

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

"It is a basic premise of this church that the pulpit is free and untrammelled. The minister is expected to express her values, views and commitments without fear or favor."

This statement is part of the Letter of Agreement between me, the minister, and you the congregation of UUCR. It is found in section 2 of that covenantal document.

Does this mean that I can say whatever I want when I stand here in the pulpit? Are there no restrictions or limits whatsoever?

Freedom never exists apart from responsibility, both legal and moral. Persuasive speech, public speech, preaching, does not exist in isolation.

The sermon portion of our worship service is intended to be a shared exploration; there are freedoms and responsibilities for both pulpit and pew.

As your minister, I spend hours and hours in research, reflection and writing in preparation of this 18 minute sermon. I never wing it, or toss it off, or use an old sermon. I offer you what I think we all need to hear, what we all need to think about.

I try to name the truth and offer stories and poetry that, as my colleague Victoria Safford says, "touch the forgotten, forbidden, and hidden of both the terrible and the beautiful"...I offer what Rev. Safford calls, what the Christian tradition calls, " the sacrament of the living word"-the word as I understand it...the living word that is our lives...as it touches my heart.

This sacrament of holy words...is only possible because of the permission and trust granted by the free pulpit. It is only possible because of the covenantal relationship we share.

As a democratic free faith, Unitarian Universalism has much in common with the freedoms and responsibilities of our country.

In the First Amendment of our Bill of Rights written in 1791, are these words, "Congress shall make no law restricting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

"Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech".

Does that mean that all citizens can say whatever they want?
Are there no limits or restrictions, whatsoever?

This week brought several tragic and hateful expressions of the freedom of speech.

A Rutgers University student age 18 committed suicide after his college roommate used a hidden camera to film him in a sexual encounter with another young man...the roommate then streamed the film on the internet. This act of cruelty caused the young violinist to kill himself by jumping off the GW bridge.

The roommate and a friend who, apparently, had a hand in putting the video on the internet, have been arrested and charged with invasion of privacy. The police investigators have not declared it a hate crime, as I believe it is.

The ability of teenagers and college students to freely post video films on the internet – to exercise their freedom of speech so widely and with little thought of consequences, was certainly not something considered by the Founding Fathers.

The other case, which is being taken up by the Supreme Court next week revolves around a fringe religious group , the Westboro Baptist Church near Topeka, Kansas. Most of the handful of members of this church are members of the minister's family.

The Reverend Fred W. Phelps preaches a hate-filled message based on his belief that the nation's tolerance of homosexuality has drawn God's condemnation. They are the group that has disrupted the funeral services of several hundred American Service Men and women with signs saying "Thank god for dead Soldiers, and "Thank God for 9/11". They believe God is killing Americans because of our tolerance of homosexuality.

A Maryland father is at the center of the court case because the Westboro people protested at his son's funeral in 2006. "it is an insult to every American who has died for the freedom of speech" says this bereaved parent. Again the legalities turn on invasion of privacy rather than acknowledging that this too is a hate crime.

Every decade, every generation, brings us challenges around the issue of free speech and censorship. Whether it's debates around pornography, or draft card or flag burning, the Marching of the KKK or threats of burning the Quran- we struggle to define and protect our freedoms.

It's in the nature of democracy that these difficult questions remain in dialogue. The Bill of Rights does not spell out the responsibilities or the limits or boundaries of free speech. That is left to the courts.

The world has changed significantly since 1791. The Bill of Rights was intended only for white male property owners. America was sparsely populated when this freedom was extended.

There were few newspapers, no television news, no internet, no cell phones, no access to cameras, no video streams to a global audience.

But, as yesterday's Washington Post editorial points out... technology is not the villain. Humans have never needed sophisticated tools to spread malice. Laws cannot protect us from heartlessness and cruelty. That is one purpose of religion-to teach love and peace.

Freedom of the pulpit in UU churches also has a cruel and violent history. Martyrs died so that we could speak truth as we know it.

Freedoms in religion began with the 16thc Protestant Reformation in Europe, when clergy began to depart from the dictates and dogma of Roman Catholicism.

To follow the dictates of conscience and see one's own truth came to Unitarianism in 1568 when King Sigismund of Transylvania passed an Edict of Toleration granting that each religion and each clergy could speak and teach their own truth.

But still battles over freedom of the pulpit erupted from time to time. In 1870, Universalist minister, Herman Bisbee was removed from Fellowship by a vote of the Minnesota State Convention of Universalists for his views on Jesus.

William Ellery Channing, an early voice of American Unitarianism, was denied access to his pulpit by a vote of the trustees because of his support of the anti-slavery cause.

And Theodore Parker, a contemporary of Margaret Fuller was shunned by his Boston Unitarian colleagues who then refused to exchange pulpits with him because of his radical version of Christianity....because he denied Biblical miracles and authority of the Bible.

In 1921 the conference of Liberal Christian Unitarians tried to pass a policy to exclude non-theists ministers from Unitarian pulpits...suggesting that all ministers must affirm a belief in God.

This attempt was defeated by the efforts of John Dietrich, the Humanist minister of our church in Minneapolis.

IN the Viet Nam era Reverend Arthur Jellis, who was an interim minister here in Rockville in 1984, was fired by his congregation because he was vocal in his condemnation of the War.

These examples point to a loss of freedom for both pulpit and pew...for the congregations were not free to hear certain perspectives or ideas offered from their pulpit.

So how do we confront the issue of the free pulpit today?

Here at UUCR we have a covenant of right relations. The introductory paragraph reads: We, the members and friends of the Unitarian Universalist church of Rockville, dedicated to a free and responsible search for truth, meaning and spiritual growth, agree to this covenant in order to promote a vibrant, healthy congregation.

Regarding how we speak here , our covenant says that; “we will engage in healthy, honest communication, listening well and speaking with respect, understanding and caring. ”

“We promise to honor the unique identity of each member and friend and to respect the personal boundaries of each person and be mindful of the importance that UUCR be a safe place for all.”

These are beautiful and thoughtful words meant to guide us in our relationships with one another. They speak to our shared values.

Perhaps it’s time for a new covenant in America. The Pledge of Allegiance is a pledge reflecting its time and place in history. We need an American pledge of right relationship to counter hate talk and disrespect. We need a pledge, a covenant, that speaks to the technology of today and its capacity to help or to harm.

America needs a covenant that builds on the Constitutional ideal of freedom of speech and adds the value and responsibility of tolerance and respect. We need a shared moral ground, made explicit.

Each decade brings us a new challenge to the ideals and values which we hold dear, both as a nation and as a church.

Let us not take our freedoms for granted. Let us never be silenced in our intention to speak truth to power, and let us be among those who engage in the hard work of making our civic documents and our religious covenants meaningful in each generation.

Our reading by Paul Lakeland captured it well; “What can be said lays down the boundary of what can be thought.” May freedom always ring from UU pulpits.

Amen