

**The Crisis of a Liberal Faith**  
**Dr. Brent A. Smith, @ May 16, 2021**  
**Assistant Professor, Grand Valley State University**

Sermon Description: Author and activist James Baldwin wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." But, how does one determine what can be changed and, thus, needs to be faced? This sermon is one white, 66 year-old man's response. In the last five years in both the Unitarian Universalist Church and American culture, visions of human community and human nature have emerged that challenge what liberal religion is and needs to address; that life and liberty, safety and freedom are spiritual qualities of lasting value that when lived, can improve existence through human effort or damage it through neglect or negative intent.

#### OPENING WORDS

And seeing the multitudes, Jesus went up into a mountain: and when he was set, he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the humble: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

You are the salt of the earth; You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before all, that they may see your good works, and glorify God.

STORY FOR ALL AGES: Mark 7: 24-30, Matthew 15: 21-28

Do any of you have dogs? Our son and his wife have two dogs who stayed with us last weekend. And when we sat at the table to eat dinner the dogs sat watching us, wagging their tails, eager for crumbs to fall so they could eat it up. This story is about who gets crumbs.

When our religious tradition began, Jesus was central to it, the life that he lived, the way he loved others and God. This is a story about him but it's not one told much because he makes a mistake in the way he treats others. Jesus was a healer like the doctors and nurses today who love people so much they care for them when they have the Covid virus and create vaccines to keep us healthy. Jesus was in a town with his friends when a woman came up to them and ask Jesus to heal her daughter who was very sick. She was a foreigner and of a different religion than Jesus and his friends, and his friends told him to send her away because she had been bothering them for some time. But she kept pleading with Jesus to care for her daughter, but he turned her away telling her he treated only people who were like him, who looked and believed like him, and lived in the same country he did, saying his love was meant for them as God's children and it was like bread to them. "It's not right to take the children's bread," he said, "and toss it to the dogs." But she corrected him, "Yes, it is right, for even dogs eat crumbs that fall from the dinner table." And she was right. And Jesus knew it immediately upon hearing her, that her faithful love was what Jesus had been teaching, and that he hadn't live up to his own teaching. And Jesus changed, and like a good doctor, healed her daughter.

#### **The Faith of a Syro-Pheonician Woman (text)**

<sup>22</sup> A Syro-Phoenician woman came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly."

<sup>23</sup> Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

<sup>24</sup> He answered her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

<sup>25</sup> The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

<sup>26</sup> He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

<sup>27</sup> “Yes, it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

<sup>28</sup> Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed.

## SERMON

In 1962, at the beginnings of a Civil Rights movement, African American author James Baldwin wrote in a New York Times article that:

“Societies are never able to... overhaul themselves; this effort must be made by that yeast which every society cunningly and unfailingly secretes. This ferment, this disturbance [in America]... means fighting... with that American complacency which so inadequately masks the American panic. One must be willing, indeed, one must be anxious, to locate precisely, that American morality of which we boast... Our own record must be read... Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced”<sup>i</sup>

Nothing can be changed until it is faced.

I have skin cancer and need to keep track of it, so before I got my vaccine I found myself double-masked in the lobby of a Grand Rapids’ cancer facility standing at the Information Desk. I was curious and asked the receptionist and guard there if they had dealt with many unmasked people. The people who came there are obviously sick, some extremely so, and I wondered about versions of those video stars from the past year in retail or grocery stores clamoring about their individual freedom not to wear a mask, and both of them said that early on they did but now most of those mask confrontations occur across the street at the main hospital.

I confess this virus has invaded my faith in human beings. Not that I was totally naïve before, not totally, I just had faith in human beings. I knew what Baldwin called “the American panic” isn’t exclusively American. Every human being carries panic within. Masks inadequately conceal it, and nations camouflage it under “belonging” and “citizenship,” and religions camouflage it under “truth” and “membership.” The pandemic has only unmasked these. But if Baldwin’s right, panic needs to be unmasked because nothing can be changed until it is faced. I just didn’t expect facing my lack of faith that human beings could change.

We can be so self-absorbed that while insisting we are protecting personal freedom we’ll freely give up on seeing, knowing, and doing what’s right in protecting others. We’ll claim to hold noble beliefs as we disregard and endanger others.

Of course, Baldwin wasn’t talking about COVID in 1962, but what in the study of religion is called a “mythic narrative,” in this case the myth that is the beginning and identity of our country, and seeing how our religious tradition was at the center of that origin, that of Unitarian Universalists as well. A mythic narrative can be a story of the beginning of things, like a religion’s creation story as to how all of this began, like the two mythic narratives at the beginning of the Bible, the “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...” story that begins the Bible and the Adam and Eve story that is the 2<sup>nd</sup> creation story. Many scholars indicate there are two more in Genesis, the Tower of Babel mythic narrative and Noah and the Flood. Most all religions have a myth of creation, science has a creation story, countries have creation stories, religious traditions have creation stories, a mythic narrative of how things began, how this country was formed, how our faith was formed, how to creedal Christianity Jesus’ resurrection became the origin of Christianity and of the belief he is God. I define the category of the mythic narrative as a “true fiction.” Something began, it’s true, and we construct an account of that beginning, we tell stories that we then hold onto as true, even as a truth we are convinced we embody even though we weren’t there. A true fiction.

Our country’s mythic narrative, its true fiction is as the Declaration of Independence declared, “a new birth of freedom... that all men are created equal.” It’s a noble truth-claim that the Creator endowed the truth of equality in every human being. But it was a far-fetched fiction to claim all were treated that way when the

declaration was made. It is still a far-fetched fiction to declare as true when so many are treated so obviously unequally, even viciously so, as when people are murdered by our police, curbside on the street or in their home; or when an elected official enacting policies to protect us all is called a witch for doing so and men plot to kidnap and murder her. It is a fiction while we maintain monuments of a time when white men owned black people, and white men and women still shout about threats to their personal freedom not to wear a mask.

Yet, what is true remains even if we do not act upon it.

The pandemic has only unmasked that the human panic is not that we'll get sick and die, but that we will say what's true but defy acting it out. This panic is ever-present. I stand in need of healing not of the COVID virus, but healing from human selfishness and the unwillingness to regard anyone else but me. I can shout I believe in freedom but if I don't act to secure it through the safety of everyone, that is missing the mark. And missing the mark is the meaning of the word sin.<sup>ii</sup> As one of our forebearers claimed, we are "tempted to be good but resist the temptation."<sup>iii</sup>

The blatant disregard for the health of others, of the physical condition and emotional well-being of others of those of a different race, gender, orientation, generates my disturbance, my crisis of faith. I want to have faith once again in the ability of human beings to see what's right to do and the willingness to do it.

Our religious tradition began in the Biblical declaration "ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."<sup>iv</sup> It began here when white Europeans arrived and white men declared, "God becomes a real being in us in proportion as his own nature is unfolded within us... [that the spiritual life consists of cultivating] "a growing likeness to the Supreme Being"<sup>v</sup> whose very nature is the love of all souls. White men said it when they and others didn't do it. The truth of that claim isn't grounded in that white men said it, nor is it made false when white men said it but didn't act upon it. Knowing and declaring a truth but not acting upon it, doesn't negate the truth. It just reveals the disturbance of human self-deception. It's the central article of our faith, that you can know the truth and it shall set you free. But to live it first requires us to admit we don't live by it. Our own record must be read, wrote Baldwin. It reads that human beings shout out "*my freedom is being threatened*" while not acting to protect and secure the freedom and safety of others.

Because the truth of the UU claim that our spiritual life is to grow in a likeness to God who loves all, is first measured by our ability to see how we do not live this truth into life. That belief can be true while living it can be a fiction. And it is measured secondly by our willingness to change what we do to fulfill what we claim is true.

Refusing to wear a mask in Walmart, partying on Spring Break unmasked, denying the virus exists, while declaring the truth of individual freedom, is a true fiction. Refusing to see the brutality and utter disregard perpetuated upon African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, First Nations peoples, and women and gay men and lesbian women, transgendered persons, while declaring we live in the land of the free is a true fiction. It is the pinnacle of human self-deception. It's declaring the truth that freedom and justice are for all but failing to live so that it is safely accessible to all. It's missing a mark. If we shall know the truth, and if knowing the truth shall make us free, and if our spiritual life is in growing into or following a likeness to God who loves all souls, those truths need not only to be declared but lived. We deceive ourselves in the fiction that by declaring truths they are made so. To declare freedom requires *securing* that by living your life towards *securing* it others. Their security secures your freedom.

For security without freedom is what every dictator promises, to protect and take care of "us" at all costs, if you are one of the "us." And freedom without security, is the fiction that all we really have to do is just say a truth and say we believe, and it is made so. Self-deception is the panic unmasked.

The spiritual life is to grow the self in God's love for all, through recognizing the difference others are from you and devoting yourself to live differently towards their well-being. Follow the advice of the physicians to follow the science and change your mask wearing *and* your spiritual life. Neurologists verify that to live empathetically one needs to cultivate both sides of the brain, the right side promoting an "intact sense of

self” – the freedom I claim is true and mine – “as well as the connection to another” – that I would love others and do unto them as I would have them do unto me to secure their freedom through love. The empathetic life is the spiritual life; to grow in the “ability to look at oneself from an exterior perspective, from the point of view of someone else.”<sup>vi</sup> My “I,” my “me,” surrounding itself with others whom I mistake as just like me leaves me empty of empathy. “... the understanding and experience of others occurs” as outside my regard, my concern, my attention, leaves me empty.

Follow the science, physicians advise, to protect yourself as well as to be healed.

And soothe your panic-sickness by Baldwin’s balm, that nothing can be changed until it is faced. Be healed by the Syro-Phoenician woman who has faith others can change. For disease and panic faced, begins the healing.

Jesus is called by some the Great Physician because of his self-understanding: “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”<sup>vii</sup> But in the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman the Great Physician disregards, discounts, dismisses the pleas of a mother for her sick daughter. Why wouldn’t he? She was poor, a woman, a foreigner not of his country, of a different race and religion. She was what we call marginalized in so many ways that he could and did disregard her imploring, discount her situation, dismiss her because she looked nothing like him and was nothing like him. Jesus was a man, fully human Christianity would later say, who taught in a religion that regarded men as having the authority to teach, in a culture that respected men, and she was a foreigner of different ethnic descent and “not from here,” and which he could brush off with, “I wasn’t sent to help you. My bread is spiritual healing and power, and is not for you any more than bread is meant for a dog.” What if this mythic narrative is not as the Christian Church would later call it, “The Faith of a Syro-Phoenician Woman,” but of a person speaking truth to the power of culture and religion that Jesus represented in seeing and treating persons NOT like them as dogs while considering themselves as masters. Jesus, and the Jewish religious leadership and the Roman political authorities, are ALL men in positions of power. Only later does Jesus become a threat so as to put his life in danger. Now, he is a Jew among Jews facing this gentile, man among men facing this woman, a countryman among countrymen facing this foreigner, and she is not who he thinks he is called to serve, to take care of, whose needs he is to provide for. His freedom to declare who he is obligated to means he does not need to live to preserve her and her daughter’s health, their safety. “It’s is not right,” Jesus says, “to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” “Yes, it is, Lord,” she argues, “for even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” She called him out, that his freedom to the God he declares he’s serving, results in treating her like a dog. She speaks the truth of his own words to choose freely whom it is he serves. Freely choose to love one another or freely choose to serve declaring a truth you don’t really have to live by. She invites the Great Physician himself to be healed before he heals others; to change WWJD then? He says her faith brought about healing, but Christianity got it wrong. Her faith wasn’t in Jesus as living the unchanging truth. Her faith was that Jesus would change, see his own selfishness, and change and make right so that the truth he says he holds, he lives.

Nothing can be changed until it is faced. Jesus faced his own self-deceptions, his own selfishness that saw no other but himself, he stared at his own lack of faith in the freedom to act from love for the safety of all, the truth he had declared time and again as what he holds but, in the moment, has abandoned. And Jesus changed, turned towards the yeast that every age bears, the bread of the Spirit, which rises unto a likeness of divine love. Jesus changed and healing occurred.

AMEN. SO BE IT. SHALOM. SHALEM. NAMASTE.

## BENEDICTION

And now, seeing there is naught to fear, and bearing witness to what can never die, let us go forth in the world in peace.

Be of good courage,  
Search all things  
And hold fast to that which is good.

Render unto no one evil for evil.  
Strengthen the faint-hearted,  
Support the weak,  
Help the afflicted,  
Love all souls,  
Serving for the Most High,  
And rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.

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<sup>i</sup> James Baldwin, "As Much Truth As One Can Bear," *New York Times*, 1962

<sup>ii</sup> James 4: 17, "It is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it."

<sup>iii</sup> A. Powell Davies, *The Temptation to Be Good*

<sup>iv</sup> John 8:32

<sup>v</sup> William Ellery Channing, *Likeness to God*

<sup>vi</sup> Cohen et al, "The right parietal lobe, sense of self, and empathy: crosscultural, ethnic, and religious considerations," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 2020, VOL. 23, NO. 5, p. 376

<sup>vii</sup> Mark 2:17