

Sermon: Does Theology Matter?
Rev. Lyn Oglesby, Ph.D.
First Unitarian Church of Baltimore
Association Sunday, Oct. 12, 2008

Last week on my way home on the train, I sat across from a British Jesuit priest, an architectural historian. He had come to Baltimore to see the restoration at the Basilica. As we visited about this and that, I commented, for some reason, on people's fear of death. He smiled, patiently, and allowed as it wasn't something he worried about much. I laughed and said, "Well, I suppose you don't." His theology is very different from mine. We both giggled. And I told him my sermon topic for today was, "Does Theology Matter?"

I reckon it does, although that had not been my premise when I first thought about it. As far as I am concerned, your theology is your business, your journey, your quest, your search for meaning and how you frame your life. Your values and ethics are yours to choose, to find, to discover, to discuss and mull over. What matters to me as far as others are concerned (and me too) is behavior. What we do. How we treat other people. How we interact with the world, beginning with our family and neighbors and the communities and groups and organizations we engage with.

The traditional Christian view is that Jesus made it possible for us to be saved from damnation and an eternal life in hell, and that when we die, if we and the lives we have lived are judged favorably by God, we will join Jesus and our predecessors in heaven for a much more pleasant eternal life.

Buddhist theology doesn't pray to a supernatural Buddha or god, but offers eternal life through following paths of good behaviors. And depending on the moral quality of our behaviors, we can reduce suffering and our next reincarnation will be more desirable – or maybe not.

We are, in the Hindu view, born into a body and existence determined by our past behavior, and by living and performing certain rituals according to the Hindu gods and scriptures, we can improve our lot in the next life – or maybe not.

What is common here is the assumption of an afterlife, and our ability through faith or works in our lifetimes, to secure a positive judgment and hopefully a more pleasant afterlife.

Judgment is ever present in these theologies. Judgment by a superior force or power or god or spirit.

We are moved to be good – to avoid eternal life in hell or endless suffering -- by fear of judgment.

Now, this is not a lecture in comparative world religions, and I'm not going to discuss all the world's religions and their theologies here today.

But in terms of how we decide on our behaviors and moral frameworks, and ethics, our own theology does indeed matter. And our own behavior matters. Are we good when we are good because we fear punishment? Are we good when we are good because we are hoping for a reward in heaven? Are we good when we are good because we feel a responsibility to others and ourselves, without fear or hope for a reward?

Let me be clear, your theology is up to you, and I would not judge anybody's theology or rationale for his behavior. But I confess that I think that behaviors do matter, and that some behaviors are unacceptable, regardless of anyone's theology.

In a recent article by Debra Haffner in the *UU World*, the magazine that all members receive, there is a quote from Robert Coles, the long-time advocate for children. The quote is from his book, "The Moral Intelligence of Children." He says that "what is most important to children is observing the important adults in their lives: 'the witness of our lives, our ways of being with them – all that is taken in slowly, cumulatively, by our own sons and daughters....[I]n the long run of a child's life, the unselfconscious moments that are what we think of simply as the unfolding events of the day and the week turn out to be the really powerful and persuasive times, morally.'

Haffner continues, "How we respond to the "big questions" that children ask is part of their faith development. Authoritarian parents often supply children with the answers, cutting off discussion or telling them what to believe. But "Affirming Parents" try to encourage their child's sense of faith and wonder and understand that these questions are an opportunity for dialogue and discussion, not lectures."

All of us adults, parents and non-parents alike, are role models for children and youth who observe our behavior and are often more likely to remember what they observe us do than what they hear us say.

All theologies, for whatever reason, encourage moral and ethical behavior, and even though there are differences and variations, we can call upon the best of them to guide our own individual behaviors.

George Lakoff makes a similar point in his latest book, "The Political Mind" in which he describes how cognitive science has discovered that the brain processes information and transforms that information into actual physical patterns in our brains. He describes the differences in conservative or authoritarian thinking and progressive or empathetic thinking as physical patterns in our brains, and that we communicate in those patterns without consciously being aware of them. Not only that, he describes how this discovery disproves most of our assumptions and beliefs that come from the "Age of Enlightenment." I will discuss this further on November 2, when the sermon title is "Choices".

The point here is that our patterns of thinking and theological frameworks affect and influence our behaviors. The effects of those patterns and their resultant behaviors are what mostly concern me. I care about the actions, the results, rather than how they got there.

And that is how Unitarian Universalist theology matters to us. We are an inclusive community of people...some of us are believers, some of us are doubters, some of us are non-believers. But our theologies do not separate us. Our larger theology, the meta-theology of Unitarian Universalism, brings us together to promote moral and ethical behavior, to celebrate respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every human being, to celebrate the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and to celebrate the interconnectedness of all life and matter.

Recall: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

Some people complain that these principles constitute a creed, when we are supposed to be a faith of deeds rather than creeds. Some people complain that these principles are too vague, and too numerous, that they are difficult to describe to non-Unitarian Universalists who inquire. Some of you may object one or more of them. Indeed, in our continuously evolving theological journey, the UUA Commission on Appraisal has been reviewing our principles, and has issued a draft or their proposed revision. Further, anyone may submit comments on the draft revision. The UUA’s Seven Principles, which have been embedded in denominational life since their original adoption at the time of the merger in 1961, were modified slightly by General Assemblies in 1984, 1985, and 1995. The question facing the Commission on Appraisal was, basically, whether to retain them or start from scratch. I suggest that we all might review the draft and submit comments as we see fit. You can do it online at www.UUA.org.

As an emerging and evolving community of faith, we continuously search ourselves and our theology to discover and create better ways of thinking and doing and representing our faith. Not only that, our efforts reflect our governance and polity. The Commission on Appraisal has been holding meetings at General Assembly, at theological schools, and has sought input from Unitarian Universalists for well over a year. This is not an authoritarian or top-down process, but a process that respects the opinions, counsel, and wisdom we are all invited to bring to it.

Does theology matter? I’m convinced that it does. I just wish some theologies or denominations didn’t think they had they only lifeboat to heaven and that all the rest of us are doomed. I like our theology that walks the talk of inclusiveness and respect for different ways of thinking. I like our transcendent theology that gives us hope of personal satisfaction

based on individual responsibility and commitment. I like it that no one tells us what we must believe, but encourages moral and ethical behavior and individual growth.

Whatever your theology, wherever you are in your search and journey, there is a spiritual and religious home for you in Unitarian Universalism. A spiritual and religious home that encourages you to seek and learn and grow as a person, and will as a community of faith be there for you and your children as you raise them to make their own choices.

Amen