

“HERETICS & MARTYRS”

2-7-10

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YOU MAY THINK ME AN UNLIKELY RELIGIOUS RABBLE ROUSER – NOT ONE TO BE LABELED EITHER A HERETIC OR A MARTYR, BUT I THINK IT IS JUST MY RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL RABBLE ROUSER SIDE THAT ATTRACTED ME TO UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM. IT WAS NOT THAT I DIDN’T LIKE RELIGION CLASS – I DID ACTUALLY. I HAD AN HOUR OF “OFFICIAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION” EVERY DAY FOR 12 YEARS. UNOFFICIALLY, THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF CATHOLICISM ALSO COVERED MOST OF MY SCHOOL DAY. WE PRAYED AT THE BEGINNING OF THE DAY AND BEFORE EACH CLASS. WE PRAYED BEFORE LUNCH AND BEFORE SPORTING EVENTS. WE WERE REQUIRED TO ATTEND MASS EVERY MORNING BEFORE SCHOOL STARTED AT LEAST HALF OF THE SCHOOL YEAR. AND, OF COURSE WE FOLLOWED UP OUR WEEKDAY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION WITH CONFESSION ON SATURDAYS AND MASS ON SUNDAYS. BY THE EIGHTH GRADE I WAS QUITE WELL VERSED IN THE PEOPLE WHO WERE CONSIDERED HERETICS AND MARTYRS – IT WASN’T THAT DIFFICULT TO REMEMBER. IF YOU WERE AGAINST THE TEACHINGS OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH YOU WERE A HERETIC – IF YOU WERE WILLING TO GIVE YOUR LIFE FOR THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH YOU WERE A MARTYR. I HAVE TO ADMIT THAT I DIDN’T THINK MARTYRDOM WAS IN MY FUTURE – I WASN’T THAT BRAVE AND MY CONVICTION THAT THE CATHOLIC CHURCH WAS 100% RIGHT IN ALL MATTERS OF FAITH WASN’T THAT STRONG. BUT I GUESS I WAS – EVEN WAY BACK THEN – SOMETHING OF A MINOR HERETIC. I WAS THE ANNOYING KID IN CLASS THAT HAD DIFFICULTY WITH ISSUES OF “FAITH.” I WANTED ANSWERS – CONCRETE, VERIFIABLE ANSWERS – NOT FLIMFLAM. EVEN AS EARLY AS SECOND GRADE, THE YEAR WE MADE OUR FIRST HOLY COMMUNION, I WAS STRUGGLING WITH CHURCH DOCTRINE. THAT YEAR, A FELLOW CLASSMATE’S FATHER COMMITTED SUICIDE BY HANGING HIMSELF IN THEIR BACKYARD. IT WAS A TRAGEDY OF THE HIGHEST ORDER FOR THAT FAMILY. OUR CLASS WAS CAUTIONED AGAINST DISCUSSING THE DEATH WITH OUR CLASSMATE BECAUSE THEIR FATHER HAD COMMITTED A MORTAL SIN AND WOULD NOT BE HAVING A FUNERAL MASS BECAUSE SUICIDES WERE NOT ALLOWED TO BE BURIED IN THE CHURCH. THIS FAMILY, MOTHER AND THREE SMALL CHILDREN, WERE LEFT TO FIGURE OUT

WHAT TO DO ON THEIR OWN AND RECEIVED NO ASSISTANCE FROM OUR CHURCH. THEY WERE TREATED LIKE “UNTOUCHABLES” BECAUSE OF THE DESPERATE ACT OF THEIR FATHER. A FEW YEARS LATER THE MOTHER REMARRIED AND HER CHILDREN TOOK THE NAME OF HER NEW HUSBAND BECAUSE EVEN THEIR NAME HAD BEEN STIGMATIZED. THEY CONTINUED TO ATTEND THE CHURCH BUT WERE OSTRACIZED IN WAYS THAT MAKE ME FEEL ASHAMED TO THIS VERY DAY. I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD WHEN THIS HAPPENED AND READILY ADMIT THAT I JUST WENT ALONG WITH THE DESPICABLE BEHAVIOR OF OUR CHURCH – BUT I TUCKED THAT INCIDENT AWAY AND IT BECAME FODDER FOR MY HERETICAL BEHAVIOR IN THE FUTURE. BY FOURTH GRADE I WAS EXHIBITING ALL THE CLASSIC SIGNS OF A PERSON WHOSE FAITH WAS IN QUESTION. I WAS THE THORN IN THE SIDE OF EVERY RELIGION TEACHER I WAS TO HAVE FOR THE NEXT EIGHT YEARS. DURING A SEX EDUCATION CLASS IN THE 10TH GRADE, THE GIRLS WERE TOLD THAT WE HAD BEEN THE SOURCE OF ALL EVIL IN THE WORLD SINCE ADAM & EVE – THIS NEWS CAUSED ME TO LAUGH OUT LOUD. NOT ONLY WAS IT A LAME SEX ED CLASS – BUT, REALLY, LAYING ALL THE BLAME ON WOMEN FOR ALL EVIL – THAT WAS TOO MUCH. HERETIC I BECAME – AND HERETIC I HAVE STAYED. TRUTH IS, I LIKE BEING A HERETIC, IT HAS GIVEN ME THE FREEDOM TO EXPLORE OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS, TO DECIDE FOR MYSELF WHAT IS ETHICAL AND MORAL BEHAVIOR AND BE MUCH MORE RESPONSIBLE FOR MY OWN DESTINY. AND EVEN MORE SIGNIFICANTLY MY HERETICAL LEANINGS HAVE GIVEN ME AN AWARENESS OF MY POLITICAL POWER, EXPANDING MY UNDERSTANDING OF INJUSTICE TO BEAR FOR THE BENEFIT OF THOSE WITH LESS VOICE, LESS POWER AND LESS PRIVILEGE. IN OTHER WORDS, I GREW UP. I THREW OFF THE SHACKLES OF A THEOLOGY THAT WANTED TO RESTRICT MY GROWTH AS AN INDEPENDENT FREE THINKER. I WAS AGAINST THE VIET NAM WAR, I SUPPORTED THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, I JOINED THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN, I BECAME A CARD CARRYING MEMBER OF THE ACLU AND IN 2000 WENT TO WASHINGTON TO ATTEND THE MILLION MOM MARCH LENDING MY SUPPORT FOR BETTER GUN CONTROL. I’VE BEEN A LONG TIME MEMBER OF PLANNED PARENTHOOD AND A PRO-CHOICE ADVOCATE FOR YEARS. AND I READILY ACKNOWLEDGE THAT I AM PROBABLY THE LEAST SOCIAL JUSTICE ORIENTED AND ACTIVE MINISTERS IN THE UU MOVEMENT THAT I KNOW. BUT I DO MY BEST – AND I’M PROUD TO BE ASSOCIATED

WITH A RELIGIOUS TRADITION THAT HOLDS IN GREAT ESTEEM BOTH THEIR HERETICS AND THEIR MARTYRS.

IN THE VERY EARLY CENTURIES OF CHRISTIANITY, CITING THE CHURCH COUNCIL CONDEMNATION OF THE CONCEPT OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION AS HERESY, THE TIMELINE FOR UNITARIANISM BEGAN. SKIPPING FORWARD ABOUT A THOUSAND YEARS WE COME ACROSS THE BIRTH, LIFE AND DEATH OF MICHAEL SERVETUS, THE SPANISH PHYSICIAN THEOLOGIAN THAT MISS KATHY TOLD US ABOUT THIS MORNING. HE WAS THE FIRST TO ACCURATELY DESCRIBE THE PULMONARY CIRCULATORY SYSTEM – UNFORTUNATELY THIS WAS NOT ENOUGH TO SAVE HIM FROM BEING BURNED AT THE STAKE FOR HIS RELIGIOUS VIEWS. ANOTHER SEVERAL HUNDRED YEARS BRINGS US TO THE MIDDLE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND THE DEATHS OF TWO UNITARIANS, JAMES REEB AND VIOLA LIUZZO IN SELMA, ALABAMA. IN BETWEEN WE FIND REFERENCES TO SCORES OF MEN AND WOMEN, WHO, IF NOT EXACTLY HERETICS AND MARTYRS, NEVERTHELESS EMBODIED THE SPIRIT, COURAGE AND FAITH OF THOSE WHO ACTUALLY WERE CONDEMNED AND DIED FOR THEIR CONVICTIONS. LONG BEFORE THERE WAS A UNITARIAN CHURCH, THE FIRST TO DIE IN THE NAME OF THE BELIEF IN THE UNITY OF GOD AND THE HUMANITY OF JESUS WAS A WOMAN, KATHERINE WEIGEL (VOGEL) OF KRAKOW, POLAND. IN 1529 SHE WAS ACCUSED OF HERESY AND FOR TEN YEARS SHE DEFENDED HER BELIEFS AND REFUSED TO RETRACT HER STATEMENTS. ON APRIL 19, 1539, AT THE AGE OF 80, SHE WAS BURNED AT THE STAKE IN THE KRAKOW MARKETPLACE. SIXTY YEARS LATER, ALSO IN KRAKOW, AN ELDERLY ITALIAN BORN THEOLOGIAN AND WRITER WAS BRANDED A HERETIC FOR HIS UNITARIANISM, DRAGGED FROM HIS SICK BED AND FORCED TO WATCH A MOB BURN HIS PAPERS AND BOOKS. HE ESCAPED WITH HIS LIFE WHEN UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS WHISKED HIM AWAY, AS THE MOB DEBATED WHETHER HE SHOULD BE DROWNED OR BURNED WITH HIS BOOKS. MORE THAN THREE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER THIS INCIDENT IN 1604, AMERICAN UNITARIAN HISTORIAN EARL MORSE WILBUR ORGANIZED THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A MONUMENT TO FAUSTUS SOCINUS OF KRAKOW – INSCRIBED ON THE MONUMENT WERE THE WORDS “IN RECOGNITION OF HIS EFFORTS FOR FREEDOM, REASON, AND TOLERANCE IN RELIGION.” SOME PEOPLE HAVE BELIEVED THAT THOSE THREE WORDS

- FREEDOM, REASON AND TOLERANCE – ARE THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST TRINITY. IT WAS ALTOGETHER APPROPRIATE THAT MISS KATHY SHARED WITH US THIS MORNING THE STORY OF MICHAEL SERVETUS BECAUSE HE REMAINS SO SIGNIFICANT TO UU HISTORY. BORN IN 1511, HE AUTHORED TWO BOOKS THAT WERE HERETICAL FOR THEIR REFUTATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY AND THEIR EMBRACE OF SALVATION BY CHARACTER AND ADULT BAPTISM. SERVETUS HAD TO LIVE IN HIDING UNDER ASSUMED IDENTITIES FOR YEARS AFTER THE BOOKS WERE PUBLISHED. HE WAS HUNTED BY CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS ALIKE FOR HIS OUTSPOKEN BELIEFS, BEFORE BEING EXECUTED ON CALVIN’S ORDERS IN 1553. WITHIN FIFTEEN YEARS OF SERVETUS’ DEATH A YOUNG TRANSYLVANIAN KING, JOHN SIGISMOND, CAME UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF A UNITARIAN THEOLOGIAN NAMED FRANCIS DRAKE. DAVID, ORIGINALLY TRAINED AS A CATHOLIC PRIEST, AND HAVING CYCLED THROUGH LUTHERANISM AND CALVINISM BEFORE EMBRACING UNITARIANISM, TOOK PART IN A DEBATE. THE OUTCOME OF THIS DEBATE WAS TO DETERMINE THE OFFICIAL RELIGION OF THE REGION. DAVID IMPRESSED SIGISMOND WITH HIS ARGUMENTS AND CONVINCED HIM THAT TO ESTABLISH A STATE RELIGION AND COMPEL ALL UNDER HIS RULE TO FOLLOW THAT RELIGION WAS WRONG. IN 1568 SIGISMOND ISSUED THE EDICT OF TORDA, THE FIRST EDICT OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN HISTORY. UNFORTUNATELY, THE TOLERANCE EXTENDED ONLY TO ESTABLISHED CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS OF THE DAY, STILL IT WAS THE FIRST EDICT OF ITS KIND AND STANDS AS A TESTAMENT TO THE DEEP AND LASTING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNITARIAN THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE. JOSEPH PRIESTLY IS KNOWN TO THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY AS THE MAN WHO DISCOVERED OXYGEN, ISOLATING IT IN ITS GASEOUS STATE. UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS HONOR HIM AS A FOUNDER OF UNITARIANISM IN BOTH ENGLAND AND THE U.S. WHERE HE FLED AFTER MOBS DESTROYED HIS HOME, LABORATORY, AND CHURCH IN BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND IN 1791. IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY THE NORA UU CHURCH, IN HANSKA, MINNESOTA, WAS FOUNDED BY A HANDFUL OF FAMILIES WHO REBELLED AGAINST THE CONSTRAINTS OF THE SPIRIT AND MIND COMMON TO THE NORWEGIAN LUTHERAN CHURCH. IN THE 1920S, WHEN ALL THE OTHER CHURCHES IN THE DALLAS, TEXAS PHONEBOOK WERE LABELED “BLACK” OR “WHITE” – FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH WAS LABELED “OTHER.” DURING WORLD WAR II, THE REV.

WAITSILL SHARP AND HIS WIFE MARTHA LEFT THEIR CHILDREN AND THEIR UNITARIAN CONGREGATION IN WELLESLEY, MASSACHUSETTS IN THE CARE OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY, TO GO TO EUROPE TO SAVE THOSE WHOSE LIVES WERE IN DANGER UNDER THE THIRD REICH – JEWS AND NON-JEWS ALIKE. REV. & MRS. SHARP WERE RECENTLY NAMED RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS FOR THEIR WORK. IN THE LATE 1960S THE UU CHURCH IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI HOSTED THE FIRST INTEGRATED HEAD START PROGRAM IN THE CITY. UU CONGREGATIONS OF ALL SIZES, IN COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY, HAVE SIMILAR STORIES TO TELL OF THE STANDS THEY TOOK IN THE NAME OF JUSTICE AND LOVE. IN 1965 HUNDREDS OF UU MINISTERS ANSWERED DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., CALL TO SELMA. AMONG THEM WERE JAMES REEB, CLARK OLSON AND ORLOFF MILLER. ON MARCH 9 THE THREE MINISTERS WERE SEEN LEAVING A BLACK RESTAURANT – THEY WERE FOLLOWED AND BEATEN. REEB DIED OF HIS INJURIES TWO DAYS LATER. LAY UU’S ALSO HEADED KING’S CALL. VIOLA LIUZZO WAS THE MOTHER OF FIVE FROM DETROIT, WHO DROVE TO SELMA AND VOLUNTEERED. TWO WEEKS AFTER REEB’S DEATH, LIUZZO WAS DRIVING A FELLOW VOTING RIGHTS WORKER HOME AFTER A MEETING WHEN MEMBERS OF THE KU KLUX KLAN PULLED UP ALONGSIDE HER CAR AND SHOT HER TO DEATH. AT THE HEIGHT OF THE FUROR OVER US INVOLVEMENT IN VIET NAM, AMID INTIMIDATION AT THE HANDS OF PRESIDENT NIXON AND J. EDGAR HOOVER, BEACON PRESS, THE PUBLISHING ARM OF THE UUA, PUBLISHED THE PENTAGON PAPERS, WHICH HAD BEEN LEAKED BY DANIEL ELLSBERG AND READ INTO THE RECORD BY UU SENATOR MIKE GRAVEL. THROUGHOUT THE YEARS LEADING UP TO THE 1973 ROE V WADE DECISION, SCORES OF UU MINISTERS PUT THEIR REPUTATIONS AND CAREERS AT RISK SERVING AS MEMBERS OF THE CLERGY CONSULTATION SERVICE ON ABORTION – REFERRING WOMEN TO PROVIDERS OF SAFE BUT ILLEGAL ABORTIONS, OFFERING SUPPORT, TRANSPORTATION AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE. I. F. STONE WROTE, “THE ONLY KINDS OF FIGHTS WORTH FIGHTING ARE THOSE YOU ARE GOING TO LOSE, BECAUSE SOMEBODY HAS TO FIGHT THEM AND LOSE AND LOSE AND LOSE UNTIL SOMEDAY, SOMEBODY WHO BELIEVES AS YOU DO WINS. IN ORDER FOR SOMEBODY TO WIN AN IMPORTANT MAJOR FIGHT 100 YEARS HENCE, A LOT OF OTHER PEOPLE HAVE GOT TO BE WILLING – FOR THE SHEER FUN AND JOY OF IT – TO GO RIGHT AHEAD AND FIGHT,

KNOWING YOU'RE GOING TO LOSE. YOU MUSTN'T FEEL LIKE A MARTYR. YOU'VE GOT TO ENJOY IT." THE LITTLE HERESIES OF MY YOUTH PALE IN COMPARISON TO WHAT THE UUs HAVE BEEN DOING FOR HUNDRED OF YEARS. THEY'VE BEEN FIGHTING THE BATTLES OVER FAITH AND BELIEF, BATTLES OVER JUSTICE, AND BATTLES WHERE THE LINE BETWEEN THE TWO IS SOMETIMES BLURRED. THE UU MARTYRS AND HERETICS DON'T MAKE US UNIQUE AMONG THE VARIOUS RELIGIONS AND TRADITIONS OF THE WORLD AND THE AGES. THEY AND THEIR BELIEFS AND THEIR ACTIONS HAVE, HOWEVER, DEFINED US AND CONTINUE TO DO SO TO THIS VERY DAY. WRITER GRAHAM GREENE SAID, "HERESY IS ANOTHER WORD FOR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT." THE BURNING DESIRE FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGIOUS THOUGHT PUT OUR THEOLOGICAL FORBEARS AT THE EDGES OF SOCIETY. THE CONTINUING DESIRE FOR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND OF DETERMINATION AND ACTION, IN ALL ARENAS OF HUMAN ENDEAVOR HAS BROUGHT UU'S AGAIN AND AGAIN TO THE EDGES OF ACCEPTABLE SOCIETY – AND PUSHED THOSE EDGES OUT. HERESY, MARTYRDOM, REBELLION – THESE ARE THE WAY THE HUMAN WORLD CHANGES. WE HAVE A PROUD HERITAGE TO LIVE UP TO – SO SOMETIMES WHEN WE ARE FEELING THAT WE ARE "AT THE EDGE OF SOCIETY" – LET'S STOP AND THINK WHAT IS MAKING US SO UNCOMFORTABLE THERE. IS IT REALLY SUCH A BAD PLACE TO BE ONCE IN AWHILE? I GIVE THANKS EVERY DAY THAT MY RELIGION OF CHOICE – UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM – IS FILLED WITH SHINING EXAMPLES OF MEN AND WOMEN WHO HAVE THROUGH THEIR HERESIES AND MARTYRDOM CONTINUE TO CHANGE THE WORLD WITH THEIR IDEAS, AND THEIR DEATHS, AND THEIR LIVES. SO BE IT.

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