

THE JOURNEY TO HUMILITY

A Sermon by The Reverend Phyllis L. Hubbell

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READING

In 1819, at the ordination of our first minister, Jared Sparks, William Ellery Channing described from this very pulpit the core of the new faith that he called Unitarian Christianity. He spoke not only of our beliefs but of our dedication to the pursuit of religious truth, but he concluded his remarks by saying that the most important virtue of this new faith was that of charity and humility toward others. Here is an excerpt from his words:

We find that on no subject have [people], and even good [people] ingrafted so many strange conceits, wild theories, and fictions of fancy, as on religion; and remembering as we do, that we ourselves are sharers of the common frailty, we dare not assume infallibility in the treatment of our fellow-Christians, or encourage in common Christians, who have little time for investigation, the habit of denouncing and contemning other denominations, perhaps more enlightened and virtuous than their own. Charity, forbearance, a delight in the virtues of different sects, a backwardness to censure and condemn, these are virtues which, however poorly practiced by us, we admire and recommend. . . .

SERMON

Perhaps it was the run up to the elections. Perhaps it has been all the killings in the name of what some groups of people consider true and right. Perhaps it has been the culture wars in this country and others over issues such as homosexuality, stem cell research, and abortions. But one night some time ago, I dreamed that I was preaching a sermon about the dangers of too much certainty and when I woke up it still seemed like a good idea.

It is easy to see the dangers of too much certainty by looking at the other side, whatever the other side is. But I want to bring this topic closer to home by sharing with you the story of one of the good guys, one of the people we consider a forerunner of our faith, Michael Servetus. The story is written in a

wonderful book by Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone, *Out of the Flames*. Servetus's story goes back to the mid-1500s, at a time when books were just being made widely available to individuals to read and reflect upon. The possibility of authoring one of those books was becoming available to scholars everywhere. It was a time of great intellectual ferment in the church, with Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others challenging the Church both on its doctrine and on its corrupt practices.

Michael Servetus was a brilliant scholar from Spain. By the time he was thirteen, he could read Greek, French, Latin, and, most unusual for the time, Hebrew. With this background, he would later read the entire Bible in the original Hebrew and Greek and compare the language with the Vulgate Bible, the authorized version of the Roman Catholic Church. He later learned Arabic which enabled him to read the Koran.

Servetus and many other students concluded that the Roman church had corrupted the fundamental teachings of Christianity and needed to return to the original text. But Servetus went further than most other reformers. Most radically, his studies convinced him that the trinity itself was an unbiblical addition of the church to the simple message of the Christian scriptures. Appalled as well by the extravagance and corruption of the church, by age eighteen, Servetus determined to lead a rebirth of Christianity.

At nineteen, he became a protégé of a powerful Protestant reformer in Basil, Switzerland, a man named Oecolampadius, a former assistant to Erasmus. Oecolampadius had led the fight in Basil against the mass. His followers had expelled all Catholics from the government. Oecolampadius initially welcomed Servetus, viewing him as someone who was brilliant and passionate who would follow his lead. Instead, the still-teenaged Servetus "lectured his host on his shortcomings," insisting that he and the other reformers had not gone nearly far enough.

After a year of trying to influence Servetus, Oecolampadius turned on him, forcing him to flee the city for Strasbourg, where he published a very scholarly but inflammatory book called *On the Errors of the Trinity*. Not content with proclaiming heresy, Servetus ridiculed those with more traditional views. Other reformers, including Luther, had struggled with the Trinity, but were not yet willing to make such a shocking denouncement of Roman Catholicism. It has been argued that Servetus's book provoked other reformers, and forced them into defending the Trinity. Both the Catholics

and the Protestants condemned him. The Spanish Inquisition sentenced him to death.

For years, Servetus lived under an assumed name, studying, teaching, and eventually quietly practicing medicine in France where he became known as one of the leading doctors in his province. Here another side of his character was disclosed as he served the poor as well as the rich, and ignored the risk to himself in treating patients stricken by the plague. For awhile, Servetus stayed away from religious issues. But a friend with whom he had religious discussions encouraged him to enter into a correspondence with John Calvin.

Calvin, by this time, lived in Geneva, Switzerland, where he had consolidated his power over the city, requiring all citizens to take a pledge affirming Calvin's interpretation of the scriptures. Violations were punishable by loss of citizenship and banishment. Harsh punishments were imposed for what we would consider minor infractions. Spies were employed by the city to catch people in unguarded moments.

Servetus's first letter to Calvin asked him about his interpretation of the Trinity. Calvin's rather cold and traditional response evoked a lecture from Servetus. He was abusive, belittling Calvin's "knowledge and interpretations of Scripture...." Calvin "was furious" and ended the correspondence, but Servetus continued to send him some thirty letters and a copy of his book. Calvin responded with a copy of his own widely read book, *The Institutes*. Servetus read it closely, then "took it apart, line by line, scribbling" derogatory "comments in the margins..." It was this insulting response that made Calvin determine that Servetus should die for his heresy. Several times, Calvin denounced Servetus to the Roman Catholic Church, hoping that they would prosecute Servetus in France, where he was still living under an assumed name.

In 1552, Servetus published a new book on religion, focusing on his basic themes, opposition to infant baptism, the distortion of the scriptures to support various Catholic teachings including the Trinity and his belief that "god existed in all people and things." [Almost as a throwaway, Servetus included a description of pulmonary circulation of the blood, which was a great advance over the theories of the time, but Servetus's remark went unnoticed until well after William Harvey was given the credit for the discovery 75 years later.] The Latin title of Servetus's new book, *Christianismi Restitutio* was a take off on Calvin's great work, *Christianae*

Religionis Institutio, and was clearly intended as a direct challenge to Calvin. This time, Calvin sent off portions of the book to France in an attempt to interest the Roman authorities. Servetus was in fact found and imprisoned—but he managed to escape. He was tried and found guilty *in absentia*, and sentenced to death by a slow fire.

It is not clear today why Servetus attempted to escape by way of Geneva, but he was recognized and arrested there. Calvin personally took a hand in his prosecution. Servetus was found guilty of heresy and sentenced to be burned at the stake, along with his books. It was a long, slow, painful death. Servetus feared that the pain might cause him to recant and begged Calvin “to be allowed to die by the sword. Calvin refused.” Despite his fears, Servetus remained resolute to the end. He died on October 27, 1553.

It may seem difficult in our times to see relevance in this tragic story of two gifted scholars so utterly lacking in humility. Certainly religious wars and persecution still exist in our world, though we do not fear imprisonment or death because of our beliefs. But our country remains divided by religion. We are deeply suspicious of each other and our differing agendas. Ridicule and condemnation spring easily from many lips—perhaps at times, even our own.

I tell the story of Servetus, however, because it has so much resonance for us today. Servetus was a person with much to admire. He was brilliant, passionate, and serious about his religion. He was charitable to the poor. He was courageous in ignoring the risk to his own life in treating plague victims. His scholarship and his unflinching willingness to examine the conventional wisdom allowed him to go further than other reformers of his day. Had he not felt a sense of mission, he would hardly have risked his own life to publish his heretical ideas.

But have we not met lesser Servetuses? People who are so intent on convincing us of their own ideas that they will not let up? I can picture the crabbed writing in the margin of pages, the insults, the never-ending letters. I cannot help but wonder whether, as convinced, as obsessed as Servetus was, he would have condemned John Calvin had their positions of power and powerlessness been reversed.

At the core of our faith, I would suggest, far deeper than a rejection of the Trinity, is a belief in the importance of humility. Our faith was born when

people still remembered the terrible persecutions of their neighbors and friends for their beliefs. Our faith was born in a time when we began to recognize how imperfect is the knowledge of any one place and time. As a result, we echo Channing's call to be slow to judge, recognizing our own imperfections, our own failings.

Yet many of us struggle to live this precept in practice. At our best, we welcome diverse religious views in our congregations and in our countries. Still, I have heard Unitarian Universalists question how one could be a Christian and still be a UU minister. I have heard people dismiss humanists and atheists as dinosaurs, in a time when "spirituality" is on the rise. I have known of factions in UU churches who argued that our churches have no place for pagans. We struggle over what is acceptable religious language in our worship services. (I can remember when I had great problems with the God word, the prayer word and the Jesus word.) We grapple with how to deal with individuals within our congregations who hold unpopular views on political issues with religious overtones—issues such as abortion, stem cell research, the death penalty and war. Many of us have been hurt ourselves because of our beliefs, so we may now seek a safe place where everyone believes as we ourselves do, and we will not be rejected.

Do we not all have issues that we think no thoughtful person should disagree on? Ones we joke about when we think we are alone with others who will agree with us? With the election barely behind us, perhaps our issues are political, rather than religious, but the point is the same.

Our congregations covenant with one another to affirm the "inherent worth and dignity of all people." We don't mention it as often, but we also covenant to accept one another and encourage each other's life-long spiritual growth, as we each embark on a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Michael Servetus embarked on a serious religious journey. He studied more seriously than perhaps any of us ever will. He was brilliant. His studies took him further in his time than we are likely to go in ours. We remain in his debt both for his writing and his courage. Despite what we may perceive as his flaws, we honor him today. But his studies and his brilliance led him into the trap. The dark side of genius is hubris, the belief that we know all the important answers and that those who disagree with us are not worthy. Greater even than the study of ideas on the journey of life, is the study of character, is the devotion to our own spiritual and moral growth. That is the core of our faith.

Ours is a difficult path, requiring that we work out our own course of study, choose our own spiritual practice, find our own prayers, discover our own God. But that path is made easier by the knowledge that our neighbor is also struggling beside us on a path that sometimes intersects ours. We can strengthen one another on our mutual journeys, admitting that we, too, have strayed, sharing our stories, moving forward together, seeking to understand our differences, loving one another, forgiving one another, helping each other up when we fall.

May we see the world through each others' eyes and hearts, believing that our world will be enlarged by the effort. This is the path to peace. This is the path to justice.