

**Problem: Division**

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I want to begin this morning with what we might call the book report portion of the sermon.

I promise I will be concise.

Really. I promise.

So, I read this book – God is Not One, by Stephen Prothero.

He’s a professor of religion at Boston University.

His book, really, is a world religions textbook –

he gives the basic and important facts about 8 major world religions.

It’s good, and he knows his stuff.

But the provocative part of the book is the introduction,

when Prothero challenges the long-standing practice in the field of comparative religion to say that all religions

really are basically the same,

they just have different languages and rituals.

To say, yes, there are these differences, but, really, God is One.

That’s what we’ve been doing for 50 years.

Prothero says this is wrong.

He says that the religions of the world are very different from each other,

and to say they are really all the same is just false.

Yes, the religions often have similar ethical instructions:

love others, don’t kill people, keep your promises, and so on –

but the ethical instructions are only a small part of religion,

and the religions have very different ideas about what is ultimate,

what life is about, and what is true and real.

Prothero thus develops a way to look at each religion on its own terms.

And I think this method is quiet ingenious and instructive.

The method is this:

each religion, he says, begins with a sense of “what’s wrong.”

Something, we feel, is off balance in the world.

But every religion makes a different claim about that this is.

A different problem.

From the problem, each religion gives a solution – a goal,

what the world, or an individual life, is like without the problem.

They elaborate – there is a technique, a way, to achieve the goal.

And, not just a technique, there are exemplars,

other people who have traveled this path,

and can show us the way to the goal.

Let me give you some examples, so you know what I’m talking about.

Here is Judaism:

The problem is exile. Removal from community, from God, from the Holy Land.

The goal, then, is return. To return to community, to return to God,

to return to the promised land.

The technique is to remember – to tell the stories, do the rituals – and to obey – to follow the commandments of God.

The exemplars are the rabbis, the teachers who show the way,  
and other ancestors, family members, and so on – folks who keep the faith.

I'm not going to run through all of them, I'll do just a few more.

Taoism. The problem is lifelessness.

Living a life of routine, of futility, of distraction.

The goal is flourishing, to live well and fully.

The technique is balance – to hold the yin and the yang in yourself,

to act in accordance with the sacred way, the Tao.

The exemplars are the sages, the wise teachers who live this way.

Now, let's look at Christianity.

The problem is sin – that people do evil things, or desire to do them.

The solution is salvation – that we are forgiven for our sins and that we learn not to do them by walking in the way of Christ.

The technique – well, it depends. If you are Catholic, the main emphasis is on works – the rituals, the sacraments. If you are Protestant, the main emphasis will be on faith – to believe in Christ and the creeds of the faith, to welcome that personal relationship into your being.

And the exemplars – well, the saints, if you are Catholic. If you are Protestant, religious leaders – your own pastor, maybe, or a character from the Bible.

So what about Unitarian Universalism?

Well, for most of our history we have been a species of Christianity.

In some ways, we still are.

So when folks like William Ellery Channing gave birth to Unitarianism in this country, some 200 years ago, they said, yes, the problem is sin.

The solution is salvation.

But the technique isn't ritual, and it isn't just faith.

Instead, they said, it is character.

Moral refinement, piety, good manners, reason, learning, service to others.

The solution to the evil the world is to build a better world,

to create institutions of good will and people of good will.

The exemplars were the prophets, people of good character, and, especially, Jesus.

One of the reasons Unitarians thought it was so important that Jesus was human –

I said this Christmas Eve, too –

was because they wanted Jesus to be an example for our human lives,

not to put him up on a pedestal and say, well, we can't do that –

but to say, that kind of love, that kind of vision,

is what we are called to.

So we were firmly in the Christian religious world,

but we were giving a different answer to the "how" question –

how do we move away from sin and towards salvation.

Indeed, that was our motto, "salvation by character."

We said we were not the religion about Jesus,

but the religion "of Jesus" – by which we meant that he, human being,

was our prime exemplar.

OK, thus ends the book report portion of the sermon.

Whew!, right?

For the rest of today, and for the next three weeks,

I want to give you what I think are our answers to Prothero's questions for us, today.

What is the problem we see in the world?

What is our goal?

What is our technique?

Who are our exemplars?

It is my contention that we, today, have our own distinct answers.

That we no longer stand just in the Christian tradition – that we don't see sin as the problem and salvation as the goal.

I say this, even though in so many ways we still resemble the protestant faith – we worship on Sunday, we sing hymns, we organize ourselves like them, and so on and so on.

And many of our people are Christian, or inspired by Christianity.

And some of my colleagues, I will tell you, would disagree with me.

They would say that although we have a slightly different understanding of what "sin" and "salvation" mean, sin is still the problem in the world, and salvation still the solution.

Character, in the widest sense, is still our technique, and the prophets, old and new, Jesus included, are still our exemplars.

We are still Christian.

I think you could make a persuasive case for that argument,

but here's why I disagree:

we don't use the word sin.

We haven't used the word in a serious way in 150 years.

We could try to redefine the word, and we have – to talk about social ills, or missed marks, and so on – but sin has a theological cast to it, a sense that something in us is broken and in need of fixing. And I don't think we think that way anymore.

As Channing was laying down the doctrine of Salvation by Character, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the rest of the transcendentalists were imagining a new way of being religious, a way that drew on Hinduism and celebrated nature and the human self; a few generations later, religious Humanists launched a new renaissance, celebrating human reason and art, and calling us to focus with intensity on this life, justice between people, and peace in the world.

So we are something different now.

That's my argument, anyway.

OK then, part 1.

What's our problem?

What do we see in the world that should be different than it is?

What is the fundamental issue?

Christians say sin, Jews say exile, Confucians say Chaos, Buddhists say suffering, Muslims say pride.  
What is it for us?

We'll do this inductively.  
Start with a story.

A few hundred years before Channing,  
the first Unitarian in Europe was a Spaniard named Miguel Serveto,  
also known as Michael Servetus.  
He came of age during the inquisition in Spain,  
and it distressed him to no end that the Christians were persecuting the Jews and the Muslims.  
He abhorred the violence and bloodshed,  
destroying his neighbors, his homeland.  
So, he thought to himself, I will research the Bible,  
and I will convince the Jews and the Muslims that the Trinity is true,  
and they should convert to Christianity,  
and that will end the bloodshed.

So Miguel, who was a physician and could read Latin,  
the only language the Bible was available in then,  
read it closely, and found, of course, that the trinity was never mentioned in the text.  
Not once.  
He did write a book, called on the errors of the Trinity,  
he argued that instead of the division between the Gods,  
and between the people of God,  
we should be one.  
And he was arrested, tried, and executed for heresy.

A generation later, in Eastern Europe, Unitarianism sprung up again,  
in the mountain kingdom of Transylvania,  
under the leadership of Francis David,  
David made two essential points:  
first, that reason, our personal conscience, is not to be separated from our faith.  
There should be no divide within ourselves in our devotion.  
Second, that we need not think alike to love alike –  
that the divisions between people, which will inevitably occur,  
since everyone's conscience and experience is different,  
need not be barriers to us being together in community.  
We need not think alike to love alike.

Channing, in the reading you heard this morning, from 1819,  
decried the "injury to faith" caused by the trinity,  
the division of affection between the three gods,  
and advanced, instead, the commitment to the unity of God.  
Elsewhere in the same sermon, Channing argues against other divisions:  
the division between a human part of Christ and a divine part of Christ,  
the division between reason and faith,  
and the division between faith and justice.  
He says that proper religion should be an integrating force,  
bringing all of ourselves – head and heart, mind and spirit, body and soul –  
together so that we might respond to the love of God in fullness and completeness.

So, theologically and anthropologically speaking, this is the problem we have identified in the world:  
division.

The separation of different qualities within divinity,  
and the separation of different qualities within ourselves.  
We have found these divisions to be problems.

These are not the only divisions we have, through our history, challenged.  
We have sought to oppose and undermine divisions between religions,  
to say, yes, we might do things differently, but we are still part of the same human family.  
And there is, Prothero's claim notwithstanding, important similarities,  
and we can live in peace with each other.

We have also sought to oppose and challenge divisions based on racial and ethnic lines:  
we fought for the abolition of slavery, and civil rights, and fight today for racial justice and immigration justice.  
We seek, still, to end the reality of being worlds apart.

We have also sought to challenge the divisions of nationalism,  
helped to create things like the United Nations,  
in celebration for which our opening hymn this morning was written.

And we have challenged divisions based on sex, gender, and sexuality –  
fighting, successfully, for suffrage, for liberation, for marriage equality.

Our Universalist forebearers joined the Unitarians in many of these efforts,  
and they also challenged another division they found particularly troubling:  
the division between the supposedly saved and the supposedly damned.  
They said, no, we are one family, and all – all – will be reconciled.  
None are cast off.

This is the problem we see in the world,  
the imbalance we experience and seek to correct:  
division. The separation of people, the separation within people,  
the separation between fields of study and ways of being.

And.

And our sense that division is a problem is not just about creeds,  
and it is not just about social justice and social questions.  
These are divisions we challenge, divisions that just don't feel right to us.  
But there is more; and, in truth, these theological and social divisions,  
the way they feel off to us,  
they come from our sense of existential division –  
our personal sense of being divided from one another,  
from ourselves, from the earth,  
our longing to feel a stronger sense of unity and connection and synergy.

The sparrows. The murmuration of starlings.  
This sense of unity and connection,  
and we feel that somehow things are not quite right,  
because we don't fly like they do,  
soaring together, dancing together as the sun sets over the water.

We do feel that sense of connection sometimes:  
when we sing together, dance together.

When we loose ourselves in the moment.  
When we stars catch us up, and stop us in our tracks.  
When the touch of a friend, a lover, a kind stranger  
warms our skin and our heart,  
when we march for justice,  
when a child lays his head on your shoulder,  
when the waves crash on the shore and the starlings dance overhead.

These moments, and ones like them,  
give us just a taste, a reminder, of life without division.  
And it is the sense of longing for connection,  
the sense of alienation from existence,  
when we don't feel that way,  
when we feel alone, apart, adrift,  
that we recognize as the problem in the world.

We feel it in our own soul.  
We feel it in our relations with others.  
We feel it in our connection, or lack thereof, to divinity.

What is the problem in the world?  
Division.

What's the solution?  
Well, that's next week's topic, obviously.  
I'll give you a hint that is has something to do with the Uni  
part of Unitarian and Universalist.

For now, I invite you to identify and resist the divisions you find in your life.  
Are you divided in yourself –  
between your reason and your passion, or between your hopes and your fears?  
see the division, resist it. Challenge it.  
Are you divided from other people –  
from your own family, from your neighbors, from others?  
Why? What is standing in the way? Is it worth it? (It might be, and it might not – ask yourself the question).  
Are you divided from the earth?  
What is keeping you away?  
Are you divided from the holy, from the sacred?  
What barrier have you put up? What are you keeping yourself from?  
For what reason? Is it worth it?

What divisions in your life are preventing you from being your full self?  
From feeling that sense of awe and joy and peace that comes from being connected?

See the barrier. Measure it. And get ready to break through,  
to go under or over or around or through,  
and to reunite what has been asunder,  
to expand the circle,  
and to tear down these foolish walls.