

The Loose-Leaf Bible

A Worship Service
by the REV. JEFF BRIERE

Unitarian Universalist
Church of Chattanooga
October 12, 2008

CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere, I'm the minister of this congregation. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. This is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements, political statements or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we're all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said.

Let us pause to dwell inward. Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in the struggles we choose for ourselves; in the ways we move forward in our lives, and bring our world forward with us. It is right that we pause to remember those who need love and support; who are ill or in pain, either in body or in spirit; who are lonely or have been wronged. Let us open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, to a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of

love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning. Amen and Blessed Be.

I ask you now to rise and greet your neighbors at the door. Please welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

HYMN 38, Morning Has Broken

GREETINGS

Maddie. I'm Maddie Kertay and I am the President of this congregation. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. Please note the emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode," and childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery. After the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area right back there. If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

I have four important announcements. First, the religious education department needs your help, especially if your child is in the program. Second, to accomplish that, a sign-up roster has been created for your convenience. It is posted on the bulletin board out front, so choose a Sunday and volunteer. Third, many students are not registered. You must register your children for the RE program, so please check with Jamie to make that right. And last, you must pick up your child from the RE program directly after their program ends. We cannot ask the teachers to supervise your children after they finish their class for the day. So get your child first and that cup of coffee second.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin

and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

Marcia brings us the music of Hoagy Carmichael today and she begins with "Georgia on My Mind."

PRELUDE: Georgia on My Mind

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

The Baby Tree

I invite the young and the young at heart to help me sing a song. This is Rosalie Sorrels. She's a singer and she plays guitar—like this one—and she writes all her own songs. She got her start way back in 1963, but today, as you can see, she's a grandmother.

When she was a young mother, she had no one to help her raise her four children. Right she had four children and no help. As a singer, she traveled a lot and you might say she lived a life on the road. This is not the best place to raise children, but she did pretty well.

One of the things that all parents experience is a child who doesn't want to—or can't—fall asleep. And that is extremely frustrating. As a parent, you think, why can't this kid just *go to sleep*?

Rosalie Sorrels had this problem more than once so she wrote a song to sing to her children so that they might go to sleep. And I thought I should sing it for you. It's a fairy-tale kind of song and the melody is gentle, just like what you'd want if you were trying to go to sleep.

But you hafta help me sing it, OK. Here are four words, and they are the last word in each verse of the song. You hafta choose which word to sing at the appropriate time. So you gotta listen to me and follow the words so you know which of these four words to sing. You understand? When I come to the end of the verse, I'll slow down and you sing the last word. Got it?

There's an island way out in the sea
And the babies there all grow on trees
And it's jolly good fun to swing in the sun
But ya gotta watch out if you sneeze sneeze
Ya gotta watch out if you sneeze

You gotta watch out if you sneeze
For swinging up there in the breeze
You're liable to cough
You might very well fall off
And tumble down flop on your knees knees
Tumble down flop on your knees

And when the stormy winds wail
And the breezes blow high in a gale
There's a curious dropping and flopping and plopping
And sweet little babies just hail hail
Sweet little babies just hail

And the babies lie there in a pile
And the grownups they come after while
And they never pass by any babies who cry
They hug them and give them a smile smile
They hug them and give them a smile
Even triplets and twins get a smile

OFFERTORY: In the Still of the Night

Anyone here ever heard the name Harry Cohn? He was an American movie producer, the head of Columbia Studios, and was very successful. He died in 1958.

His brother Jack once suggested to Harry that they produce a biblical epic.

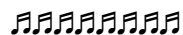
“What do you know about the Bible?” said Harry. “I’ll lay you fifty dollars you don’t even know the Lord’s Prayer.”

After a moment’s thought, Jack began with, “Now I lay me down to sleep. . .”

Harry stopped him and pulled a fifty out of his wallet. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he said. “I didn’t think you knew it.”

But you know it, don’t you? You know what’s coming next, right? We’ll collect the offering now, for the support and ministry of this church. If you have a check for your annual pledge, please mark it that way. As always, the Wood–Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and be thankful for them. Marcia, please lead us

in our *Hymn of Thanksgiving*. The words are in your program.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,
For all gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

Three of our church family members are in crisis today. Harold Linn’s wife, Carmen, is in the hospital with kidney problems and is undergoing dialysis. Michael Walters’ stepfather, Greg Jones, received a preliminary diagnosis of lymphoma, but a thorough exam showed that was incorrect. He is still in pain and more tests are scheduled. April Waggener’s mother is back in the hospital experiencing difficulties after open–heart surgery. She has fluid around her heart and a bone spur on her shoulder, neither of which can be addressed until she heals from her surgery. Please hold these folks in your thoughts and prayers and check with me after the service if you wish to contact April, the Linns or Michael.

Matthew Shepard was a gay college student in Wyoming who was robbed, tortured, tied to a fence and left to die in a remote, rural area near Laramie, Wyoming. Discovered eighteen hours later by a cyclist and brought to the hospital, he died ten years ago on this day, October 12th, 1998.

The tragedy shocked his family, his friends and the nation as we grappled with the horror of such cruelty inflicted on someone solely because of his sexual orientation. His death was not in vain. It inspired new legislation around the country. And it spawned a powerful play, *The Laramie Project* which ensured his life and his

death would not be forgotten. I was honored to play a part in *The Laramie Project* when it was presented in Quebec at General Assembly in 2001, and so I experienced this a little more deeply than most people.

As time passes, we tend to focus on other things, so at this 10 year anniversary let us remember and mark this tragic event that still impacts us. Let us continue to call for the safety and rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people everywhere.

This litany comes from the Rev. Lesley Brogan, Minister for Community of Central Congregational United Church of Christ in Atlanta and Rabbi Joshua Lesser of Congregation Bet Haverim also in Atlanta. Please respond with the words in italics in your program.

God of All Time, we remember the life and death of Matthew Shepard, 10 years ago. Alone, tied to the fence, he was left to die. You were with him, in his fear and suffering, always. Although his death left us with despair, anger, and confusion, our faith reminds us too, that You are with us always.

Faithful One, renew our faith as we remember.

God of All Places, we pray that You move us from the isolation of that dark night on the Wyoming Plains to a vision of being held by You. Guide us to envision a world where healing and wholeness is attainable. May we know this hope to be true and let it live in and through us in this place.

Hopeful One, restore our hope as we pray.

God of All People, we are called to act as your children gathered. Let us be moved by Your Love to respond on this anniversary to work to end violence, violence toward any one of us, toward all of us. You created us in Love and may our lives reflect that love as we live together.

Loving One, revive our love as we act.

Spirit of Life and Love, we pray this day for wisdom. Increase our understanding so that our memory of death may be transformed into life. We remember the death ten years ago on the plains in Wyoming and long for safety for all of us under the canopy of your steadfast love. We know that acts of violence and hate continue in our country, especially for those of us, who because of our differences, are pushed to the edges of the community.

May we be the changers and the changed as we allow ourselves to made new in loving kindness. Keep us vigilant. Move us toward action in our neighborhoods as well as our nation. May our actions bring healing and reconciliation. For all people—*for all people*—may there be compassion, grace and peace. For all people, of whatever means, of whatever color, of whatever life they live, may there be compassion, grace and peace.

Thou, who art everywhere,
Many are your names.
May thy presence be with us,
May thy wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us to forgive the mistakes of others
As we hope our own mistakes will be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.

May we live purposefully and joyfully
in every moment,
in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come.

In these moments of silence, let us hold close to our hearts all those who are persecuted for being who they are and especially, let us pray

for those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place
When our heart is in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our heart is in a holy place

SERMON: A Loose-Leaf Bible

A few weeks ago, my colleagues were discussing the term, “Loose-Leaf Bible.” The conversation began, as many do, when one person asked if anyone in the group knew the origin of the term. My colleagues are sticklers for correct attribution. Whether it’s music, a catch phrase, a theological concept or a joke, my colleagues are insistent that we attribute to people what is their due.

After a few days, we abandoned our attempt to pinpoint the origin of the term, because it seemed to be one of those sayings like, “Monday morning quarterback” or “back seat driver.” So many people have used the term “Loose-Leaf Bible” that it’s impossible to determine who first said it.

But I was intrigued with the concept. An unbound Bible, held together by metal rings which can be opened for the insertion of more material or the deletion of material that has been superceded in one way or another. Think of the possibilities: With a loose-leaf Bible, you could re-arrange the books to suit your tastes; put all the juicy stories up front and the horrible history and boring begats way at the end. You could take out all the questionable stuff and leave the inspirational. You could edit the thing down to a manageable size. Along with red words and black words, you could print words in

purple or green.

So the question for me, and the question I asked of you was this: What would you add or subtract from the Bible? This little box has been sitting on the round table for about a month, with index cards so that you could suggest additions or deletions. Judging from the amount of cards in the box, not too many people care about editing the Bible.

Now in the context of this sermon, I use the word Bible, with a capital “B” to mean this book. This is the Holy Bible. Says right here. Holy Bible. This book contains Jewish Scripture, which is often called the Old Testament and Christian Scripture, which is often called the New Testament. This Bible was a long time in composition, but the books in it were finalized in the year 397 at the Council of Carthage. Before that, there were many variations in Bibles; after that, the book was closed to additions or deletions.

I also use the word bible with a small “b” to mean this book. This is my bible. This book contains my spiritual history, stories and histories about me and my family, poems, photos, music and memories that, when taken together, provide me with a moral and ethical constitution that allows me to operate in the world according to the dictates of my conscience.

You have one too. I think everyone has a small-b, personal bible, a collection of stuff with a core that rarely changes, but with an outer layer that changes with experience.

Our small-b bible is a loose-leaf bible. We can add to it an insight we develop after attending an especially moving play. We can add to it our reflection after meeting the Dalai Lama. We can add to it our reaction to 9/11.

We can remove all the twaddle we thought was going to change the world when we were 13 years old. We can delete the crud, that with

the perspective of age, proves embarrassing and provides little basis for spiritual growth. We can erase flat-out mistakes that we made in our haste to arrive at the right conclusion.

Our loose-leaf bible, then, elevates reason and experience over tradition and scripture. Remember those four? The Methodist Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. Those are the four sources of wisdom that you use when you encounter something that's new in your life. You would be expected to consult scripture, recall tradition, think about it and compare it with other known experiences. But of those four, Scripture would be the deal-breaker, the game-changer and the heavyweight in the ring. Scripture trumps all for most Christians today.

However, if you have a loose-leaf bible, reason—and especially experience—become more important. Because it can change with experience and because it responds to reason-driven science, a loose-leaf bible can more easily accommodate the features of modern religious life, such as evolution, same-sex marriage, the ordination of women, abortion and the existence of more than one way to heaven. A loose-leaf bible keeps us up-to-date with developments in the real world so that they align neatly with our ideals in the spiritual world.

Yes, Scripture is important. It has been the lifeblood of our spiritual development for all of recorded history. Yes, Tradition is important. It keeps us grounded in our own stories giving us an anchor in the storms of our life. But no, Scripture is not sufficient for the most troubling questions of modern life. It cannot be squared with the reality we see every day. And no, tradition is insufficient as well. It is mute concerning challenges we face in the 21st century.

Thomas Jefferson may have been the most well-known person to construct a loose-leaf bible. He left the Old Testament intact, but for the New Testament, he took a razor blade to every passage that purported a supernatural occurrence and whatever seemed to be a

forced conclusion by the evangelists. In the *Jefferson Bible*, Jesus performs no miracles, God does not speak from a cloud and Thomas keeps his hands to himself. Jefferson's objective was to extract the pure philosophy of Jesus from the stories about Jesus and in so doing, construct a more pure Christianity.

About a loose-leaf bible, my colleague Peter Richardson, who is retired in Maine, says, "Isn't that what most of us have in actuality? Even those who limit themselves to one scripture generally are highly selective which verses they will work with in their lives. I would include Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Li Po, Tagore, Iqbal, Rumi and many others poets and prophets of our humanity in my Loose Leaf Bible."

My colleague, the Rev. Dr. Lindsay Bates, of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Geneva, Illinois writes, "I'm sure that someone, somewhere, was the first to combine 'loose-leaf' and 'Bible,' but there *really are* loose-leaf Bibles and have been for quite a while; I had one in college for my religious studies classes some 30-odd years ago, and it wasn't a new concept then."

The Rev. Scott Gerard Prinster, writes, "This is just a guess, but it is only in the modern day that books are sold pre-bound. Although we've had the technique of being able to bind loose pages into codices since about the first century CE, even in the 16th and 17th centuries you almost always bought your book as a stack of unbound pages and had it bound according to your needs and budget. Perhaps theological students, who would have been less likely to afford the extra expense of permanent binding, simply worked with their bible as a stack of unbound pages."

My colleague, the Rev. Kit Ketcham of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island, Washington, writes, "It occurs to me that 'loose-leaf Bible' might be a Bible with which one could take such liberties as removing pages one didn't agree with. If so, in some camps, it would be a pejorative."

I discovered that you can actually buy a loose leaf bible from some Christian booksellers. It's designed for those who take copious notes when they read scripture and for whom the margins are too small to accommodate their jottings. With such a bible, you can insert as many blank sheets as you need to write your thoughts and references.

The Rev. Dick Gilbert says, "The loose-leaf Bible is an apt metaphor for theology building, combining the stability of a core of convictions with the flexibility to modify them in the light of experience."

And that sentence struck the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, one of our theological shining lights. She writes, "Dick did not seem, in that brief statement, to stress flexibility any more than stability, though most people do. Now I'm curious. I wonder if he meant to say that no matter how flexible we think we are, we do have a stable core of convictions from which we mostly act, more so than later additions."

I think that's what he meant. I think we have a big-B bible that is mostly unchanged from the time we are about 25 through the rest of our lives. Our loose-leaf bible, though, can change daily. And we use both to interact with the world. But Alice point out that the trick is knowing which bible to use. She writes, "I hope our devotion to new learning is often that, not just an addiction to elite philosophical fashion, which will be passe next year and so always on the whatever is "latest."

And for me that's the rub. If we accept the concept of "bible" as being a book of stuff that worth keeping, worth a regular look-see, worth preserving for our children, how do we avoid what will be passe next year? We don't know—just as we didn't know when we were 13 years old—that which excites us now may puzzle us later on.

Buuuut, if we close the book for fear of including something as evanescent as a mullet haircut, how can we be open and flexible and relevant to modern life? Not that a mullet has any spiritual significance. A loose-leaf bible must be scripture, honor tradition,

be reasonable and reflect experience. That's a tough mission.

As I said earlier, a few people responded to my question. This person wrote that what should be added is that women can be priests and heads of the church. I would agree. To be sure, in the early church—I mean real early, like in the hundred years after Jesus died—women were often leaders in congregations. But good old St. Paul, our first Christian theologian wrote that women ought to be silent in church and his opinion held sway for nearly two thousand years.

The person who wrote this card would add an annotated bibliography for all histories and genealogies. That would be nice, so that we could read what other people wrote about the topic, and we can compare stories. He goes on to suggest that all black words be deleted, leaving only the red words. He says that there are too many words in the Bible, and they are mixed up with meaningful lessons and thoughts.

Ahh, yes. Red letters. A red letter edition of the Bible is one in which words spoken by Jesus while he was on Earth, are printed in red ink. It was invented by Louis Klopsch, then editor of the *Christian Herald* magazine in 1899, and first published in 1900.

The problem is, that the evangelists are *reporting* what Jesus said. They don't present independent verification. There were no fact-checkers in those days. They are asking us to take their word for it. And you know, they have an agenda. This is a prime example of our modern-life needs not being met by scripture and tradition.

I prefer this red-letter edition. This is *The Five Gospels*, the New Testament as translated and annotated by the Jesus Seminar. With a lot of science and research, they determined which of the words attributed to Jesus could actually have fallen from his lips. Very few, as it happens.

In this book, the words or expressions they think probably originated with Jesus are printed in red, and there are only about two dozen of them. “Render unto Caesar” is one. “Turn the other cheek” is another. They printed in pink those expressions that could have been said by Jesus—as well as anyone else. “A prophet gets no respect in his home town” is one. Another is “A man cannot serve two masters.” They printed in gray those words that sounded something like Jesus and in black the words of editors. So if you really want to recapture what Jesus actually said, you’ll end up with a mighty slim volume of his sayings.

This card also suggests keeping the Ten Commandments, and I agree as well. I have said before that versions of the Ten Commandments appear in many societies around the world. They are a good compilation of laws to govern behavior in a civil society.

This person would add a companion CD with music of Beethoven, Bob Dylan, Mozart, the Talking Heads and Ella Fitzgerald. Now that’s a good idea, although I wonder why she didn’t suggest a DVD with music videos and concert footage. And of course, as Marcia would point out, she left out Hoagy Carmichael, Irving Berlin and Dave Brubeck.

And Richard Berry. You don’t know Richard Berry? Richard Berry is the gifted songwriter who penned the immortal paean to love lost and regained, “Louie Louie.” It was the first rock and roll song I ever learned. He’d be in my bible.

This writer would also delete any scenes of shame, dismemberment, eye-gouging and the like. But I’d leave the content of the big-B Bible alone, with two exceptions. I’d put Revelation and the the Gospel of John in with the Apocrypha, but I wouldn’t take anything else out. Not even such questionable books as Philemon.

And here’s a really interesting card that I suspect was left as a warning. On the line that says, *I would add* the card reads

“Revelation 22:18.” On the line that reads, *I would delete*, the card reads, “Nothing.”

It seems the writer would like me to consult Revelation 22:18. For those of you who cannot immediately bring the verse to mind it reads, “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book.” No mention of deletion until the next verse, which promises equal misfortune for editors.

Although it seems to be a taunt, I appreciate this card, which I believe comes from a member of the Church of God, which worships here on Saturday. I wondered how long it would take for some communication to happen.

What this card illuminates is the difference between Unitarian Universalism and just about any other religion. That difference being, that we believe—and I realize I am speaking with a collective we here—we believe that revelation is not closed.

Orthodox Christians believe that God is finished revealing his preferences. Roman Catholics believe God has finished his revelation. 95% of Christians believe that revelation is sealed, that God speaks no more, that this Bible is the be-all and the end-all of revelation. Right now, it seems that only the Metropolitan Community Church and the United Church of Christ accept the possibility that God is still speaking. Just gotta listen harder, that’s all.

I don’t buy that revelation is sealed. Nope, not for a minute. Not when there are so many sacred texts from other cultures available to us. The Qu’ran, the Upanishads, the Analects of Confucius, the Tao Te Ching. In saying that, I admit that Christianity is not the only way to heaven. Which is one reason for a loose-leaf Bible.

If I could, to the Bible, I’d add several things, like the Qu’ran, the

Upanishads, the Analects of Confucius and the Tao Te Ching. And then there's Shakespeare, Cervantes, Pirandello and Chekhov. Rubens, Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock. Maya Angelou. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Ansel Adams. Francis Ford Coppola.

I'd add in all those people and creations that show us who we are, who show us our own humanity. Those plays that taught us honor in tragedy; Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Those poems that captured grandeur in a few words; Joyce Kilmer's *Trees*. Those sculptures that capture the spark of life; Michelangelo's *Pieta*.

I'd add in all those creations and people who show us where we come from and illuminate the road ahead. Richard Dawkins, Charles Darwin, Descartes, Spinoza, Galileo, Rousseau and John Locke.

I'd add in all those people and creations that point to the transcendent aspect of our lives; the teachings of our greatest spiritual advisors, guides, seers and philosophers. Mahatma Gandhi, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Thích Nhất Hạnh, Mother Teresa, John XXIII.

And those are only the additions of an educated American man born in the middle of the 20th century. If the Bible is to be truly universal, it ought to include many cultural and spiritual items from around the globe. Ever since the canon was closed back in 397, things have happened, thoughts have been thought, songs have been sung and writings have been written which merit inclusion in a loose-leaf Bible.

I understand that the Bible is inspirational to many and is revered as the word of God by others. But aside from its religious aspects, the Bible is like a big family scrapbook, stuffed with compelling stories about Uncle Mergatroyd and Aunt Matilda; histories about my progenitors; and a lot of stuff that seems to have lost its relevance to me. And so when I am handed the bible, as if it were a family heirloom, I wouldn't want to lose any of it. But I sure would add some photographs, poems, plays, music, and movies. All of which

might set my descendants to scratchin' their heads and asking, "Now why is that in here?"

It's in there because it meant something to someone at some time. Our job is to find our own meaning in it and perhaps, add our own.

HYMN 108, How Can I Keep from Singing?

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth
the warmth of this community
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

BENEDICTION

And now be like Christmas angels to those you meet, bearing through word and deed the proclamation, *Be Not Afraid*. And as there is nothing to fear, bear witness to what can never die. Live in the world in peace. Be of good courage, search all things and hold fast to that which is good. Render unto no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the afflicted. Love all men. Love all women. Love all children. Love all, serving your God, and rejoicing in the power of the spirit.

POSTLUDE: Skylark