

UU 101 SERIES

SO YOU WANNA BE A UNITARIAN?

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You may not know this, but *By The River* was written, well, by a river, the Hudson River to be exact, because it was written by Robert Lowry, a Baptist minister who was serving a congregation in the city of Brooklyn at the time because it was the mid-1800s, not the borough of Brooklyn yet. He wrote it in a summer of very dangerous heat, a heat wave, and where there was an epidemic spreading around the city. He was almost overcome by the heat himself and had a vision. He had a vision out of the book of Revelation. It's going to be one of those sermons today, friends. Buckle up. Anyway, he had a vision of the river, of crystal clear water flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. Revelation 22:1.

I remember when it was sung at the National Cathedral during the interment of the remains of Matthew Shepard, the young gay man who was tortured in hatred on offense in Wyoming, left for dead, who then succumbed to his injuries. See, Matthew's parents, his mom, Judy, had struggled for years with what to do with the remains, to lay him to rest because they knew that any burial site they chose would be defaced, defiled with the hatred of those who could not find love in their hearts. He loved his church. He grew up Episcopalian, which is fine. It's fine. It's fine.

So when the cathedral made the invitation to lay Matthew to rest in safety in the crypt, in the heart of this nation, his parents accepted. It was a service like no other I've ever seen. You can watch it on YouTube. I commend it to you. And I thought as I watched this service alone, I could worship with these people who love this boy so well. Today, at least for the time being in this nation, we have the freedom to worship as we choose, even in the heart of a nation being taken in steps by authoritarianism. Centuries ago in this land and in others, there was a lot less choice. Granted, a lot less people too. This year marks the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, I did warn you it was

going to be one of those sermons, when a faction of Christians formally adopted a new way, a new way of seeing God.

They broke from the original tradition and required that everyone who said they were Christian from now on believe what they believed. They were known as the Trinitarians. Emperor Constantine demanded that the leaders of the church come to one of his palaces, one of his palaces. He chose one that was conveniently located near to where he lived in Constantinople so that he could attend the proceedings himself. The emperor of the now fully brought together Roman Empire wanted to see a few folks about some things. One observer, Eusebius, described his entrance, the emperor's entrance into the council like this. I quote, "Like some heavenly angel of God, his bright mantle shedding luster like beams of light shining with the fiery radiance of a purple robe and decorated with the dazzling brilliance of gold and precious stones." And who said drag was dead?

I just have this image of him just kind of beveling in. Anyway, I've seen too much Showgirls. Anyway, that quote comes from a book. I mean, it comes from Eusebius, but there's a book entitled *The Elephant in The Room, Constantine at the Council*. It's by a historian named Harold Drake. Very entertaining. He's a professor in California. Just to give you an idea of the way historians view this entrance, the elephant in the room. Now, out of the council came the creed, the Nicene Creed that held God was in three eternal persons. They also set the date of Easter, which now changes every year. So we'll leave that aside. But the main thing they did was decide that this Trinitarian concept of God would exist. And the Egyptian priest Arius did not make it to Nicaea because he was poisoned a few weeks before the council. Just happened to happen, because Arius had been going around talking about his idea and defending his idea that God is one and that Jesus was a man created by God.

This belief was an older belief, hear me, an older belief than the doctrine of the Trinity. That's right. Scholars less blinded by the idea of heresy today. Call Arius one of the original religious conservatives. I told you, it's one of those. Yet he was told he was wrong and misguided, and also poisoned actually. So today what is called the Arian heresy, and heresy is simply the Greek word for choice or unorthodox, is the idea of a Unitarian, not a Trinitarian God. So if you still want to be a Unitarian, if you're still sitting here, get ready. Get ready for a right to choose. Get used to holding beliefs that seem perfectly rational to you supported by evidence, likely by history, maybe even right, and then being told you're wrong, but hopefully not poisoned. So you want to be a Unitarian, I'm told. Well, one thing is our faith is often accused of not having a theology.

Huh. Has anyone ever heard that before? Okay, theology means thought or speech about God, Theos, God, Logos, thought, speech, mind. But our faith does have a theology that gave rise to, that nurtured much of how our churches and our faith works, not to mention other churches that created a whole creed just to say we were wrong and have been living by it for 1700 years. That's another sermon. And one of those theological beliefs is that God is one and is love. Reverend Beth preached about this last year in a beautiful sermon you can go listen to, and it's a statement from this church's founding sermon from 1899, but it goes a lot farther back than that. In biblical Hebrew, Yahweh, Y-H-W-H or Jehovah is the word for the creator God and the beginning of Genesis and throughout much of Hebrew scripture. But that word is often thought of as a noun, but it really isn't.

Hebrew scholars see it as a verb form, an active word that means creating or being. The being. The one being. So the idea that God is one is actually one of the oldest foundational understandings about the nature of God, and that is love interestingly is squarely in the final gospel account of Jesus's life, John. So God is one and God is love is one of the oldest pieces of Hebrew scripture combined with one of the newest pieces, revolutionary actually pieces of Christian scripture. So if you want to be a Unitarian, you might actually have a theology that works, a real theology. Now, if you still want to be a Unitarian, if you're still sitting here, get ready for this. You don't have to believe a single thing about God that I just said at all, right? In fact, if you want to be a Unitarian, you're going to need to hold more than one idea in your head at a time.

It can sometimes feel like a lot of work, this cognitive dissonance, and being able to hold different ideas about the nature of God is only the beginning. In our lives, over and over, we see and we process disparate ideas all the time. Much of what sends so many here to our faith is trying to reconcile a world that is filled with so many horrors and so many miracles at once. Holding the intentional starvation of children in Gaza alongside the pains and the joy we take from the thriving of our own children. Neighbors disappearing in the arms of masked agents from the streets while holding close our own family and friends at night, seeing tanks rolling into our nation's capitol to take over policing there while driving safely for now through our own streets. Our faith doesn't tell you that there's a reason or an answer for all of these things. We don't gloss over loss with some promise of a divine plan here.

We hold the painful truths we experience alongside the beauty in this shared world. And if that makes sense to you more than being told to spiritually just suck it up and move on because someone said so, you might be a Unitarian too. All right. This is an important one. If you want to be a Unitarian, you have got, you've got to let go of perfectionism. Yeah, I hear you, you little perfectionists laughing, but it's real. Nobody can make themselves perfect. You cannot make yourself perfect, and nothing you do can change that. You have got to bring, we have got to bring all of our grace, I know the perfectionists want to run out of the room, all of our forgiveness to bear upon our life and our actions. The quest of truth isn't a destination. It's a constant discovering and unfolding.

It's as natural as the blossoming of a garden. No one plants a rose and yells at the rose to grow. I mean, if you do, we got to talk about it. We got to talk. We got to talk. Perfectionism and expectations of constant excellence must end if we want to last long. These standards come from a culture steeped in superiority and the false gospel of supremacy culture. That's right. Their crispy rigidity is built with fear. Fear of not being enough, fear of not being loved, fear of being alone, fear of being seen as an imposter, fear of not being worthy. You, all of you are worthy. You're worthy of love, worthy of understanding, worthy of this place and this faith. In fact, not because you earned your place to be here. No. We strive in this community to earn your holy presence being here.

You hear that, right? If you want to be a Unitarian, a practice of letting go of perfectionism as something that can be achieved in the realm of human relations is essential. This is a covenantal faith, a faith that makes and breaks then remakes promises to one another and to the wider world. We seek perfection less in preventing mistakes and more in forgiving one another for making them and then

learning how better to love each other in the future. That is the making and the remaking of the beloved community, and that is how the beloved community can live in and around you. Now, here's an important one. If you want to be a Unitarian, you've got to think about the future, not just the past. I'm going out on a little bit of a limb here, but I wonder about a future. I wonder about a future where the name, the word Unitarian loses some of this pride that it's borrowing from the past generations that it seems to carry with it.

I wonder about a future where Unitarian comes truly to mean what it says, unity. It has been 1700 years since one of our spiritual ancestors sparked the need for the Trinitarians to rally around a creed and run. I wonder a lot about reunification. I know we don't talk about a lot here, but they do in other churches, a reunification of the faithful in the human spirit, of the believers in human kindness and of the realization that we are part of the divine and the human at once in unity. The poet says this, "Remember, you are all people and all people are you. Remember, you are this universe and this universe is you. Remember, all is in motion, is growing, is you. Remember, language that we're talking about comes from this. And remember, the dance language is, that life is. Remember." And of course, remember literally means to put back together in the same way that religion, [inaudible 00:15:38], means to rebind, to come back together.

There is a calling and I think a longing, I have felt it myself, I know others have, between faiths of this world for a reunion, an end to this divisiveness among faiths. I'm not saying it's tomorrow. I'm not saying we're going to convene another world council and have a drag performer come and bring everyone in. But I mean, I'd like to see it. But I think there is a part of being Unitarian that holds open the hope of a future that remembers, like Harjo says, that we are all people and all people are us, and that any true faith will hold that more closely than what could ever divide us. I know it's in the future, but I believe it can happen. Lastly, if you want to be a Unitarian, you can't let the bastards grind you down, right?

Look, I know many people here, many people watching have been harmed by scripture used unconscionably against you in your lives, against those that you love in this world with tremendous harm. And I see, I hear. I give a lot of thought more than might make you comfortable to whether or not the world might be better off without religion altogether. The John Lennon world. If only the state would stop forcing everyone to believe what they believe, to live according to their personal interpretations of scripture that I declare right here are not the words of a loving God. As long as that is happening, we are not going anywhere. But we live in this state where in two weeks, unless an injunction comes, teachers will be forced to put the 10 Commandments in their classrooms. And the proposed language is not even close to a passable translation of the Hebrew at all.

I'm sorry to be a nerd about it, but it's awful. Not even close to the right translation. But this action comes in this year alongside the muzzling of our precious credentialed educators to teach critical thinking to the extent that teachers can't say if the practice of slavery is bad in a classroom in Texas. If you didn't know that, hear it now and pray. I just, for all you educators here, we love you. We pray for you all the time. We cannot imagine what you are feeling. And I think right now, you all need to hear this congregation give you some support. Let's hear it for our teachers.

This week, a new move to overturn the freedom to marry for all lurches again up the steps of a Supreme Court, a court that no longer even bothers to write its opinions when it tramples on the civil liberties of the citizens it is meant to protect and defend. And you know, the hairstyle that woman is wearing is a crime. Sorry, I can't help it. I'm a little catty this morning. And I pray for every lawmaker who is seeking to prevent the unlawful and blatantly racist dilution of fair representation in our state by escaping its clutches to defend liberty in Texas. I hear you.

There are a lot of bastards out there. And if you want to be a Unitarian, you can't let them grind you down. The famous words scrawled by the hero of *A Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's masterpiece, "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum," are a caution from what seemed like so much fiction not too long ago. Don't let the bastards grind you down. Now, our faith, our faith isn't for the faint of heart or spirit. With no rote or simple answers, we got to work together to serve one another in this world we share in the ways we believe will do the most good and make the most change. But if the forces of conformity and religious bigotry succeed on some fronts, we must not let it be on every front or on all fronts. If we are faced with a single-minded focused attack, we bring our focus to bear to counter ideas of domination and deprivation with a passionate resolve to love one another in freedom no matter what the cost. Right. Here is... Yes.

Here is just a bonus if you want to be a Unitarian. Just put down some of the dead white guy authors. Just put them down and pick up some non-male writers of color who are alive, who are living that you can engage with. We hold today the words of joy Harjo, and we hold the words of the great Palestinian European Texan, Naomi Shihab Nye. She shows so perfectly how a parent and child can be one yet different beings, and how we hold the unstated knowledge that the world is hard. It is hard on fragile things, and our children are going into that world sometime, like Judy Shepard had to let her child go for decades before returning safe at home.

This message from Nye is a gospel message, one that is the good news of a parent faith like ours who is child of Trinitarian creeds and revolts, and yet we are bound by history, and I say we are bound by a fate of the future to reckon with that shared future together. So if you still want to be a Unitarian, know this, that you are part of this river that has flowed through all time, still flows through all creation to this moment where you sit, where you breathe past despots and emperors, through war and through tyranny. Nye says, "The road will always be wide and the rain will never stop falling." So we take the whole road of faith, the wide road of faith, holding more than one idea at a time, letting go of our perfectionism, looking toward a future and never letting the bastards grind us down. We gather at the river, the beautiful river. So if you want to be a Unitarian, jump in. The water is fine. That's right.

