

Rev. Lyn

It is both purposeful and providential that today, as we celebrate the life of the great civil rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., we begin a series of discussions about our Unitarian Universalist Principles. Our first Principle, as you know, is that we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. What better combination could there possibly be?

A bit of history. When the American Unitarian Association and the Universalists joined together in 1961, there was a need to define who they were and what they stood for. And it was not easy, not easy at all. The Unitarians still were predominantly anti-Trinitarian, that is, they did not accept Jesus as God and the Trinity, that “the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” were one and the same.

In other words, they did not subscribe to the Nicene Creed that was adapted at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD.

Furthermore, many Unitarians had been and were active in the humanist movement that denied the existence of a supernatural god or creator, and relied on science and rationality as a basis for living an ethical, moral and intelligent life.

The Universalists, on the other hand, were Christian theists who believed in a loving and forgiving God, that no one would be condemned to hell, that all – everyone -- would be saved.

Thus the name, Universalists. So when the Unitarians and Universalists finally decided to join forces, they had to pull some all-nighters in order to come up with a common statement of beliefs and values that they could both accept.

And that is how the Principles and Purposes came about. They were revised in 1984 and 1985 to eliminate sexist language. There was a big fight about that at the 1984 General Assembly and a lot of resistance from some of the old white guys. So, Denise Davidoff, from our church in Westport, saved the day by moving to set up a

commission to study the issue for a year, and the Principles that we know were adopted at the 1985 General Assembly.

I like them all. The Principles are a guide for daily living and a set of values that can be espoused whether or not a person believes in a supernatural God. I particularly like the first Principle, respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Thinking about the first Principle reminds me to be kind when I am cranky, to be patient when I'm in a hurry, to speak more respectfully to people and about people.

The First Principle is kind of handy, like the Golden Rule, except that it's better and broader and says more. Affirming the inherent worth and dignity of each person calls us to respect ourselves and others as we live out our holy days and time on this earth. Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote, "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy." Think about that, "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy." Every person is important. No one is irrelevant. We all matter. Doctors know this. Nurses know this. Teachers know this. Ministers know this.

But sometimes it's easy to forget. Or we don't apply the Principle equally.

Consider how differently we treat victims of violence. In France, seventeen people were assassinated. In Nigeria, two thousand. Granted, Nigeria is a long way off, and northern Nigeria is very remote. We would know much less about the slaughter of the dark-skinned people in Baga, Nigeria, if it were not for the photos Amnesty International has provided. Somehow, we white folks in our comfort and safety seem to pay much less attention when the victims of violence have dark skin. Or perhaps we simply don't have any idea of what we can do about it.

In France, part of the problem is the marginalization and lack of economic opportunity for French Muslims. And age-old anti-Semitism. Ill treatment of people who are not "like us" in appearance or background or faith is still common in most of the world. Think of the ways some of our states make it difficult for Hispanics and recent immigrants to vote. It's almost as bad as right after the Civil War.

A little respect goes a long way. It's free. Interpersonally and institutionally, respect matters. The

law prohibiting women from wearing head scarves in France exacerbates tensions between French Muslims and the French government and some French people.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke eloquently as he worked for civil rights, and he emphasized both interpersonal and institutional respect and dignity. As a person of color, Dr. King and his family experienced disrespect and discrimination. As a scholar and theologian, he was a Christian who believed strongly in a personal God who took a strong interest in the life of every person, individually. His dissertation critiqued and compared the theologies of Paul Tillich and the Unitarian philosopher Henry Nelson Wieman, neither of whom believed in a personal God. For Dr. King, serving a God who took a strong interest in him strengthened his resolve to support others and open paths through the jungle of a society whose people and laws systematically held back and kept down people of color. I have read that such a belief in a personal God who cared inspired and gave hope to slaves in the South as they struggled to survive physically, economically and emotionally in a system that offered them little hope on this earth during their

lifetimes. The theology of the Universalists, with their belief in a loving and forgiving God and universal salvation, closely resembled that of Dr. King.

When the Unitarians and the Universalists hammered out the Principles and Purposes, they solved the theological dilemma associated with their philosophical and religious differences in two ways.

First, they agreed on a set of Principles based on values that did not necessarily derive from belief in a personal God, beginning with respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The word “inherent” powers this Principle, for it means that regardless of race, color, gender, or physical or intellectual ability, ALL persons have worth and value and deserve respect.

Second, they agreed on a set of Purposes which acknowledged that both the Unitarians and the Universalists shared theologies that grew out of Jewish and Christian traditions, and acknowledged the moral, ethical and historical influence and import of other major religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

In a sense, the very process of formulating the Principles and Purposes embodied and validated respect

for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Those negotiations required respectful acknowledgement of differing perspectives put forth by persons of worth and dignity. And so we are gifted with a Principle that permits disagreement but not disrespect. The First Principle transcends religious and theological differences, and provides a pathway to peace between individuals and nations. That pathway is sometimes difficult and challenging. People can be difficult and challenging. Let us begin our march up the path that grounds us, inspires us and moves us to become better persons and to create a better world. Amen.