

THOU SHALT HOLD YOUR IDEAS, BELIEFS, AND CONVICTIONS HUMBLY AND GENTLY

Sermon II in the Year Long Series: “**10 Commandments for the 21st Century**”

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

UU FVB Sunday, October 24, 2010

I have been preaching from this pulpit now for more than two months... and just in case there is any lingering doubt in any of your minds, I wanted to begin this morning by confessing to you something that I suspect is rather obvious by now. **Your new minister is a proud, dyed-in-the-wool, card-carrying, left-leaning, progressive liberal!** Following in the tradition of my parents (who were passionate and engaged liberals) when it comes to almost any economic, social, cultural or political issue this nation faces, I can be found way out on the progressive/liberal end of the continuum...that's just the way I see the world, and dream for the human future.

Yet despite this fact (and here comes my second early confession of the morning) many evenings I enjoy watching (at least for a few minutes!...Dear Lord, forgive me my sins!) I enjoy watching a little of fiercely conservative news commentator Bill O'Reilly on the Fox News Channel! I can't really explain this irrational, counter-intuitive behavior, other than to say I enjoy his energy as an entertainer, and (on the more serious side) as a liberal I want to keep abreast of what conservative commentators (like O'Reilly) are saying and thinking – this also explains why I often listen to the Rush Limbaugh radio program when I am on long car trips!

Anyway...despite my passionate liberal leanings, I enjoy watching and listening Bill O'Reilly. But one thing that forlorns and disheartens me about him (as a public personality) is his tendency (not expressed every night, and not in every segment of the show... but with quite a bit of predictable regularity) his tendency to be **an intellectual bully**. Bill O'Reilly can be arrogantly dismissive of people who see the world and politics differently than he does. As evidence of this, I offer the title of his latest best-selling book...does anyone know the title?... *[SOMEONE FROM THE CONGREGATION OFFERS THE RIGHT ANSWER]*

Right...**“PINHEADS AND PATRIOTS”**...his new book summarily dismisses all liberals and progressives (with whom he disagrees) as ‘PINHEADS’ and everyone who agrees with his conservative opinions as “PATRIOTS.” As a liberal, I can't tell you how relieved I am that Bill O'Reilly has unmasked me (and everyone who even vaguely thinks like me) as AN UNPATRIOTIC PINHEAD incapable of clear and right American thinking!

Back in the Summer – when I began giving shape to this year-long sermon series on **“10 Commandments for the 21st Century”** – and as you can see I have reprinted for your consideration this morning the full list of both the original 10 Commandments found in ancient Jewish scriptures, and the new 10 which I am proposing for your and humanity's consideration – back in the summer when I began this sermon series project, it seemed obvious to me that the commandment I want to explore today – **“Thou Shalt Hold Your Ideas, Beliefs and Convictions Humbly and Gently”** – **MUST** be included.

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The point of this sermon series is to propose a set of **BEHAVIORAL RULES** for humanity (both on the **MICRO** level of our individual, personal lives...and on the **MACRO** level of our lives as members of society and the global community) to propose a set of behavioral rules for humanity which – if followed – would lead to a more just, humane, compassionate and civilized world. The commandment “***Thou shalt hold your ideas, beliefs and convictions humbly and gently***” is so crucial in human affairs. I am passionately persuaded that if you look around the totality of the human landscape, **one of the things that perniciously contributes to people harming and diminishing one another is that many human beings wield their ideas, beliefs, and convictions as swords and cudgels (rather than of instruments of engagement and interaction.** What a different world it would be if everyone (in our nation, indeed on our planet) held their ideas, beliefs and convictions the way Unitarian Universalists are **SUPPOSED** to – that being respectfully, humbly, thoughtfully and gently.

As I observe the diverse dramas and difficulties of “the human condition” (and again, I mean this on all levels of human existence and interaction ranging from the personal to the global) I believe that one of **the spiritual and emotional ad political commodities** we homo sapiens need **much more of** (in our complex interactions with one another) is **GENUINE TOLERANCE AND RESPECT FOR HUMAN DIFFERENCE**. Tolerance (first and precious) for our racial, cultural, affectional and religious differences... **AND** tolerance (RETURNING TO TODAY'S SPECIFIC TOPIC) for one another's widely varying (and often contradictory) ideas, beliefs and convictions.

Perhaps, indeed, “**TOLERANCE**” is **too limited or timid a word** to describe the quality which human beings (if we are to make real progress on this planet) must learn to hold and express for one another. Maybe what we really need to do (when we bump up against one another's divergent thoughts and opinions) is to genuinely “**WELCOME,**” “**EMBRACE,**” “**RESPECT**” and even “**CHERISH**” one another's ideas, beliefs and convictions. Imagine (if you can) a world where human beings everywhere (before they expressed their own opinions) **welcomed, embraced, respected and cherished** one another's intellectual and thought differences – including, of course, in the all-important spheres of religious and political ideas and beliefs. If we were to achieve something akin to this, our world would indeed be a peaceable and humane kingdom hardly recognizable by today's conflicted and violent standards.

Over the long, tortured course of human history (as you all too sadly know) there are countless, tragic examples of people slaying, oppressing or diminishing one another all in the name of their firmly held personal ideas, beliefs and convictions. Over recent decades, we have all tragically witnessed genocide in places like

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Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and the Sudan...where groups of human beings have slaughtered other human beings, all because of racial, cultural, religious (and intellectual!) differences. Imagine a world where – upon encountering ideas, beliefs, and convictions different from their own – human beings everywhere paused...listened...asked sincere questions...and respectfully welcomed perspectives and conclusions different from their own...just imagine.

Now...I think I know what many of you are already thinking. **“Has Scott gone off the utopian deep end this morning? I know most Unitarian Universalist clergy are optimists, but does he really think that most human beings (wired as they are in primitive simplicity of thought and action, and so frequently mired in their own myopic visions of reality) does my minister actually believe people are capable of learning to hold their own ideas, beliefs, and convictions humbly and gently – even as they truly welcome, embrace, and respect thinking significantly different from their own”?** To ask for such TOLERANCE AND LARGESS of human persons and societies (in general) is to ask too much. Intolerance of beliefs and ideas radically different from your own [I suspect many of you have already concluded] is built right into our primitive human nature...surely to ask this intellectual largess and gentleness of human individuals and groups IS TO EXPECT TOO MUCH!”

Well...Indeed...I must confess (dear friends) that I will be the last one in this room this morning to suggest that this bold and idealistic commandment for the 21st Century (which I propose for your and humanity’s consideration) will be an easy one for us homo sapiens (us now-upright-critters-of- the-ancient- Savannah) to practice. There is – I think – a natural intellectual intolerance wired right into the human psyche and brain...that makes it hard for us (after we have thought things through, reached our own conclusions and dug a “psychological foxhole” around our convictions – as humans are wont to do) it is hard for us to embrace (or even tolerate) thinking that is foreign (or even significantly different) from our own.

Let me be the first to crawl into the confession booth this morning. I will honestly admit (from this pulpit this morning) that (like all human beings) I occasionally fall victim myself to this natural intellectual intolerance, for every now and again I find myself having little or no patience or respect for ideas and beliefs radically different from my own most deeply and passionately held perspectives. Just two weeks ago, for example – when I delivered my rather emphatic sermon about the dangers of global warming and environmental destruction entitled **“We All Live Downstream”** – in a fit of passion I called the thinking of those who deny the reality of global warming **“Idiotic”** and **“foolish”**...I might as well have called them “pinheads,” (Bill O’Reilly!). Two weeks ago – right here, in public, for all of you to see – I failed to honor the

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wisdom of my own second commandment for the 21st Century...on that occasion – if just for a moment – I failed to hold my own ideas, beliefs and convictions” gently and humbly,”

Let me give just one more personal example of how hard I find all of this. Back in Wisconsin (where I grew up as a part of a close and caring extended family) I have several dear cousins (all more or less my age) who have as adults become what I will call “**fierce and unwavering Christian Fundamentalists.**” Now, as a dyed-in-the-wool religious liberal, I will admit to you that (at the basest level of my intellectual and spiritual being) I tend to have very little patience and/or enthusiasm for their fundamentalist religious beliefs and ideas – which are so radically different and in many cases antithetical from my own. So the last thing I want to do at family gatherings (honestly) is openly and respectfully listen to (or seriously consider) their ideas about God, creation, humanity and morality (including such issues as abortion, homosexuality, taxation, education, and guns – the last time I was home for a family gathering, one of my cousin’s son’s had a huge handgun holstered on his hip!).

Even though as a minister I am [quote-unquote] “**in the business**” of regularly discussing divergent religious ideas (and generally really enjoying such dialogue and interchange), I honestly have almost no tolerance for engaging the narrow, fundamentalist thinking of these cousins of mine – who, again, are dear and wonderful members of my family whom I otherwise enjoy and respect. I must honestly tell you that their fundamentalist religious ideas seem **so profoundly primitive, illogical, destructive and wrong** to me it’s almost impossible for me (even as a usually open Unitarian Universalist) to welcome, engage or respect these ideas, convictions and beliefs. And so when I am in their company – again, otherwise genuinely enjoying them as persons – I scrupulously avoid any religious or ethical discussions...because I know if I go there, I will end up either shutting down entirely (or saying things I will later regret).

Now...this is hard for me (as a Unitarian Universalist) to admit, for TOLERANCE and DIALOGUE and RESPECT AND OPENNESS TOWARD THE IDEAS AND BELIEFS OF OTHERS are supposedly an operating hallmark of our liberal religion. But even though I consider myself a “GOOD” Unitarian Universalist, I have found that when it comes to certain religious belief THERE ARE **DEFINATE LIMITS** TO MY TOLERANCE AND OPENNESS TO IDEAS THAT DIFFER RADICALLY FROM MY OWN. I’m not saying I’m proud of this limitation (this lack of genuine tolerance) in my life, but it is powerfully there...and this reality challenges me regularly as a Unitarian Universalist committed to “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning” – our fourth principle that we print right here in our order of service each and every Sunday.

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And my guess (dear friends...and here is where – as the old Southern Baptist expression goes – I’m about to cross over **“from preachin’ to meddlin’!”**) my guess is that **I am not the only one** in this room this morning who (if we are honest with ourselves) has (at least pockets) of INTELLECTUAL INTOLERANCE for ideas and beliefs (be they religious, social, ethical or political) that are different from our own. Again...it is hard for **any of us** (both in our individual lives and in our lives in groups and communities) to truly **welcome, respect and embrace** ideas, beliefs and convictions that are radically different (or painfully contradictory) from our own.

Look...let’s face it...**we each like the way we think and reason!** Our personal conclusions about life and humanity make **perfect and solid sense** to us...and we’re pretty certain our discernment is right up there with the best of them! We naturally **like the way our own minds work**, and find it hard to believe that (when all is said and done) other (contradictory) thinking could be equally valid. Look, I’ve already confessed a couple examples of my own dismissal of ideas that are substantively different from my own...it’s time for you to be honest with yourselves as well! Is there a soul in this room right now who doesn’t have a measure of intellectual intolerance rattling around in their psyches??

I will say more about this later in the sermon, dear friends, but for now let me go on record with asserting that there is probably a measure of **this natural intellectual intolerance resident in you...whether you label yourself “CONSERVATIVE” or “LIBERAL” or something in-between.** I think it is indisputable (and argue with my idea later if you like) I think it is indisputable that a part of being a human being is to fall victim to frequently being naturally intolerant to thinking substantially different from your own. But acknowledging this, dear liberal friends, doesn’t let us off the hook! We can do better!

Look...our religion, Unitarian Universalism – intuitively understanding this natural human weakness and propensity toward closed and myopic thinking – has always challenged human persons and society to a higher, more tolerant and open and respectful standard. If you look at the principles of our faith (which we proudly re-print each Sunday on the back page of the order of service) you will notice that several of them call us to greater tolerance, respect, consideration and inclusiveness toward thinking that is unlike (or foreign to) our own.

First, as I have already mentioned this morning, there is the fourth principle **“The free and responsible search for truth and meaning,”** (which challenges us always to open our minds and consider new, different, or divergent thinking)...and then there is

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our first principle celebrating “**The inherent worth and dignity of every person,**” (including, of course, those persons holding ideas, convictions and beliefs different – even radically different – from our own)...and then the third principle “**Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth,**” (in all our natural diversity here at UUFVB and beyond)...and (lastly, found in the fourth principle) our firm UU commitment to “**The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process**” (which requires us – in the communities in which we live and move and have our being – to respectfully engage human diversity and disagreements). Here in this liberal congregation we pride ourselves on our theological, ethical and spiritual diversity, we describe ourselves as a “free church” which welcomes differing beliefs and perspectives...for centuries now and it is often affirmed (out loud) in Unitarian Universalist congregations that [quote] “**We need not think alike to love alike.**”

In the year 1822, a conservative, puritan religious leader in the city of Worcester, Massachusetts (today we would call him a fundamentalist Christian), described the Second Parish (Unitarian) – upon reading some sermons from its minister the Rev. Aaron Bancroft which celebrated “**free inquiry**” and “**theological diversity**” – he described the congregation as [quote, unquote] “**A Promiscuous Assembly.**” This was NOT, I assure you, a reference to the sexual habits of the members of the congregation (19th Century Unitarians were as chaste and conservative when it came to sex as any Puritan ever was!) but rather calling them “**A Promiscuous Assembly**” was an accusation that the free-thinking Unitarians of Worcester did not all conform to “**One Saving Doctrine.**”

Listen to the words of Rev. Bancroft who (true to our open intellectual heritage) welcomed diversity of belief and conviction in the congregation, “**The natural understandings of men differ, their education is dissimilar, and the course of life is various. These circumstances lead to different views of religion and all subjects. A truth that is plain and evident to [one] man...may be unintelligible [to another]...What you deem to be a mere rite of religion, your neighbor may hold as a fundamental principle of the gospel. No one [Bancroft concluded] ought to adopt the opinion of another against the dictates of his own mind.”**

This tolerance of religious difference led the Unitarians (and the Universalists) of early New England to be labeled as blasphemous heretics for not precisely towing the Puritan line!

Today, almost 200 years later, Unitarian Universalist congregations aspire to the same “**promiscuous**” (and I would add **precious**) openness to a diversity of perspective and belief. Here in this free religious community (if we are true to our open intellectual and spiritual heritage as Unitarian Universalists) we should constantly

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and continuously be about GENUINE, OPEN AND DEEP DIALOGUE about and between all our various ideas, beliefs and convictions – both within the congregation itself, and in our conversations with the wider community as well. Here in this congregation, **how well and respectfully we listen and learn from one another** (no matter what the issues or decision before us) is of ultimate importance. If we are true to our heritage of reason and tolerance, Unitarian Universalist congregations should be places of **lively and respectful dialogue and inquiry** where all perspectives and views are seriously engaged...including those conservative ideas which run contrary to our liberal and progressive leaning...and more on this crucial point next week, dear friends, when we reflect together on what is at stake in the upcoming national election!

Now...let's dig a little deeper, shall we? I have been a Unitarian Universalist minister for almost 4 decades now, and have served not only the national movement as a whole – when I was a denominational executive up at headquarters in Boston – but four diverse congregations up and down the Atlantic seaboard as well. In every one of these professional settings, I have experienced Unitarian Universalists – both individually and corporately **regularly falling short** of our professed commitment to intellectual and spiritual tolerance and openness. Again and again (over the course of my ministerial career) I have witnessed members of the congregations I have served (God knows usually without meaning to) be arrogantly dismissive of minority (or deeply divergent) viewpoints in our midst. It has been my experience that in our UU congregations, we pay a lot of **quick and easy "lip service"** to the affirmation that in our liberal religious communities all ideas and perspectives are welcomed, engaged and respected...but then (again, often unconsciously and without malice or forethought) **ride rough shod** over ideas and beliefs (**usually conservative ones!**) which differ from the apparent liberal norm of this community.

Do you want some examples? One member of the last congregation I served in Bethesda, Maryland, had some real reservations about the moral rightness of abortion, which she tentatively expressed in a coffee hour conversation with another member. Much to her disappointment what she got back was, **"Well, everybody in this congregation is pro-choice, you must not belong here if you believe in any way limiting a woman's right to choose!"** Although she hung in there with the congregation, she was deeply troubled and hurt by what she rightly perceived as her being summarily dismissed and excluded by another Unitarian Universalist. Another example... not a single election cycle passed (in that congregation in the enlightened Washington suburbs) without several of the (generally quiet and well-mannered) Republican (and fiscally and socially conservative) members reporting to me their feeling dismissed, disregarded or excluded by hearing some members proclaim (sometimes out loud in public settings) that **"Everybody in this congregation votes**

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progressive and Democratic," or **"Of course everybody here will be voting the same way."** Let me assure you friends, everybody (in that congregation in Bethesda, or right here at UUFVB on the Treasure Coast, for that matter) does **NOT** vote (or think, or believe) the same way – not about the various candidates seeking governmental office...nor about what justice should look like in the Middle East...nor about whether Florida should spend billions restoring the Everglades...nor about whether U.S. troops should be immediately withdrawn from Afghanistan...nor about whether or not Indian River County should cut lifeguards or "outsource" trash pickup.

Although it must be frankly acknowledged that "liberal" and "progressive" thinking does predominate here in this (as in every) Unitarian Universalist congregation, there is always (on any topic or issue) a wide divergence of belief, conviction and thinking. And it is our duty here in this UU congregation (I would remind you) not just to **tolerate** minority views, but to always seek to **actively honor and respect** the wide and interesting spectrum of perspective found in this living, breathing community of free thinkers. **When we are at our Unitarian Universalist best, dear friends, we create (here in this respectful, free thinking community) abundant opportunities for people to come together and genuinely engage and discuss the controversial issues and ideas of our time...engage and discuss them in respectful ways that deepen the understanding and thoughtfulness of all.**

Quaker theologian and social philosopher Parker Palmer describes (better than most) the **open and humble ideal** we aspire to our UU congregations:

How [he writes] do we change [the deeply imbedded human habit] of fixing, saving, advising, and setting each other straight?...What does it mean to "SPEAK OUR OWN TRUTH" in a circle of trust? It always takes the same form: we speak FROM our own center to the center of the circle – to the receptive heart of the communal space – where what we say will be held attentively and respectfully. This way of speaking differs markedly from everyday conversations in which we speak FROM our own intellect or ego directly TO the intellect or ego of someone on whom we hope to have an impact. Everyday speech is "INSTRUMENTAL" rather than "EXPRESSIVE," intended to achieve a goal rather than simply to tell one's own truth. When we speak instrumentally, we try to influence the listener by informing or affirming or rebuking or making common cause. But when we speak expressively, we speak to express the truth within us, honoring the inner teacher by letting it know that we are attending to its voice. Our purpose [in expressive speech] is **NOT to teach anyone anything but to give the inner teacher a chance to teach us...How we LISTEN in a circle of trust is as important as how we speak...And then Palmer concludes...In a circle of trust,**

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we...dwell in the truth by dwelling IN the conversation. In such a circle our differences are not ignored, but neither are they confronted in combat. Instead they are laid out clearly and respectfully alongside each other. In such a circle, we speak and hear diverse truths in ways that keep us from ignoring one another AND from getting into verbal shootouts – ways that allow us to grow together toward a larger, emergent truth that reveals how much we hold in common.

All this is my way of reminding you – dear friends – that when we are at our best here at UUFVB, we create an atmosphere here where everyone is invited (genuinely invited through this vehicle of respectful and expressive speech which Palmer so adeptly describes) to humbly and gently share their ideas, beliefs and convictions, and (at the same time and in equal measure) truly hear the ideas, beliefs and convictions of others, with the goal (of course) of the whole community respectfully moving together toward deeper understanding and higher (emergent) truth. It would be my heartfelt hope that together (over the coming months and years) that (fully aware of that natural intellectual intolerance that is – at least occasionally – resident within each one of us) that we shape UUFVB into the kind of open and inclusive community of respectful dialogue and engagement which will model for the wider community and world the power and beauty and decency of a simple commandment for the 21st Century: ***"Thou Shalt Hold Your Ideas, Beliefs, and convictions Humbly and Gently."***

AMEN.