

The image shows a green banner with a white border. The banner contains text for a sermon series. The background of the banner is a photograph of a stone path leading through tall grasses. The text is centered and reads: "ANCESTORS OF OUR FAITH SERIES" in a small, white, sans-serif font. Below that is "THE UNITARIAN TRINITY" in a large, white, serif font. At the bottom of the banner is "OCTOBER 5 | REV. DR. DANIEL KANTER" in a white, sans-serif font.

ANCESTORS OF OUR FAITH SERIES

THE UNITARIAN TRINITY

OCTOBER 5 | REV. DR. DANIEL KANTER

Inspired by Wislawa Szymborska's poem today, my own version of contribution to statistics. Some actual ones. Out of 100 people in the United States believe in God, nine in 10, believe in heaven, seven in 10, only six in 10 believe in hell, seven in 10 believe in angels. Three in 10 believe the Bible is the literal word of God. Six in 10 believe in aliens, two in 10 believe God determines the outcome of the Super Bowl, which if that were true, the Cowboys probably should have won more. Right? Three in 10 believe the sun rotates around the earth.

7% of Americans think chocolate milk comes from brown cows, and many believe in Jesus, few act like Jesus, and that is really where I want to start today. Because as much as I want to wax poetic about the difference between the Trinity and the unity of God, the historical arguments, our religious ancestors started in the fourth century and lost. I'm just not sure that it matters that much anymore. Just to take a small detour though, if you grew up saying the Nicene Creed. How many grew up saying the Nicene Creed? Which I could not say in the Episcopal church, I worshiped in this summer. We believe in one God, Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, all things visible and visible in the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God begotten from the Father before all ages, etc., etc. You probably know it by heart if you did.

You participated in saying that in a decision that defined Christianity as Trinitarian over Unitarian in the fourth century. I cannot say this in worship this summer, not only because I don't believe it, but because it made our religious ancestors into villains and exiles and heretics, the statement which some of you know by heart created and orthodoxy with which was used on inquisitive people like us to make them into heretics. And if that sounds appealing today, yes, I am claiming my inner heretic label. I welcome you to do that yourself. But back in the fourth century and the 16th century and the 17th

century, our people were exiled, killed, and had their churches burned down because they wouldn't say this statement and differed over who Jesus was. Just let that sink in a little bit. Now, the lesson we might take from this in our modern brains in our modern day is that when people feel threatened by ideas that scare them or go against the grain or disrupt their well-held beliefs, they can get violent.

And they did, and they do and they will. Countless Unitarians starting in the fourth century through the 17th century, were drowned, burned, alive, exiled, ruined for their insistence that they did not see Jesus in the Bible as God. And beyond that, they said, nor did they think it mattered whether Jesus was God. Because if we all lived like Jesus told us to live, it wouldn't matter what you believed except to model your life by his actions. Our American Unitarian, bright light, William Ellery Channing, Unitarian minister in Boston and Unitarian Christian in the early 1800s defined us into existence as we pulled away from our pilgrim roots, said very clearly. "God sent Jesus to be an example for us, but did not send himself, part of himself or part of some mystic God-like self to save us through his sacrifice." Channing said, "Our job and the job of all people of faith, Unitarians and all religious people of all sorts is not to have these theological arguments. Our job as spiritual people or religious people is to perfect our moral likeness to God. Given to us from him."

He said, "For the good of all humanity and the world." To forget this was a waste of life on empty beliefs and actions unworthy of God itself. Channing used more flowery language than all that, but essentially that is what he said to those cold willing ears in New England before central air or heating. In his concept, which challenged the Trinitarian God in three forms of one substance, mixed with a strong, purposeful urging of Americans to live up to the ideal of religious freedom, put Channing and others at the center of our formation of faith and also at the center of attention of those who did not like dissent. You see, the role of religious freedom is meaningful in this story. Channing was a child of an America that fought for religious freedom because he knew that it was not enshrined from the beginning of country.

Instead, that it was hard fought and won in our constitution, in our work of the revolution to break with the King of England. Puritan leaders before the revolution were the first invaders of the land, established the laws of the country, had experienced persecution in their faith themselves, wanted to create a new community that was faithful to the Bible and Christianity. But what the Puritans did was said that they believed God would punish them if they allowed sin and dissent to flourish. In the 1700s, some Christians ended up in jail, others found constables knocking at their door, hauling their positions away for back taxes. Taxes meant to subsidize the state and the state church. Others were banned from meeting altogether in so-called illegal churches. Take a guess who the illegal churches were. Yes, Unitarian, but also Quaker and Catholic. Dissent was what they were worried about. Dissent was and maybe is not a welcome ideal when forces of conformity try to establish an ethos in a country.

I believe we are in a period of renewed Puritanism. In this country, as conservative Christians try to explain to us that America must return to its Christian roots or perish. Have you heard that? Josh Abbotoy, the head of the American Reformer magazine, said he wants to rebuild America, but he suggests that we need a Christian Franco, a reference to a long-time Spanish Catholic dictator, to

restore Christianity to its rightful place in American society. The recent National Conservatism event, at this event, some called for religious tests for those who want to serve in office. The president last week himself in a memo on protecting America from domestic terrorism, said, "Violent conduct comes from those who are anti-American, anti-capitalist and anti-Christian." Friends, let's be clear, that's centering being an American as being a Christian.

This is not religious freedom. By the 1800s in our country, Unitarians and Baptists and Jews and immigrants from Asia were developing what it meant to be an American. It was clear that this country was not some mythical, unified Christian concept, but was founded to allow diversity of belief and freedom of and from religion. The idea that creedal tests are somehow good for any community is, friends, un-American. So is division. Puts people in closets, creates heretics and religious orthodoxies. We are seeing this idea rise to the point where the leadership of this church is talking about what happens if there's a creedal test in the state of Texas to retain your non-profit status.

Honestly, I don't think that's going to happen, but I'd love to stand in court and argue it. I'd love to have the kinds of arguments that Michael Servetus, the Unitarian martyr had with John Calvin, the founder of Calvinism, Protestantism in a court in the 1500s, where he said, "No one at the Council of Nicaea had used the word trinity. If the fathers," he said, and I quote. Quoting from the 1500s, imagine. "If the fathers did acknowledge..." It was so important to the Calvinists to capture this, that they wrote it down. He said, "If the fathers did acknowledge a distinction in the divine essence, it was not real but formal. The three persons were nothing more in truth than dispensations or modes, not distinct entities or persons in the accepted meaning of that word." Spoiler alert, Servetus had his book of errors of the Trinity tied to his thigh, and he was asphyxiated by green wood smoke and then burned until he and his ideas were eradicated.

I'm not looking for that kind of attention just to be clear. But what I'm asking in this sermon is two things. One: does the Unitarian versus the Trinitarian theological idea mean anything today beyond some of these very important religious freedom issues? And does any of this matter to us at all? The Trinity, the unity, Jesus was God, Jesus was man, distinction probably is not that important anymore. Two things have changed my mind about this. One is people like John McCrady, who died a few weeks ago, was a member of our church. He used to sit right here in the early service, and he used to come up to me often and hold my hand and my arm very firmly and shaking with tears in his eyes, said, "I've been to Christian churches all my life and this church is more Christian than any of them."

The other is that more than one new member and seasoned member have told me in the last year or so that they believe in Jesus Christ, that they center Jesus in their spiritual lives and they still love and support this church. Although I'm not keen on giving up our history or theology or our commitments, I think our founders would've understood this because, essentially, they would've thought there is a difference between the importance of a belief and how we act. To behave in line with Christian values, to understand our lives, to be a task to perfect our moral likeness to God, whether it is by studying or following Jesus' example or not, is the core of who we are. And I have thought recently that our theological label might not be that important anymore, and it might be time to change our name from

First Unitarian Church of Dallas to First Progressive Community Church of Dallas. And let our values carry us rather than our theological label.

Or in my real fantasy world, we should go all in and just call ourselves the First Progressive Gay as Hell, DEI-centered, Justice For All American Community Church of Dallas. That's going to be a little long to put on the sign. I mean, I know it's heresy to say that we should let go of a Unitarian name that I might not recover from publicly or practically speaking in this church, but we serve more than the Unitarian dilemma over and against the Trinitarian concepts. That's just who we are now. At the same time, we are not Trinitarian. The Nicene Creed will not be repeated by you and the pews here, but the real issue here is that we have trouble with those who go around calling themselves Christian and then do evil in its name.

This dichotomy of belief versus action is important to us. And this is also not something new, neither to us or to anyone. I'm guessing this problem, this dichotomy between what people believe and what they do in the world around those beliefs, goes all the way back. The stories of Jesus warning against saying what you believe one thing and acting another way runs throughout the Christian scriptures. There are 14 verses about Jesus healing on the Sabbath. I'm convinced that these stories are about this very thing. Every time Jesus wanders into the temple or is seen in some holy encounter on the Sabbath, there are news reporters. They're describing him as being rebuked for breaking one of those sacred laws of Judaism. The Sabbath is sacred to the ancient world as it is today in Judaism. On the Sabbath, everything closes down at sundown on Friday. No work is to be done.

No scrolling through scrolls, no cooking, no cleaning, no washing, no Netflix, no selling anything, just eating and praying and hanging out with your loved ones. So the 14 stories reported in the Bible say that the Sabbath Jesus keeps healing on is blasphemy to the people around him. He keeps breaking the sacred tradition even though he is making people's lives better. The old woman in our story today, in our reading today, who has been hunched over for 18 years, not ever looking up unless she's laying down, always in pain, troubled by all manner of chores, can't see the eyes of her loved one and only knows them by the laces of their sandals. Here she comes, enter stage left into the temple on the Sabbath, and Jesus says, "Wait, you, let me help you."

Now, I'm not over-focused on healing miracles as part of this story. For me, Jesus did not go around making some magic miracles. What he did was shine light on what was wrong, and in turn miraculously change people's lives. So here comes the old hunched woman and he heals her. To me, this means that he comforted her, he saw her as a human being, he treated her with dignity, he acknowledged her pain and just this effort made her stand a little straighter and walk with less burden. So what is this story about? Maybe she is a symbol of how the temple kept people sick or the laws they promoted kept people from living full lives. And Jesus confronts that on the Sabbath saying to those who hear this story, then and now, "What matters is not what you believe but how you act."

And for me, if that is the Jesus, we are being asked to follow the one who says, "Question the conformist rule makers, and act for love and dignity, even when they say you should be quiet and accept their version of religion. Love them anyway." Sign me up. By all means, heal on the Sabbath.

Do what is right rather than believe what is right, because that is my religion. What I think this and the... Oh yeah, thank you. What I think this and the other 13 Sabbath stories are doing is saying you can't believe all you want in Jesus and then do otherwise. You can say he's God and came to save us. And you can call yourself whatever you want. But if that belief is there, and that's all there is, if you don't treat everyone the way he does and break with convention to extend a healing hand and see people as dignified, no matter how far over they are bending from whatever is considered normal, then you are as bad as those agents at the temple who are condemning the healing on the Sabbath. That's what I believe those stories are about.

So that is today's Unitarian, Trinitarian lesson. But I want to end with the statistics to say, soothe the soul. To return back to Wislawa Szymborska's spirit. You will not find these statistics if you Google them. Out of 100 people, most of us can't live up to the moral perfection we are charged to live for. And that's the truth. Most of us will fail and most of us also will forgive those failures in ourselves and in others. But all of us can try and try again for the highest peace on earth and joy for all humanity by looking past belief to what we do with it. And if it helps all of us, maybe we should listen to Wislawa Szymborska's last statistic in her poem today. Out of 100 people, those worthy of compassion, she says, 99, I say 100. And those who are mortal, 100 out of 100. Thus far, this figure still remains unchanged. Friends, the human adventure continues in our quest ever to have life and to have life more abundantly. Amen and amen.