me as little else did at the time, has become such an integral part of my personality that I don’t even think of it as a dynamic apart from myself. Feminism is part and parcel of the natural order of things.

Secondly, nowhere has feminism shouted at me more loudly than in religion.

Nowhere have I felt more indignant and inflamed about the inequality of women than in the realm of fundamentalist religion – and particularly fundamentalist Christian religion, because that is what I am familiar with. That is where I came from. That is what informed my first tentative steps into relationship with a god figure.

Through all of the socio-economic injustice, school and workplace iniquity and societal nonsense around male and female roles that I experienced growing up and living in the 50s and 60s, none affected me at a more core level than those having to do with religion.

This is, I think, because religion has always been so very important to me. Long before I knew that I wanted to be a minister, long before I ever practiced organized religion in any sort of regular and structured way, religion was a key component in my psyche, holding an all-important place in my heart and mind.

As a child, it was where I sought safety in a world I often found overwhelming. It was where I sought solace in a world I sometimes found lonely. It was where I sought meaning in a world that often made no sense to me.

A highly sensitive child, in a rough and ready family unequipped to handle my tender sensibilities, I sought internal tools with which I might make my way in a world I found confusing and frightening.

Among these inner resources was a cobbled-together belief system in a god I understood was to be both feared and trusted, who would either provide and care for me or condemn me to an eternity of torture in hell, and with whom I was already at a disadvantage because I was female.

As a little kid living in a tumultuous world, I sorely needed the promise of god that my limited exposure to religion offered, and that is a need desperately felt by many children in many circumstances throughout the world. It is a need felt by many adults who, by reason of situation or circumstance are disempowered, hurting, vulnerable.

It is a need fundamental to human experience, however humans experience it – that call to something larger than ourselves -- and it is far too pure and basic a need to be toyed with by self-serving purveyors of religious “truth” who so effectively distort or destroy the potential of positive religious experience in service to their own prejudices and perceptions.

If I sound angry, I am, and though my anger has tempered some through the years, it quickly reignites in the face of fundamentalist arrogance and certitude, if I don’t work to keep it in check.

And the third thing I would like to clarify is the title of this morning’s sermon, which may be misleading. Though I have referred, in the title, to traditional Christianity, I believe there may be a distinction to be made between traditional and fundamentalist Christianity.

Fundamentalist Christianity is a movement which began during the early part of the 20th century in response to the increasing influence of liberal or modernist Christian theology in this country. Fundamentalists embrace and promote the “fundamentals” of the Christian faith including the virgin birth, the resurrection and the second coming.

Traditionalism evolved from the early belief that revelation of God occurred via the prophets and apostles, and later, scripture and creeds, to a later belief, especially among Roman Catholic thinkers, that knowledge of God could only be attained through faith in revealed, unbroken and infallible tradition (as opposed to, for instance, human reason).

There are, today, some mainline protestant denominations which may be considered to be traditionalist, though not fundamentalist, at least as we think of fundamentalist Christianity today.

My sermon more addresses fundamentalist Christianity, than traditional Christianity, though I think an application can be made to both.

And so, with those clarifications in mind, let me offer to you my first sermon which begins with a question put to a Unitarian Universalist woman by a new friend.

This UU woman had not taken seriously the charge of formulating an “elevator speech” -- a speech in which one might, in the space of time needed to travel from one floor to another on an elevator, explain Unitarian Universalism, and so she was not immediately prepared to respond. Fortunately, the two women were not on an elevator, and she had a few minutes to think about her answer.

As she thought, a myriad of jumbled images and memories raced through her mind; images that chafed at all of her senses, it seemed – visual, auditory, and kinesthetic...

She remembered when she was six years old, the starched, scratchy crinolines worn under her Sunday dress, sitting stiffly between her mother and father in the long hard pew, unable to fidget, unable to scratch, unable to breathe, even, it seemed, hearing the preacher’s voice rise and fall in words she didn’t always understand, but in an unmistakable voice: he was mad. He was always mad, and though she was never sure just what she had done to displease him, she was quite sure his rantings were aimed at her.

She remembered the fourth-grade boy who taunted her in Sunday School, telling her she was only a girl and that girls didn’t even have the right to speak in church. She was rebuked by the teacher for calling the boy a liar, and astounded by her mother’s affirmative reply when asked if the little boy’s preposterous statement was true; a reply that affected her so profoundly that it forever changed the way she viewed her mother, the way she viewed her world, the way she viewed herself.

She pondered a more recent memory of the grief of a Catholic friend whose engagement had ended because her divorced fiancée could not get his first marriage annulled so that they could marry in his beloved church.

As she thought of these things, and more, a polite clearing of the throat drew her from her reverie and she sought to respond simply to the question that had been asked of her.

She said that, though it was a uniquely personal religion engendering different things for different people, she thought of UU-ism as a haven.

It was a haven for runaways who had fled painful religious pasts, she said, and after another moment of thought during which she warmed to her subject, she added that this was particularly true of women whom, she believed, longed for religious homes in which they could breathe fully and freely, and speak whenever they pleased, and fidget when necessary, and scratch whenever they itched...

From the blaming of women as the root of all sin for Eve's behavior in Eden, through the complete denial of women's sexuality by the doctrine of the virgin birth, and on through the silencing of her passion, her will and her voice through the edicts of St. Paul, women have longed to scratch the itch of traditional Christianity. And the Unitarian Universalist Church has allowed them to do it.

From a distasteful doctrine that seeks to disempower fully one half of its people, a doctrine surely born out of fear, for the mythical Eve was nothing if not powerful, women have found their way to this denomination which values their power, values their strength and values their voice.

UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed, in his book *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination* asks "What does each of us need to know? That we are valued, and that our lives have significance."

Now, it would be an error to simply state that traditional Christianity does not value women. It does, of course, but it seems to me that it does not fully value them, or that the value is conditional, subject to the constraints women are willing to acknowledge as their due and endure as their lot (duty).

These constraints lie in the area of women's strength and autonomy, and are commonly addressed in relation to the superiority of men.

The following excerpt from a sermon published by Moody Bible Institute is typical of this attitude. Entitled, "Is the Church Unfair to Women?" the unnamed author says, "Man is at his best as an initiator – when he plans, leads, risks, and strives. Woman is made to reach her greatest potential when she rests on man's provision and supports him in his efforts."

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As the adrenalin of righteous indignation courses through my woman's body I further quote: "...the usurpation of authority is forbidden women in the church. Women are not to attempt to rule either directly or by authoritative preaching or teaching. They are not to contend in church discussions."

"But," the sermon author goes on to say, "Women can declare the gospel, teach where authority over men is not involved, witness, and carry the good news of salvation to the ends of the earth."

Good news?! What's all the shouting about?

For women, it can be awfully hard to identify with the excitement of salvation when it comes couched in the confines of a theology that seeks to disenfranchise them.

It can be very difficult for a woman to imagine the glory of salvation within the bondage of silence, or to embrace salvation as a personal concept when she is taught she is not really quite fully a person in her own right.

Now certainly I am taking these quotes out of context. But the context is hardly necessary. We know it all too well. And no matter how progressively that context is presented, the end result is always and stiflingly the same.

So, where did this all come from, this division and definition of Christian gender roles? It came from Scripture, the Bible, the Word... the sourcebook of Christian faith.

We all know the passages such as I Timothy 2:12 – "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence."

But if woman is to be in silence, who then is to speak for her? Who is her voice? Where did it all begin?

If we trace back through the New Testament and on into the Old, all the way through the wars and the pestilence, the pillages and plunders to the very beginning, who do we find as the very first example of the gender that is to hold authority over woman, to have the last word (so to speak)? Who is this man?

It's Adam! Think of it. Adam, the man who, at seemingly the very most critical juncture in the history of humankind, seems completely unable to act, unable to speak, unable to find his voice at all...

No stern rebuke to his "helpmate," Eve. No gentle reminder of God's admonishment not to eat of the tree. Nothing! Silence!

Well, we can be fairly certain that Adam eventually did find his voice. One can almost hear his mutterings and rantings as he and Eve trudge out of Eden, their meager possessions in hand: “Ya had to do it, didn’t you! You just had to do it!” he berates Eve. “Ya just couldn’t leave well enough alone...”

Now even the most hardcore chauvinists would have to admit that Adam really dropped the ball on this one. And given the apparent fact that he was, as the first man, the prototype for the eventual hierarchy of the entire Christian Church, it was a pretty big ball to drop!

But it’s kind of easy to forgive Adam when you think about it.

It’s kind of easy to feel a grudging affection for the guy as you imagine his life, and his likely relationship with Eve, with its bickering and blaming, affection and play, hardship and heartache – not to speak of the probable interference from Adam’s first mate, Lilith.

We could maybe relate to this couple with some fondness were the results of their behavior not so unsavory.

But distasteful they are to women (and men) who often struggle for years, decades, even lifetimes to come to terms with the great and almighty Christian faith that beckons them to soar with the promise and prophecy of Jesus while effectively clipping their wings via the likes of Paul.

And so, disillusioned, sometimes bitter, frequently chastised by their families and friends, they often drop out, close up, turn away, unable even to sift through the chaos enough to know what they believe; only that which they don’t believe.

Some of them find their way here, to UU fellowships where, perhaps suspicious, hurting, defensive, they begin to lick their spiritual wounds while they watch and wait, ever vigilant to any sign of the giant thumb of Christianity under which they, for so long, were pressed.

Morrison-Reed says that “Reason is one of the primary methods we have of gaining control of our lives.” He’s right. And gaining control of our lives is one of the basic struggles of women (and men, as well). What is found at UU fellowships is reason. And heady though it may be, that reason tantalizes women new to the faith, and draws them in for a closer look.

Not all who find their way to this denomination will embrace it. It can be a lengthy and particularly wrenching process to break away from the dogmatic church of one’s past into the light of a church which espouses no doctrine at all save the freedom of every individual to seek their own spiritual truth.

Many of our sisters will return to their roots, only to leave again even more disillusioned, disconsolate and disheartened. They may repeat this cycle again and again, unable to find quite the source of spiritual fellowship they need to really pursue their quests for truth and meaning.

Some will stay, and like a small bud in a slow and uncertain spring, they will begin to blossom, and then they will pause, they will await again the warmth of the new sun, they’ll grow a little more and blossom further, until finally they are in full bloom, glorious and exquisite in a garden of deep rich earth.

There once was a little girl who sat in her Sunday best on the long hard pew of her childhood church, listening to the weekly admonishments of the preacher, entranced with his wild gesticulating and the tone he dared take even with the adults in the audience, enthralled with the fact that her father did not rise up and shout back.

As she grew older, and the words began to make sense to her, she tried hard to find where she fit into the big picture of the theology being taught her. There became a distance between herself and her brothers as she viewed them in a new way, a way that could not transcend the common humanity that they shared, the childhood they had lived together.

She saw herself differently, too. There became a vague sense of unease about who she was and what she was about, a sense of apology for being less than what she might have been, less than her brothers, less than male.

As the girl matured into womanhood, she saw herself as fundamentally flawed – a view not born out of bad parenting or the traumatic sexual advances of the man next door, but rather born out of her church experience.

For decades she tried to justify that church experience through prayer and study, counsel, discussion, soul-searching and church-shopping.

Eventually, all of her spiritual striving brought her to a UU congregation where, in near amazement, she felt herself embraced, honored as a fully equal participant in the human experience, respected not only for her views, but for her very being, and upheld, as, no longer bound by the guilt of being female, she could finally soar along her faith journey.

That is the way it is in UU churches. That is the way it is in our creedless denomination where we are free to embrace god and goddess alike, or not at all, and where we uplift the use of reason and experience to discern the spiritual path that most richly nourishes us.

There once was a little girl whose mother told her of starchy crinolines, long hard pews, and angry pastors who spoke of sin and judgment and damnation. The little girl could not imagine a church such as that, or one in which women were not allowed to speak.

In her church the women talked just as much as the men, and the pastor seemed very kind.

No one dressed up much, and the kids were as likely to have Sunday School outside under a tree as in the classroom.

They never spoke about sin in her church. They never talked about evil, or about people being bad. They did talk about differences and about love and understanding.

And though sometimes they roared with laughter, no one seemed to shout very much in her church. And as far as she knew, no one was ever admonished for scratching.