

An Invitation for UUs to Come out of the Closet

Clay Nelson 18 May © 2014

It is good to be back amongst you. It has been a while, but to breathe the bishop-free, creed-free, doctrine-free air in a Unitarian Universalist church from time-to-time is life giving. It is pretty rare air for a religious community. As some of you may remember from my previous visits I served two large UU churches as an administrator for eight years immediately before coming to New Zealand. By chance, once I got here I fell back into the Anglican Church in which I had been ordained and had served prior to my escape into the UU world. It wouldn't have happened if the Anglican Church had not been St Matthew-in-the-City. Even before I arrived it had a long history of standing up for social justice. It wasn't afraid to get in trouble with those in authority. One's intellect did not have to be suspended in order to worship. It expressed a desire to be radically inclusive. In other words, they were clearly on the road to becoming Unitarians. So, I allowed myself, with some misgivings, to put my collar back on as an Anglican priest. And thus began what has been an extraordinary nine-year pilgrimage as we sought to explore what it means to be a progressive Christian congregation.

Now Progressive Christianity might sound like an oxymoron to you, especially if you associate Christianity with what you hear on Christian radio, unwelcomed knocks on your door from people who want to "save your soul," harsh judgment and exclusion from persons who claim to be loving Christians. If your impression of Christianity is those people who read the Bible literally, deny evolution in favour of creationism, believe it is their divine right to tell us who we can love, and who spend more time trying to predict when Jesus will return to destroy the earth than trying to save it for their grandchildren then you might seriously wonder why you would want to have anything to do with them. If your only experience of Christianity has been with family members or neighbours who smother you with unsolicited religious pamphlets or cheesy forwarded email messages and tell you that they're praying for you for fear you are "going to hell" or being "left behind," you would be justified in raising your eyebrows sceptically at the idea of Christianity, even in its more liberal forms, of being "progressive."

But as surprising as it may be there is a small number of congregations around the world who reject much of what we have been led to believe Christianity is all about. In New Zealand I know of only three that self-identify as progressive: Two Presbyterian churches and St Matthew-in-the-City.

Progressive Christianity finds its roots in the Enlightenment and the thoughts of John Locke, David Hume and others, but in its present form, it is quite young. In the last 20 years scholars have been trying to get past the Christ of the Church's dogma to uncover the man who was Jesus from Nazareth. What did he really say? What did he really do? What was he trying to accomplish? What was the socio-economic-political context in which he lived? Thanks to archaeological findings, literary analysis, the discovery of non-biblical documents contemporary to the New Testament, and historical criticism we've learned quite a bit. That was good but what was even better was these scholars intentionally chose to look at the evidence without the benefit of church creeds, doctrines and dogmas as their filter. What we are beginning to get is a

picture of the real Jesus, not one Photoshopped by the Church's theological and political agenda.

For many of us who have been on this path for awhile it has emboldened us to move beyond church teachings to share this new vision of Jesus and to explore what he might have expected of those following in his path. What this has meant for me was trying to shape St Matthew's into a place Jesus wouldn't be ashamed to be found at worship. This is not a path without risk. At least twice the bishop has had demands made of him to put me on trial for heresy.

I began the journey eight years ago preaching publicly what I'd believed for many years, that Jesus was just a man. If he was more than that he was of no bloody use to me as I tried to find ways to reach my full human potential. I tried to make the point that what is important is not whether or not he was God but whether we could experience God through following in his way.

Not long after that I ventured into the mystery Christians call the Trinity, denouncing it as a dangerous doctrine that distracts us from the mission to which we are called, and worse, invites us to form a creed around it. Creeds of any kind are antithetical to radical inclusiveness. By design they demand groupthink and create a line between those who are inside and those who are outside the community. Not long after, the creed disappeared from St Matthew's worship service. It was amusing that no one missed it until I pointed it out a few months later that it was gone and why.

My colleague and I continued to push the established boundaries of orthodoxy, teaching that the Bible, as rich a source as it is, is a human creation, not a divine one and not the only one we should pay attention to. That it must always be read knowing it to be as fallible as the humans who wrote and interpreted it. It does not trump our individual authority to state what we believe based on our personal experience. No longer did we proclaim, "This is the Word of God" after the Sunday reading, but rather, "Hear what the Spirit may be saying to the Church."

What we discovered committing ourselves to the progressive path, is it keeps asking new questions that lead us to new places when we stop using stock answers provided by our spiritual ancestors. Ultimately it led us to question our language about God, and to think about what God was for us. We came to a non-theistic understanding of what the word means. Our experience was that whatever the word might mean to others, it did not mean an old man in a three-part cosmos intervening whenever he felt like it in human affairs. For me it became a metaphor for how I experienced the divine. God is not love, but loving wastefully. God is not life, but living exuberantly. God is not a being, but being fully human.

When our understanding of God shifts it changes everything.

- The line between holy and sacred disappears. All creation is sacred to be served and protected.
- All roads that lead us to oneness with God become sacred. Christian triumphalism withers away. All our fellow pilgrims become our holy companions, no matter what faith or non-faith pathway they walk.

- Language to worship that new understanding of God loses its patriarchal and hierarchical overtones. Words like sin, salvation, and eternal life either lose their former meaning or disappear.
- Right action becomes the mark of who we are, not right belief. Seeking Social Justice becomes our obligation.
- Transformation of the world and our selves becomes our mission. Peace and Justice, our desired outcomes.

The irony for me is that after nine years on this progressive Christian journey St Matt's has come a long way. But as I look around I discover that Unitarians Universalists are already here. You gather already around seven principles that embrace where our journey has brought us.

While sharing our Judeo-Christian origins you began challenging the doctrines and dogmas at least six centuries earlier, so I guess it is not surprising that you got here first. But here is not a destination, just another place in the journey. UUs and progressive Christians have a long way to go in a world desperate for transformation.

Both face one big challenge. Most of the world doesn't know there are Unitarian Universalists or progressive Christians in it or they reject us with everything else that smacks of religion or they have a totally wrong impression of who we are. How many people have you met thought you were Moonies, members of the Unification Church? But that said, there are lots of people who want to know more.

When St Matthew's got noticed because of the Joseph and Mary billboard I put up, millions around the world responded. Yes, many responded with hostility, but at least as many with interest. When our billboard with Mary looking at the results of her home pregnancy test kit went up a couple of years later it had a reach of 12 million people on Facebook and was discussed by Whoopi Goldberg and Barbara Walters on The View for 10 minutes.

And there is good news for the Unitarian Universalists as well. There is a poll on our website asking visitors with which faith group they identify. Knowing many might not know, I put up a link to Beliefnet.com that asks a series of questions about your beliefs and then tells you what per cent of agreement you have with all of the world's faith groups. I have been taking it periodically for over 15 years and I consistently come out 100% UU. Apparently so have a lot of other people. The last time I looked, over 15,000 people had taken the poll and 50% identified with Unitarian Universalism.

Looking at that figure more closely, about half of the respondents are from New Zealand. I'm pretty sure that those 3200 Kiwis are not currently members of UU fellowships. When you consider that over 50% of New Zealanders don't identify with any faith group, I suspect that many of those two million people have never taken the poll. If they did they would discover that the seven principles UU's uphold would resonate for them as well. I encourage you to come out of the closet and make your presence known. The world needs you.

In an increasingly conservative world as reflected by the conservative governments in New Zealand, Canada, Australia, UK and the ability of conservatives in the States to

stymy almost every progressive initiative President Obama has proposed, it is clear a loud progressive voice is needed from Unitarians. The values you hold in common with Progressive Christians are about making this world a more just and compassionate one for everyone. As individuals it is hard to be heard, but as a faith community giving one another mutual support we can make our presence felt.

There is one more reason I hope UUs will make their presence felt. It is more personal.

Just as there is a conservative zeitgeist sweeping the political world, it is being felt in religious institutions as well. In 1925, Kirsopp Lake, a New Testament scholar wrote that denominational divisions had lost their relevance and had been replaced by three new streams that divided Protestants into Experimentalists, Institutionalists, and Fundamentalists. He predicted the Fundamentalists will eventually triumph. They will drive out the Experimentalists with the help of the Institutionalists and then reabsorb the Institutionalists who, under pressure, will become more orthodox. The church will shrink from left to right. This trend is clearly evident in New Zealand churches.

This week we got a clear picture of the plight of being a progressive Christian in the Anglican denomination. The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia met. Under consideration was the full inclusion of the LGBTI community in the life of the church. The best they could come up with was, with a bishop's permission, a priest could pseudo-bless the civil marriage of a same-sex couple. In four years they may get to do it legally. They failed to address the ordination of gay and lesbian people. The idea of marrying a same-sex couple is still not on the table.

On a local level, during the recent interim between St Matt's past and present Vicar, diocesan pressure was brought to bear to change aspects of our worship service, including the reintroduction of a creed. It is a reminder to me that progressive Christians in an Anglican context can go only as far the bishop can tolerate deviance from the norm. The degree of tolerance of course varies with the bishop.

The following is a personal statement by a priest in the Church of England with progressive Christian beliefs who was being pressured to conform by his bishop to traditional norms. David Keighley speaks for many who feel compelled to follow this path.

LEAVING HOME

I'm off!

I must leave the political and ethical compromises that have corrupted the faith of my Jesus.

I must leave the stifling theology, the patriarchal structures.

I must leave the enduring prejudices based on our God-given humanity, the colour of my skin, my gender or how my sexual orientation is practiced.

I must leave the mentality that encourages anyone to think that our doctrines are unchangeable.

I must leave the belief of those who insist that our sacred texts are without error.
I must leave the God of miracle and magic.
I must leave the promises of certainty, the illusion of possessing the true faith.
I must leave behind the claims of being the recipient of an unchallengeable revelation.
I must leave the neurotic religious desire to know that I am right, and to play at being God.
I must leave the claim that every other pathway to God is second-rate, that fellow Hindu searchers in India, Buddhists in China and Tibet, Muslims in the Middle East and the Jews of Israel are inadequate.
I must leave the pathway that tells me that all other directions will get me lost.
I must leave the certain claim that my Jesus is the only way to God for everyone.
I must leave the ultimate act of human folly that says it is.
I must leave the Church, my home.
I must leave behind my familiar creeds and faith-symbols.
I can no longer stay in an unliveable place.
I must move to a place where I can once again sing the Lord's song.
I must move to where my faith-tradition can be revived and live on.
I must move to a place where children don't tell me what I believe is unbelievable but tell me they can believe what I believe.
I must move to a place where they are not playing at moving the deck chairs on the decks of an ecclesiastical Titanic.
I can never leave the God experience.
I can never walk away from the doorway into the divine that I believe I have found in the one I call the Christ.
I must move to dangerous and religiously threatening places.
I must move to where there is no theism, but still God.
I'm off! But to where, God only knows.

I don't know where David went, but I hope he found some UUs out of the closet. I know he would feel welcomed. And there he could marry same-sex couples.