

Vis! Vim! Vi!

*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
November 8, 2009*

CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Matt Hoyt and I am a member of the 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, politics 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. If you have something to share, please come forward, tell us your name and what's on your mind.



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.

Please rise now and greet your neighbors at the door. Welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

HYMN: Turn the World Around

GREETINGS

ERIC. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted.

There is an 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.

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. Today our minister, the Rev. Jeff Briere, offers his thoughts about the Lakeview–Fort Oglethorpe cheerleaders and their Bible banners.

Thanksgiving is 18 days away and Jeff & Kate invite you to Thanksgiving Dinner here at the church. They roast the turkey and make dressing and gravy. You bring a dish to pass. Please check out the roster on the door next to the kitchen and sign up if you can join us for Thanksgiving Dinner.

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.

PRELUDE: Sul Lago

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

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

STORY: Meet the Kids!

CHILDREN'S RECEPTIONAL

We hold you in our love
as you go, as you go.
May your heart
be at peace as you go.
To nurture the spark
of your precious life
we hold you in our love
as you go.

OFFERTORY: Meditazione

This congregation is blessed with generous folks who evidently have too much money in their pockets. One of them reports that it's burning a hole in his pocket and he needs to rid himself of it right quick. So we proposed he match the collection plate and he agreed.

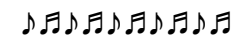
So every dollar you drop in the plate this morning will be matched up to \$300. This is not hocus-pocus or smoke and mirrors. It's not magic; it's real. Every dollar in the plate is doubled today.

And here's the proof. This is an algebraic diagram of double the plate. x is your donation, x' is the matching donation, and $2x$ is the doubled plate. Actually it's somewhat more complicated than that.

This is probably more accurate. x is your donation, y are annual pledge payments, z is the entire collection. $z-y$ is the collection minus pledges and if you add the matching donation— x' —the entire kit and kaboodle is less than \$601.

Everyone but Tim Kleve is confused. This ought to make it clear.

We'll collect the morning offering now, and all donations, less pledge payments, will be matched up to \$300. If you have an annual pledge payment, please mark it as such. 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 I 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. Christina, please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

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.

My thoughts this morning are with those who were wounded or widowed as a result of gun violence this week. On Wednesday, at Fort Hood, Texas, an Army Officer went on a rampage and killed 13 and wounded 31. On Friday, a gunman killed one and injured five more in an Orlando, Florida office building. Also on Friday came news of a shooting in Japan, which left one person dead. The report characterized that shooting as “rare,” because of the strict gun-control laws in Japan. I fear they are too common in this country.

The Orlando shooting will soon fade from our awareness. The shooting at Fort Hood will be with us a little longer, but it, too, will eventually fade; unless we have some personal connection to it.

If we know someone who is shot, we’ll remember for a long time. I say that because I’ll bet every person in this room has forgotten that in 1991, a gunman shot and killed 24 people in Killeen, Texas, which is right next door to Fort Hood. Every person except someone who had a connection.

And you know, I was annoyed to see flags at half staff. Not that I believe those who were wounded or died at Fort Hood do not deserve the honor of flags at half staff. Of course they do. What I mean is that every day, every week, someone is shot and dies. Every day. Every week. That deserves a flag at half staff. And we seem to be inured to it. Unless we have a connection.

I wonder if that’s what it will take to stop this scourge of gun violence. When the number of people who have a connection to gun violence reaches a certain point, maybe then, the people will stop it. I pray.

I often rail about people who cling to a belief and never consider another point of view. On Friday, I realized I was one of those people, because I am convinced—I’ve made up my mind—that handguns are a menace in this country. I hope I live long enough—not to see handguns banned; that would take a few hundred years—but just to see one senator, one representative, one governor or one president take just one step toward restricting the sale and possession of handguns.

The little bit of good news this week is that 48% of the people who voted Tuesday in the state of Maine opted to extend civil rights to gay men and women who wish to marry. The bad news is that they were outnumbered by about 21,000 people who voted otherwise.

And here’s the troubling news: There are 1,316,456 people in Maine. Of those, 1,040,001 are old enough to vote. Of those, 1,028,752 are registered. Of those, 545,238 voted on Tuesday. Of those, 283,523—about 21.5% of all Mainers—determined that the state would not afford civil rights to all Mainers who want to marry.

I am not certain that passing laws is the best way to change culture. Apparently, civil rights law can now be overturned by referendum.

So I pray for patience. I do not intend to compare the civil rights

movement nor the movement for women's equality with the movement for civil rights for gay men and women or the effort to control handguns.

They are not the same. Except for one aspect. It takes a long time to change culture. I hope I live long enough.

Thou, which are everywhere,
Many are your names.
May we always feel your presence,
May your wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon 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 this time of silence, let us hold close to our hearts those who suffer from gun violence and those who wish to marry but can't, but let us never forget 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: Vis! Vim! Vi! Victory!

When the newsletter went to press, I knew what I wanted to say this morning, and so I dreamt up the catchy title, "Cheerleaders and What They Cheer For." Aside from ending with a preposition, that title was neither provocative nor erudite. It had all the qualities of about three minutes consideration.

When I began to write, I recalled that in high school I was a cheerleader. Really. I was a bona-fide cheerleader. My high school was Brebeuf Prep in Indianapolis and our team was the Braves.

I don't recall why I was chosen to lead cheers for the football team. Because I could holler louder than anyone else? Perhaps. I think it was more that I had the courage to flirt with gender-specific roles in the mid-60's. Actually, there were no girls in my high school, there was no neighboring girl's school from which we could recruit cheerleaders, so someone had to be a cheerleader.

I was one of about a handful of boys who were given a letter sweater and a megaphone. We would roam the area between the bleachers and the team, exhorting the faithful to bellow their appreciation at the appropriate moment so as to inspire the team to greater achievement. We must have made a difference, because our football team went from 2-8 in my junior year to 10-0 my senior year.

We were given cheers, because there was no class ahead of us, we were the first. This school was only three years old, there was no tradition. And what did a few teen-aged boys know about cheerleading? Not much. So the teachers devised some cheers for us. No routines, no acrobatics, no pom-poms and no human pyramids. Just hollering at the fans with a megaphone.

The cheer I recall most vividly serves as the title of my sermon today. Vis! Vim! Vi! Victory!

Say it with me once: Vis! Vim! Vi! Victory!

Anyone know what that means? If you don't know, here's a clue: I went to a Jesuit high school where the curriculum was heavy in the classics. *Vis Vim Vi* are the nominative, accusative & ablative cases of the Latin word for strength or power. We get our English word vigor from the Latin. And Viagra.

Everyone in my high school took Latin. And Greek. The cheer was one way the faculty applied and reinforced our education in the world outside the classroom. I tell you all this so that you understand I have some creds in cheerleading. I know whereof I holler.

During the football season, in the north Georgia county of Catoosa, at the Lakeview–Fort Oglethorpe High School, it had long been the custom for cheerleaders to construct a large frame of wood, cover it with paper and upon that paper write various Bible quotations. At every home game, the cheerleaders would hold up the frame and as the Warriors—that's the team—as the Warriors took the field they would crash through the paper in a frenzy of football fervor, ready to defeat their enemy.

The Bible verses were written—or painted—in large letters and the verses were chosen to inspire and encourage the team. I was never asked to choose a verse, but I suppose one might be Isaiah 41:10, which reads,

So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Well, it so happened last month that a somewhat disgruntled wanna-be employee of the Lakeview–Fort O school district mentioned to the superintendent that the Bible banners might provoke a lawsuit. The super, after conferring with the Board of Education

and the school district attorney, banned the banners because they violated the first amendment to the Constitution.

You know the first amendment, right? It insures freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the right of the people to assemble, in that order. It begins, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” That's the part of the amendment that is in play here.

Well, this story was picked up by every minor newspaper in the country. Major ones, too, I suppose, but I was struck by the huge number of weeklies, rural papers and small-town journals that ran this story. Google [*bible & cheerleaders*] and you'll get more than a million hits. Every little news outlet in the country jumped on this story, because it seemed to many that the superintendent was trampling on the cheerleaders' first amendment rights. It seemed that the free exercise of their religion was being prohibited.

The controversy has passed now, I think. At least it's off the front page. In the heat of the moment, a whole bunch of disgruntled Fort Oglethorpers wanted to know why the cheerleaders were forbidden from expressing their religious sentiments. I have the answer right here. But they aren't gonna like it.

Congress has actually made no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion. So all is well. Not quite. It's the extensions of Congress or the representatives of Congress that often cause problems. I mean states, counties, cities. And other government agencies, like the Federal Communications Commission or the National Aeronautics and Space Administration or Tennessee Highway Patrol or the Hamilton County Social Services Department or the Board of Education. What about them?

We have courts in this country charged with interpreting what the first amendment means. And they have decided that all those

governmental agencies and entities are just as bound by the first amendment as Congress is. Those agencies also shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

The courts have further reasoned that the promotion of any religion or a display of its tenets is also prohibited by the amendment. This is why the Ten Commandments cause such a commotion when they are displayed in courthouses. It's difficult to decide whether they are a cultural artifact or a religious artifact. This is also why nativity scenes are verboten. In either case, a religious claim is being made. In the case of the Ten Commandments, the claim is that God decreed them for all humanity. In the case of the Nativity, the claim is that God became human in Jesus.

And so in Catoosa County, Georgia, the cheerleaders—an authorized program of the school district—constructed a display of Bible verses and displayed in on school property during an officially-sanctioned school event. That, in the view of the courts is tantamount to a government agency promoting a religious view as being the truth. In effect, the school district was respecting the establishment of a specific religion. And that's why the cheerleaders cannot put up their banners with verses from Jewish or Christian scriptures.

By the way, within a week, this episode prompted a bible banner ban at Southeast High School in Whitfield county, too. They decided to allow only sports-related phrases on the banners. But they didn't have to do that, because I had an idea for the cheerleaders that would allow them to keep their banners and their Bible verses as well.

I thought the cheerleaders could go back to the original Greek or Latin texts—or as close to them as they could find—and make their own translations, using slightly different words, yet still making the verses sensible to modern ears. They could also omit any reference to chapter or verse and they ought to avoid any verse with the words God, Lord, savior, Jesus or Christ or similar words that make a claim.

So the verse that we heard earlier, Isaiah 41:10, could be rendered

Take it easy, man; I got your back.
I know you're not a wimp,
For I make you strong;
I will support and defend you.

Same message, gentler tone. A message that anyone could relate to.

A few days later, I had more thoughts about how the cheerleaders could have solved the issue and avoided all their angst. They could have turned the banners around so the team could see the words, and not the fans. Or, I thought, they could write the verse so small that you'd have to stand six inches away to make out the words. And just after that, another thought—I was getting ideas quickly now—perhaps the cheerleaders could holler the verse at the team as they left the dressing room.

After writing my thoughts to the editor, I realized the cheerleaders would never take my suggestions. Why not? Because for them, it really wasn't about inspiring the team. It was waving the flag.

If they were intent on inspiring the team, they would have turned the banner around so the team could read the message before they ran through it and they would have constructed the banner so the last man through could read it as well as the first. They were not interested in inspiring the team so much as spreading the good news.

And where were they spreading the good news? In Catoosa County, Georgia! They were preaching to the choir! They were waving the flag. They wouldn't take my suggestions because what good is waving the flag if no one sees the flag? When you can't rub everyone's nose in it, the exercise is not nearly as much fun.

The cheerleaders and what they cheer for are the latest evidence of triumphalism. Triumphalism is the attitude or belief that a particular

doctrine, religion, culture, viewpoint, opinion or social system is superior to and will triumph over all others. Triumphalism characterizes the attitudes of some historians, political commentators, theologians, popes, bishops and now cheerleaders.

Triumphalists may derive a sense of pride, security, or virtue from their sense of superiority and their expectation of ultimate triumph. However, they rarely call themselves “triumphalist.” Instead, the term is pejorative and is used by others who would be triumphed over, so to speak. Triumphalists call themselves, “right” and others, “wrong.”

Triumphalism comes from arrogance and cultural myopia. It is usually accompanied by provincialism. It is aggravated by a right and wrong, black and white view of the world. It can be sparked by fear, and we saw a spike in patriotic and religious triumphalism right after the World Trade Center was demolished. That’s understandable, but not excusable. I suspect that we will hear a bunch of fear-based religious triumphalist rhetoric directed against Muslims as we sort out the mess at Fort Hood.

A spectacular example of cultural and religious triumphalism is what European Christians did to native peoples in the Americas and elsewhere around the world. But Christians are not the only ones susceptible to triumphalism. The Iranian Muslims who kept the hostages imprisoned in the embassy in Tehran for a year were acting out of a triumphal interpretation of the Quran. The shenanigans at Abu Ghraib were conditioned by the climate of impunity created by triumphalist strategy, ideology and rhetoric. Triumphalism eventually undid the Soviets in Afghanistan.

While I am talking about religious triumphalism here, I want to point out that Christianity and Islam are hobbled in this regard by something that each religion has at its core. It’s a missionary spirit, which abets triumphalism. Truthfully, if Christianity and Islam did not have that missionary spirit, that dictum to spread the good news,

that enjoinder to go out and convert the world, I believe they wouldn’t have a problem with triumphalism.

Triumphalism appears in more trivial places as well. Excessive celebrating after a touchdown is a common form of triumphalism. And it’s banned. Why? Because its goal is to elevate one player over his opponents and to shame and embarrass the losing team. It’s poor sportsmanship, it reveals a lack of maturity and it makes everyone else mad.

In my letter to the editor, I suggested that this episode is evidence of a cultural change, and I stand by that assertion. Imagine that this happened 20 years ago, even 10 years ago. Well, in the first place, the disgruntled wanna-be school district employee would probably not have said anything about a lawsuit. And even if she did, I’ll bet the superintendent would have done nothing.

But now, people are being educated in the sensibilities of the wider world, merely by experience. And I am glad they are. In the letter I wrote that southeastern Tennessee and northern Georgia are not the isolated sleepy backwater places they once were. People with new ideas, different habits and broader visions are comin’ to town.

I am sorry to say this cultural change is not happening fast enough. About nine months ago, we were contacted by Wes Crider, a fingerstyle guitarist of some renown and reputation. He offered to come play at a worship service today and we said, “Sure, come on.” Eight months later, he got around to looking at our website and cancelled because of his devout Christian faith. He just could not bring himself to play for such a diverse group as Unitarian Universalists.

To him and others who might be frightened of something or someone different: From now on, Southern Baptists won’t be your only neighbors. A Presbyterian might move in next door. A Muslim might buy the apartment building on the corner. Your next employer might not care a fig about the Vols. Or, God forbid, a Yankee might

sit next to you in church.

And this cultural change will be good for everyone, believe me. It will eventually put an end to triumphalism. In the meantime, I wish triumphalism would be banned on the playing field of life, not just the football field. It is immature behavior and it makes everyone else mad. It shows a profound lack of respect for other people and other viewpoints. A lack of respect.

But we were all taught respect, right? Our parents, our teachers and our friends have all taught us to respect one another, right? I'll bet at least some of those Fort Oglethorpe cheerleaders were raised to say "Yes, Ma'am." and "Yes, Sir." Everyone around here knows respect, except, it seems, when it comes to religion.

HYMN 352, Find a Stillness

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

Our benediction today comes from three different people, but they all tell us the same thing. The first person was a diplomat, the second, an historian and the third, a poet. What they say is one of the hardest lessons to learn. At least it is for me. I hope you have an easier time than I do remembering that the most important time in your life is right now.

Do not look back. And do not dream about the future, either. It will neither give you back the past, nor satisfy your daydreams. Your duty, your reward—your destiny—are here and now.

DAG HAMMARSKJOLD

Forget mistakes. Forget failures. Forget everything except what you're going to do now and do it. Today is your lucky day.

WILL DURANT

Happiness not in another place, but this place; not for another hour, but this hour.

WALT WHITMAN

POSTLUDE: Danza Campestre