

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula
Sunday July 1st 2018

Sermon: “Human Kindness”

“Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the Western Spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow sun.

“Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-three million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.

“This planet has — or rather had — a problem, which was this: most of the people on it were unhappy for pretty much most of the time. Many solutions were suggested for this problem, but most of these were largely concerned with the movements of small green pieces of paper, which is odd because on the whole it wasn’t the small green pieces of paper that were unhappy.

“And so the problem remained; lots of the people were mean, and most of them were miserable, even the ones with digital watches.

“And then, one Thursday, nearly two thousand years after one man had been nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be kind to people for a change, a woman sitting on her own in a small café suddenly realized what it was that had been going wrong all this time, and she finally knew how the world could be made a good and happy place. This time it was right, it would work, and no one would have to get nailed to anything.”

These are the famous opening paragraphs of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, the first of five novels in Douglas Adams’ quite inaccurately named Hitchhiker’s Trilogy. It’s the story of Englishman Arthur Dent, whose house and then his planet are both destroyed on that fateful Thursday, his friend, Ford Prefect, whom Arthur never suspected of being an alien but was actually an interstellar researcher for the Wikipedia-like “Hitchhiker’s Guide”, and various other characters and their galactic misadventures.

(It is not, sadly, the story of the woman who was sitting in a café when she figured it all out. We have to wait until “So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish”, the fourth book of the trilogy, to find out who she is.)

This Summer, our Religious Exploration programs for children and youth are based on *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, building on the theme of what it means to be imperfect and vulnerable humans in a strange and often unfriendly Universe. And I thought, well, we can tie services over the Summer into that, too, because, yes, there’s plenty of opportunity to consider religious ideas in light of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. What’s more, given the humorous nature of Adams’ book, we can be light-hearted and have some fun with those ideas, which seems appropriate for the Summer, after all.

But then reality intruded. We learned about the awful treatment of thousands of refugee families, children and even babies taken from parents in state-sponsored crimes against humanity within an immigration crisis that had not actually existed until the Administration created it. And just this week, the Supreme Court handed down decisions that direct our country further down the road of bigotry and xenophobia. Unfortunately, we can expect to see more of the same for years to come, given that Justice Kennedy, who was responsible for many of the court’s pro-equality decisions, particularly in regards to LGBTQ rights, has announced his retirement.

For all of the apparent incompetence of the Administration, the unprecedented turnover of White House staff to the point that they have to hold a job fair, the practically comical deceit and pandering, there is real damage being done to the fabric of this nation. As well as the lip-service that’s paid to the Constitution as a cover for actively undermining it, we’re seeing the implementation of public policies that are not only extreme and regressive but seem to be deliberately cruel. And what’s with the cozying up to foreign dictators who repress their own people and assassinate their political opponents while destroying our relationships with progressive countries that used to be our allies? My wife and I have long had a private joke that when we hear jet planes, we say that Canada must be invading. Well, now we say that we hope they’ve come to save us.

Given all of this, there is public mobilization such as this nation has not seen in generations. November’s elections will be decisive, determining whether we start to fix

the damage that's been done in the last two years or whether we double down on isolation, exploitation and hostility. I just pray that we're not too late.

Some of the anger at what's happening is being directed personally at members of the Administration. Now I'm going to talk about that, because it gets at some of the issues of what it means to be human and to be in relationship with other humans, but I have to say that I can't imagine what it's like to be part of the Executive Branch right now. I know there are some true believers in these horrible policies, but I'm sure there's an awful lot of moral injury being done, that people's souls are being broken by what they are asked to do. The White House must be running out of closet space to store all of the horcruxes.

I'm also uneasy with the fact that the most notable cases of officials being the targets of public anger are with female officials. Let's be clear, this Administration is the most male, not to mention the most white, in a long time, but somehow the men who are orchestrating so much of this are avoiding the public while the women who work for them are being hung out to dry. The man most responsible for the deplorable immigration policies, for instance, from the Muslim travel ban to the "zero tolerance" of human decency treatment of refugees, is White House advisor Stephen Miller.

If you don't know who Miller is, I would describe him by analogy with Martin Shkreli, the hedge fund capitalist who became one of the most reviled men in America when his company bought the rights to a life-saving drug and then raised the price from \$14 per pill to \$750 per pill. Change medicine into immigration and Miller is just like Shkreli, only without the winning personality.

Miller's xenophobia is particularly wretched, not to mention ironic, given that his mother's family were refugees from Russia during the anti-Jewish pogroms. A generation later, and his grandparents could have been on the St. Louis, their request for refuge in the United States denied and sent back to Europe to die. Unlike other members of the Administration, I'm guessing that Miller never goes outside, presumably because sunlight would cause him to burst into flame, or perhaps because moonlight would reveal his real form as a rotting cadaver.

So instead, it was Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen who was heckled when she was out for dinner. I don't know if she had any role in crafting the

policy of separating children from their parents at the border, but she was certainly responsible for implementing it, and she defended it in public, so you have to wonder what amount of self-awareness she possesses. After all, she was at dinner at a *Mexican* restaurant and she was one of a number of immigration officials who complained about being separated from their families due to the protests.

Even more notable, though, was that White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders was asked to leave a restaurant because the owner didn't want to serve her, given Sanders' complicity in defending and justifying the Administration's inhumane policies. This is a challenging one for us to process, because while many of us are cheering for the restaurant's owner, this does come hot on the heels of the Supreme Court case in which a Colorado baker refused to make a wedding cake for two men who were getting married.

Many of our arguments about the baker having no right to refuse service to gay men hinged on the idea of public accommodation, that if you operate a business that is open to the public, then you don't get to pick and choose which parts of the public you serve and which you turn away just because of who they are. The defense of the baker rested on the claim that if someone has a "deeply held religious belief" that would prevent them from serving someone, then that should be protected as a form of religious freedom. Obviously a lot of religious progressives have a big problem with the religious freedom argument, on the basis that it offers a potential justification for refusing service not only to LGBTQ individuals but also to Jews or African-Americans or women if someone claims to have the right "deeply held religious belief" on the basis of cherry-picked Bible verses.

Now I am not aware that the owner of the Red Hen restaurant claimed any religious justification — she simply refused to serve Sanders given her political actions — but there's still the matter of the restaurant offering a public accommodation. Actually, not offering a religious justification would seem to make the situation even worse, in that now a business owner can refuse to serve anyone with whom they disagree, maybe if they just don't like them. How, as Unitarian Universalists, do we square that with our First Principle, our promise to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

As often happens, I found help in figuring this out thanks to the wise words of a colleague. The Rev. Michael Piazza is not a Unitarian Universalist, but he's certainly on the same page as us when it comes to progressive religion and social justice. As Piazza was struggling to process the Red Hen's refusal to serve Sanders, he remembered the often quoted words of Dr. King. Speaking of his longing for justice, equality, and freedom, Dr. King expressed his hope for a day when people "will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

In other words, there's a difference between treating someone, for better or for worse, on the basis of who they are — their race or their gender or their sexual orientation — and on the basis what they have done — their speech or their actions. So the Colorado baker turned away Charlie Craig and David Mullins because of who they are, which is prejudice, whereas the restaurant turned away Sarah Sanders because of what she had done, which is not prejudice. (Restaurants do have the right, after all, to turn people away for not having the proper clothing or for being disruptive. The difference here is that the Sanders' disruptive behavior didn't take place in the restaurant itself.)

As Piazza put it, Sanders "wasn't turned away because she is a woman nor because she is white. She was not turned away because she is heterosexual, upper-class or middle-aged. She was turned away because she is a liar who defends the destruction of the environment, the imprisonment of children, attacks on the free press, the appointment of bigots to the Supreme Court, and the dismantling of systems of justice and equality."

So where does this leave our First Principle? Wasn't Sanders' "inherent worth and dignity" disrespected by the restaurant?

It wasn't so long ago that, within Unitarian Universalist circles, our First Principle was taken to mean that nobody should ever be criticized for anything they said or did, because to criticize them would be to deny their inherent worth and dignity. Coupled with our strong tendency toward conflict avoidance, this became a recipe for letting people get away with just about any bad behavior short of anything actually illegal. Freedom of speech was unfettered, no matter who felt hurt or threatened as a result.

Of course, we all know that freedom of speech is not unlimited, the clichéd being that you can't just yell "fire" in a crowded theater because you want to see what happens. Moreover, freedom of speech does not mean that you must be granted an audience. Perhaps most importantly, freedom of speech does not mean freedom from the consequences of your speech.

Thankfully, our understanding of the First Principle has matured since then. We understand that there's a difference between who someone is, and the fact that they have inherent worth and dignity, and how they behave. We understand that there's a difference between treating someone, for better or for worse, on the basis of who they are and on the basis of what they have done. We understand that we each have the right to speak and act as our consciences dictate, but we do not have the right to avoid accountability for our speech and our actions.

Refusing to holding someone accountable for their behavior is, ultimately, not doing them any favors. It's actually unkind. It may be nice, letting someone get away with bad behavior, but it's not kind.

In last Summer's issue of *UU World*, the Rev. Kimberley Debus unpacked the distinction between being nice and being kind:

"Niceness buys into the gospel of comfort and says we don't want to offend. Niceness is complacent. Niceness doesn't make waves and lets people have their own version of truth. Niceness doesn't want to bother anybody. Niceness says comfort is more important than doing what's right.

"Our Principles do not call us to be nice," Debus continues. "We need to shed that veneer of respectability in favor of our faith's true call: to be kind.

"Kindness sees a need and offers to help. Kindness stands up for the person being bullied, and then makes sure they're safe. Kindness goes out of its way. Kindness recycles, kindness holds the door, kindness builds a ramp, and kindness knows its privilege and uses it to build justice. Kindness is not easy. Kindness is sometimes uncomfortable," Debus concludes, "because it requires us to not stay comfortable, to not stay nice and docile."

The Rev. Amy Shaw is even more pointed in her recent blog post entitled “Stop Being So Damn Nice”:

“We tolerated intolerance because it just isn’t polite to riot, and now the highest court in our land has been stained and twisted.

“Stop being so damn nice.

“We tolerate hatred and give it a forum over and over again because we want to ‘hear all of the options’, because ‘it isn’t fair to be one sided.’

“When did hatred and ignorance become positions we want to get out there just in case someone needs to follow his heart and just go with some light genocide?” Shaw asks.

It may not have been *nice* to refuse to serve Sarah Sanders, but holding her accountable for her actions was *kind*, both to her as well as to the thousands of families and individuals that Sanders has helped terrorize.

Unitarian Universalism calls us to be kind. It doesn’t require us to be nice, particularly if that’s just a way to pretend there isn’t something unkind happening. After all, our Second Principle is all about kindness, in terms of “justice, equity and compassion in human relations”. So holding someone accountable for their cruelty, refusing to allow intolerance to win, holding the entire Administration accountable for their inhumanity, that is a much greater kindness to people who have been hurt, the families who have suffered, the children who will never recover from the trauma of their kidnapping at the hands of the US government.

At the end of the day, kindness must become a core value of our society if we’re going to survive. It shouldn’t be such a radical notion to suggest “how great it would be to be kind to people for a change.” What else is there, when it comes to living as imperfect and vulnerable humans in a strange and often unfriendly Universe? When he described the Earth as a “pale blue dot”, remember, cosmologist Carl Sagan noted both the uniqueness and the isolation of our planet; he lamented the arrogance and cruelty that is unnecessarily common in human society; and he warned that “in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.”

Let's be kind to one another, and let's be kind by calling to account those who are abusing our shared humanity. Let's make kindness great again, because it's the only way we're going to save ourselves.

So may it be.