

GREETINGS

DAVID. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. In order to make the most efficient use of our little space, we're gonna try something new, and that is, could all the children who would like to, please come down here and sit on the steps? This will make more room for visitors.

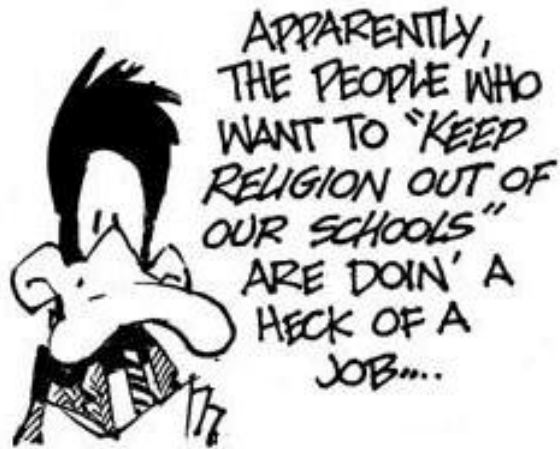
Please note the emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode," and childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery.

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.

In the fellowship area, there is a silver box and I encourage you to use that to answer the survey that was in the newsletter. If you haven't read the survey, a copy of it is right beside the silver box. It's important that we hear from as many people as possible, so your help is appreciated.

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: *Allegro*



Getting Religion Wrong

A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE

Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga

March 8, 2009

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

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

STORY: Race to the Top of the Tree

Next door to my house are four very large and very healthy oak trees. I think I've told you about them before. They're pin oaks, and they shed a lot of leaves in the fall, they drop a lot of oak tassels in the spring and all summer long, they provide a lot of shade for my house, so it's cool inside.

They also make a home for about a dozen squirrels. There are big squirrels and little squirrels, squirrels with light gray fur, squirrels with silver gray fur, squirrels with dark gray fur, and some squirrels with a touch of brown fur on their shoulders and on their backs. Each squirrel is a little bit different. But all of the squirrels have bright inquisitive eyes and feathery, fluffy tails that they flick this way and that way and from side to side.

And they chatter. You ever hear a squirrel chatter? Well, they do. I can't imitate the sound very well, but they chatter.

And all of the squirrels love to climb the oak trees. They climb up. They climb down. They climb out on the branches, to the very thinnest part, where the branches sway up and down and Up and Down and UP and DOWN, like a seesaw.

But better than tree-climbing, and even better than see-sawing, they like tree-racing. Every day the squirrels hold races to see who can climb fastest, who can jump farthest, and who can climb highest of all. But since they're squirrels and squirrels are always hungry, sometimes they stop racing to eat a nut. And they completely forget they are in a race to the top of the tree. But that was all right, since

they always have fun, whether they are eating or racing or scratching or tearing up my roof or just lying around being squirrels.

Last week three squirrels were having a discussion about the best way to get to the top of the tree.

"Straight up the trunk!" said Houghton, the dark gray squirrel, between bites on a stale acorn from last fall.

"But the trunk doesn't go all the way to the top," said Helena, the light gray squirrel, who was standing on her hind legs. "You have to go on the branches sometime."

"But when?" said Escanaba, who had silver-gray fur touched with brown. "And which branch?"

"That big one, over there," said Houghton.

"No, the crooked one, on that side," said Helena.

"The big one!" said Houghton.

"The crooked one!" said Helena. And they got to arguing with much chittering and chattering.

"This is silly!" said Escanaba. "Stop talking about it and do it! Have a race!"

Both Houghton and Helena liked that idea, and other squirrels liked it, too. They all gathered at the base of the tallest oak tree and lined up for the Race to the Top of the Tree. And when the starter squirrel dropped an acorn they were off and running!

Squirrels going this way, squirrels going that way, squirrels everywhere! They leapt for the trunk and dug in with their toes. Some raced straight up the tree trunk. Some ran up it going around

and around, like climbing up a corkscrew slide, because they got a little dizzy and that was more fun.

Some squirrels didn't go up the big oak tree at all. Instead, they ran over to another nearby tree and climbed up that, all the way to the top, and then leapt across open sky to reach the tip of an oak branch fifteen feet away. There they clung, swaying up and down and Up and Down and UP and DOWN, until finally the branch stopped swaying and the squirrels could start climbing again.

Now, the oak tree is a very tall tree, and it is a very long climb to the top. Many of the squirrels (since they were squirrels and squirrels are always squirrelly) stopped to take a break along the way. Some of the squirrels had so much fun going around and around the trunk of the oak tree chasing each other that they stopped worrying about the race at all.

But Houghton went straight up the big branch and Helena went up the crooked branch. They went higher and higher, and the branches got thinner and thinner and the wind grew stronger and stronger, and the ground got farther and farther away and the sunshine grew brighter as they climbed the tree. Of all the squirrels they were the only two who reached the very top of the tree, and they reached it at just about the same time.

"It's pretty up here," said Houghton, holding on tight with all four paws as the very thin branches swayed to and fro in the very strong breeze.

"Yes, it is," said Helena, holding on tight, too. "Ready to go down?"

"Yes!" said Houghton. "Let's grab some acorns on the way down." So they did.

And Escanaba, she didn't join the race at all. She took five on a branch about ten feet off the ground. "After all," Escanaba said, "It

doesn't really matter how far or how fast or which way you go, or even if you go up a completely different tree. There are lots of ways to get to the top of the tree or to other parts of the tree, or to different trees altogether. In fact, you don't even have to climb any tree at all, because there are plenty of good things right down here on the ground."

CHILDREN'S RECESSINAL

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: Adagio-Andante

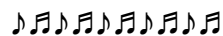
A couple weeks ago, we shared the plate and I am pleased to report that we collected \$280.29 for the Blue Monarch, a shelter for abused spouses and children. Thank you very much.

When I went to seminary there was a lot of talk about God. Who is God, where does she live, what does he want? All those kinds of discussions. Over time, I concluded that God lives in that little tiny space between people. Perhaps you have heard me say that. Well, there were two people that led me to that conclusion. One was a colleague who remarked one day that "God brings people together to create something." And I thought that God must be between people to bring them together.

The other person was Martin Buber, who wrote about something he called "the sphere of the between." That's the space between people, which he thought was holy. Buber was a Jewish philosopher, translator, and educator, who concentrated on religious consciousness, interpersonal relations, and community. His influence is felt mostly in the fields of social psychology, social philosophy, philosophical anarchism, and religious existentialism.

He once addressed an audience of priests, and he asked them, “What is the difference between Jews and Christians? We all await the Messiah. You believe he has already come and gone, while I believe he has not yet come. I therefore propose that we await him together. And when he appears, we can ask him: ‘Were you here before?’” He paused and then said: “And I hope, at that moment, I will be close enough to whisper in his ear, ‘For the love of heaven, don’t answer.’”

We’ll collect the offering now, for the support and ministry of this church. If you write 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.



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.

Wendy Sapp gave birth to her second child, a boy, earlier this week. His name is Christopher. I regret to say that all is not well. Christopher was born with an incompletely–formed diaphragm. This allowed his intestines to rise in his body and push his lungs aside, which caused them to function erratically.

For a time, his body was without oxygen, which damaged his liver and kidneys, but, amazingly, not his heart. He is stabilized now and an operation to make things aright is expected this week. Maddie has set up a blogging site where Wendy can tell us what’s goin’ on. If you want to keep up with the news, ask Chris or me after the service for the web address

<<http://www.uuchurchofchattanooga.blogspot.com>>

When I saw her, Wendy’s emotions seemed just below the surface, but she and Anthony are more hopeful every day. Christopher is doing pretty well, all things considered. She would probably appreciate a card at her home, as she has left the hospital.

That’s not all; I have more challenging news. Buck O’Rear tripped on a curb and broke his left wrist and his right shoulder. If you know Buck, you’ll appreciate this story: He was alone when he fell and after a time of just laying there, he finally rolled over, got to his feet and thought to drive himself to the hospital.

In a truck with a stick shift.

With a broken left wrist, he couldn’t hold the steering wheel and with a broken right shoulder, he couldn’t shift gears. He didn’t get too far. Soon enough, he gave up and called Leslie, who came to rescue him.

The good news is that surgery can repair all the damage. The bad news is that Buck’s gastroenterologist refused to clear him for surgery because he hadn’t seen him for several years. So right now, after a quick appointment on Friday, Buck is awaiting his surgeon’s

best opinion. The deal is that to repair all the broken bones and re-attach muscles and tendons, Buck would be anesthetized for six to seven hours, which would put him in real danger. So they are thinking about two separate operations and other options.

Buck is absolutely helpless. Cannot use either arm. Leslie, who hides her fears under a mask of humor, says Buck is completely at her mercy now. Don't worry, she is an *angel* of mercy. Telephone calls are a problem because in order for Buck to talk on the phone, Leslie has to hold the phone against the side of his head. Which is a hassle for Leslie. Send a card and send your best wishes.

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 these few moments of silence, let us pray for those who are in pain or who are afraid. And let us always remember 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: Getting Religion Wrong

Well, I stepped in it again, and I must apologize to you. It seems that I was a little overbearing in using this projector and screen during worship. Or more exactly, some people believe the projector and screen are overbearing and in hindsight, I see that I might have rolled this out a little more gracefully. I apologize most sincerely if you are upset about the screen. I certainly could have introduced it more gently.

For me, being a parish minister is a learning process. I ain't never done this before. I suppose if I had 30 years ministerial experience, instead of 6, I could have foreseen some resistance to change. Obviously, the screen is less than attractive when compared to the drapes. I know that. There is really nothing I can do that will make that screen appear any more pleasant. The drapes will always look better.

Do you know the story behind these drapes? They were made by Kay Spehar, Leslie O'Rear, Florence Hull, Leah James and Ann Heacker. Leah and Florence did most of the sewing, Ann and Leslie collaborated on texture and color and Kay Spehar created the chalice applique. They were hung in 1991, during the ministry of Jack Young, and he helped Kay Spehar hang them.

Before the drapes, there was nothing back here. To those women, it seemed stark, bare and the sanctuary had no focal point. When Florence Hull died, her life and membership in this church was commemorated with this little brass plaque right here. Florence Hull, incidentally, is Leslie O'Rear's mother.

These drapes have come to be very important to some people and when the screen came down and obscured the view, they let me have it with both barrels. And yet some people like the screen. I have heard about a dozen good comments about it, two very impassioned negative comments and one moderately negative comment.

If the screen doesn't bother you, here's an analogy that will give you an idea of how some people feel about it: Imagine that you live in a charming little bungalow on a rustic seaside road on the Gulf of Mexico. One morning you wake up to find a thirty-story hotel and casino across the street, between you and your beautiful beach. The hotel turns out to be good for the economy of the county and your property tax goes down, but it destroys the environment that you have come to know in the 30 years you lived there.

So what will you see on the screen? I intend to use the projector and screen for stories and for illustrations within the sermon and for responses. Lyrics for singing hymns may also be projected.

Someone suggested that we put announcements on the screen, but I think that's not likely. I can't imagine anyone wanting to *watch* announcements. I'd like to think that we could have a paper-less service, but I don't think it's possible at present.

What you *won't see* up there are larger-than-life images of the minster so that those in the last row can see each hair on my chin; we are not in danger of becoming a mega-church. *And you won't see a bouncing ball.* Three people actually said to me, on the first Sunday we used the screen, "We're not gonna see a bouncing ball, are we?"

Do you remember bouncing balls? Perhaps anyone under forty may not. In older movies and on TV, the lyrics to a song were projected and a circular image would bounce from the top of one word to the next in time with the music, giving you the tempo so that you could sing along. I have no intention of using a bouncing ball. Never occurred to me. So be at ease and rest assured, it won't happen. No

bouncing ball.

But I got to thinking, "What is it with a bouncing ball?" One person says something about a bouncing ball is one thing, but three people? I asked members of the worship group and it turns out that people were afraid that using the projector and screen would make the worship service *cheesy*.

Cheesy. And I took that word under consideration. "What is it about cheesiness?" I asked. Well, going to the dictionary and online resources I realized that some people feared the projected images would be lowbrow, crude or less than noble. They were afraid that using the projector and screen would be tasteless and vulgar, that we would use technology in a haphazard and slipshod manner that appeal to the lowest common denominator with excessive artifice and unsubtle images.

"Really?" I thought. "People are afraid I would produce a cheesy service?"

Then, in a moment of inspired detective work, I got it. The drapes—and everything else in this room—are here to lift our spirits, give us a sense of something larger than ourselves. And the screen, by itself, just hanging there, does not do that. Images projected on the screen, it would seem, are fine. But the screen by itself is not up to the standards of the rest of the room.

So we'll take it out during the sermon. I originally thought that it would be a distraction to raise and lower it during the service, however, I have come to see that raising it during the sermon is appropriate. Worship is a work in progress. While some elements will always be present, worship will change over time to meet the needs of the congregation. I hope to use technology in a way that diminishes no one's experience.

Getting Religion Wrong is the title of my sermon this morning and it

comes from a story about Martin Marty. In 1970, Martin Marty was associate dean at the University of Chicago Divinity School. The Dean was a scholar and did not like to raise money—so he told Marty to do it. As he began his fundraising, he posed this question to a colleague: “Given all the world’s problems, on what grounds dare I ask for money to fund the graduate study of religion?” His colleague replied, “On the same grounds as those for funding sex education. Sex, if you get it wrong, is very dangerous. So is religion.”

Here’s a book by Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy*. The subtitle—every serious book is obliged to have a subtitle—the subtitle is *What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t*.

Stephen Prothero’s says that Americans get an “F” in religion. Actually, he is guilty of grade inflation. He would give us less than an “F” if he could. Remember, he is a scholar, living in an academic world of his own making, reading about, writing about, thinking about nothing but religious topics all day long. With other professors of religious studies. So you’ve got to season his offerings with a little real-life spice. Asking his advice about religious literacy is a bit like asking Tiger Woods how to play miniature golf.

I don’t mean to argue with his point; Prothero has some important things to say. Like this: “Americans are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion. They are Protestants who can’t name the four Gospels, Catholics who can’t name the seven sacraments, and Jews who can’t name the five books of Moses. In America, faith is almost entirely devoid of content. One of the most religious countries on earth is also a nation of religious illiterates.” My first thought on reading that was perhaps religious literacy doesn’t much matter to Americans.

But Prothero says it should and his proof is the fiery death of David Koresh and his 75 followers who perished when the FBI attacked the Branch Davidian’s compound in Waco, Texas, in April of 1993. At that time, Prothero was alarmed as he watched the events unfold on

TV, and realized that due to Koresh’s twisted and idiosyncratic interpretation of the Book of Revelations, the whole affair would end just as it did. His familiarity with religious studies led him to believe that if the FBI persisted, they would ignite the “end-times inferno” predicted in the Bible.

He hoped that someone knowledgeable in end time theology was advising the FBI, but such was not the case. And the FBI didn’t call him, so all he could do is watch the game play out according to Koresh’s plans. Still, he thought the affair could have ended differently if someone in the White House or the FBI had known just a smattering about Apocalyptic Christianity. Instead, officials dismissed Koresh’s theology as “Bible babble,” and unworthy of consideration.

Do you remember the book, *Cultural Literacy*, from 1987? In it, Ed Hirsch, the author, claimed that Americans have devalued much of their cultural heritage; that they have abandoned facts and literature in favor of skills. Hirsch would say that students today cannot “Remember the Alamo,” nor understand why that expression is important to us.

Prothero argues that much the same is true in the sphere of religious studies. He says, “Today religious illiteracy is at least as pervasive as cultural illiteracy, and certainly more dangerous. Religious illiteracy is more dangerous because religion is the most volatile constituent of culture, because religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces for evil. Ignorance of the term “Achilles’ Heel” may cause us to be confused about what John Madden or Al Michaels said during the Super Bowl; but ignorance of the history of Christian crusades and Muslim martyrdom can be literally lethal.

In this country—actually in North America—the kind of religious literacy that one must have is Christian literacy. There’s no two ways about it. The United States is one of the most religiously diverse

countries in the world. At the same time, it is also the most Christian country in the world. There are more Christians in this country today than have existed in any other country in the history of the world.

How often do we hear the expressions the Golden Rule, the Good Samaritan, the Promised Land, Armageddon and the Apocalypse? All those from Christian Scripture. I'll bet a thousand references to Christian beliefs and theology occur in government, business and common conversation every day in every state in the country.

Christian literacy is not enough, however. To understand foreign policy on Tibet, you need to know something about Buddhism and the Dalai Lama. To follow the argument over the phrase, "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, you need to know something about atheism and polytheism. And to fully engage in debates about the war on terror, you need to be informed about *jihad* and the Islamic tradition of martyrdom.

So the question is, what to do about our lack of knowledge of Christianity and other religions? Well, churches and families could do an awful lot better in this regard; churches, especially, where one would assume that resources for religious studies might be close at hand. Problem is, most churches devote far more time to teaching people about their own brand of religion than to exploration of others. And families, well, I don't fault mom & dad for not teaching junior about Hinduism and Santeria. Families have long sent their children to schools to learn the three R's and to church to learn the fourth.

I am pleased that religious literacy is often a topic in the Forum at this church on Sunday morning. I am not so pleased with the bible study classes offered in public schools around here, precisely because they do not address other religions. This part of Tennessee has long been somewhat isolated, but is becoming more cosmopolitan, so I hope that religious studies replaces bible studies in the future.

The media could do something to educate our citizens about other

religions and cultures. Problem is, news about religion does not sell papers and very little can be learned in a 90-second TV news report. Check out the major sections of our Chattanooga Times-Free Press. In order, what sells is sports, business news, local and state news, national and international news, features and the comics. All the information about religion you see in the Times-Free Press on Saturday is free. The paper pays for it. And they recently cut that section to about 30% of what it once was.

You can educate yourself. Go to Amazon.com and order a copy of this book. OR check it out of the public library, which I am pleased to say has a copy of it and four other good titles by the same author. Only half of this book is the book. The other half is an index, an extensive section of footnotes, and a dictionary of religious literacy—all the things, in some detail, that you ought to know to be religiously literate American in the 21st century.

Here are a few things Prothero thinks we should know: the difference between fundamentalists and evangelicals; the difference between the ascension and the assumption, between the nativity and the immaculate conception, between Mecca and Medina and the difference between deism and dispensational premillennialism.

Prothero believes we ought to include a course in high school—two courses, actually—Bible 101 and World Religions 101. "Ay, there's the rub," as Hamlet observes. Prothero goes beyond high school. He suggests a required course in religious studies for a college diploma as well.

It is important to understand that the teaching of religion, in schools funded by our tax dollars is forbidden under the supreme court's interpretation of the first amendment. It is however, permissible to teach *about* religion in public schools.

Unfortunately, this distinction is hard to make and few people attempt it. Even fewer teacher's colleges instruct future teachers in

understanding how to teach religion objectively and how not to teach it confessionally. The result is that most teachers, principals and school districts teach *around* religion. Their strategy is to obey the law by avoiding the problem altogether. This puts the religious instruction of children in the home, which is appropriate, in my opinion.

I suggest that there is a reasonable case for the teaching *about* religion, mostly because if you don't teach children the truth about religion, they will learn lies about it from a disreputable source. I am sad to say, that may not bother some people.

In your program today is a sheet of paper with 15 questions, mainly concerning Christianity, but covering other religions lightly. It's a religious literacy quiz. Take a look at it, answer the questions as best you can and don't feel bad if you don't do very well. Your minster did not ace this test, for the which he is religiously mortified.

You probably want to know what questions I missed. I was unable to name all ten commandments. I forgot about one and only one god. I have the answer key right here if you want to check your answers.

I don't believe that I'll see religious studies mandated in public schools in my lifetime. I feel like a doubting Thomas, to use a term that should be understood by both the religiously and culturally literate.

Because they make mutually repugnant claims to the truth, I believe a bible studies course could be taught without some promotion or denigration of Judaism or Christianity. Likewise, how does one study Islam without giving some credence to the notion that it is a fulfillment of both Judaism and Christianity?

In my opinion, the only way to study religions is to study all of them at once, in comparison; to learn the sociology, the history and the people and events in one semester and in the following semester, to

study the theology. And to study the theology *very carefully*, again in comparison, and making no claims to supremacy, to truth or correctness. Or incorrectness, for that matter.

This will not be easy to accomplish, to state the obvious. This will take time and finesse and it will take a mighty political will to shoulder aside those who would see this as an opportunity to shoehorn their religion into the classroom. Frankly, I'm not sure that I would support the effort. There's just too much damage possible when you get religion wrong.

HYMN 34, Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire

BENEDICTION

If we would allow the majesty of creation to be, instead of trying to understand it, it would bless us.

If we would incorporate all the aspects of creation instead of trying to incarcerate them, the war would end.

If we could accept ourselves, perhaps we would accept others.

If all these questions add up to confusion, all the answers add up to one affirmation—Love life and it will bless you.

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.

POSTLUDE: It Ain't Necessarily So

