

## **April 20, 2008 Sermon: “Saving the Children”**

Many thousands of years ago, according to the sacred Hebrew scriptures, a man called Moses was called from the desert to challenge authority and free God’s chosen people. The Israelites had been held in bondage in Egypt for generations, and God had finally heard their cry. Through Moses, God showed his power by bringing great plagues upon the land of Egypt and its people, but the Pharaoh was a stubborn ruler and refused to release the Israelites from bondage.

In response, God planned a last-resort plague that would surely result in the freedom of the Israelites. He would send a great pestilence, the Angel of Death, to kill all firstborn children in the land of Egypt. In order for the Israelites to be spared, they must sacrifice a lamb and paint its blood upon their doorposts so that the Angel of Death might pass over their homes and spare their children.

This, the story tells us, was the great sacrifice that set them free. This is the story of Passover, and it

is being celebrated this weekend by religious Jews throughout the world.

How might those of us from a different religious tradition learn from such a powerful story? The meaning of the story has been interpreted in many ways throughout the millennia and it holds extremely powerful meaning for Jewish people. In interpreting the Passover story in the context of our present circumstances, from the standpoint of liberal faith, I do not wish to co-opt the sacred meaning of the story. I only hope to illuminate aspects of the story from which we might also gain wisdom and inspiration.

I challenge you to imagine the scenario of the story described above. You are a slave in ancient Egypt. You are poor, and tired, and hungry. You have few possessions, and few animals to your name. Your lands have been ravaged recently, by plagues of locusts, blood, frogs, and wild animals. (The plagues that God sent to Egypt surely did not affect the Egyptians alone). Now a final threat... the death of the children. You are told that you must sacrifice your lamb... quite possibly the only lamb you own, to spread its blood on your doors. This, you are told,

will save your children and lead to the freedom of your entire people.

I don't know about you, but I'd be a little skeptical. I'm tired, and hungry, and you want me to do *more*?

When the Israelites had faith in Moses and their God, the story tells us that their children were spared. Pharaoh's will was broken by the tragic death of his own son and the children of his people and he let the Israelites go. Life, freedom, and a future as a people was given to the Israelites, *because they were willing to make a sacrifice for their children.*

Let's fast-forward to the present day. April 20, 2008. Who wouldn't sacrifice a lamb to save their children? Especially if it guaranteed the continuity of your people, and guaranteed a better and more fulfilling life for you and your entire community? Let's be honest... I doubt many of you would hesitate to sacrifice that lamb.

We are not currently facing slavery as a people, or plagues of frogs, locusts or rivers turned to blood.

We can hardly compare ourselves to the ancient Israelite people and their monumental struggles...  
...Or can we?

I believe we ARE facing slavery as a society. We are enslaved to the media, and to consumerism and materialism. We are in a fast-paced world that is chained to our technology and to instant gratification. We are faced by plagues of AIDS, poverty, hunger, racism, and illiteracy. Our rivers are polluted not with blood but with toxic waste, and our earth is struggling against rising global temperatures.

As a liberal religious people, we are struggling. What are we to do? How can we save ourselves, how can we deliver ourselves to the Promised Land? We have to make a sacrifice. We have to save our children. (long pause...)

Even at my young age, I can already see the differences between my generation and the one sitting in these pews and gathered in the R.E. wing back there (*point*). They are under a great deal of pressure in a fast-paced world to do more, learn more, perform more. They worry about getting into

selective high schools, and doing enough to create impressive college resumes. They don't know whether a classmate is going to bring a gun to school. Twenty-three Chicago Public School students have been killed in the past five months. This generation fears that OUR generation will leave them with a planet devoid of forests and sapped of natural resources; and they are concerned that the effects of this war will carry on until they are old enough to fight in it. And they wonder how their faith fits into it all.

*How* can we save our children?

Well, for a start, we can support them as they grow in their faith, and give them a safe place to learn, question, worry, and explore. We can let them know that above all, they are loved. A recent psychological study shows that when children and youth have a relationship with one or two non-parental adults, their risk of many problematic behaviors decreases significantly. But beyond simply reducing risky behavior, the effects of a solid religious education can last a lifetime. By nurturing our children today, they could grow into the people

who will lead our society to the promised land of peace, freedom, hope, tolerance, and reason...

I realize that many of you have children of your own and spend countless hours dedicated to raising those children as best you can. You feed them, clothe them, bring them to school and soccer practice, you attend swim meets, and collect Girl Scout cookie money. You have discussions with them, and you love them deeply. Many of you have long since finished raising your children and might be enjoying your grandkids, or simply enjoying living adult life without children at home! Who am I, a childless woman, to stand in front of you and challenge you to do MORE for the children? (*pause...*)

I am a woman who is concerned for our faith, and our church. I see the slavery and the plagues and I see the promised-land far off in the distance, but I know that first, we must save our children. We are tired, and we are stretched thin, but we must sacrifice in order to live as a people.

I believe the children are our future, as the Whitney Houston song puts it, but they are also our

present. They are here with us, now. They are sitting among you and are off in the R.E. wing, and they are out in the community, as we speak. I believe the children are our present and they can lead the way.

Since the time I was old enough to not be considered a child, I have committed my life to the service of children. Through experiences with children in tutoring, mentoring, leading Girl Scouts, teaching Sunday School, and doing child-psychotherapy, I have been challenged by the children I work with to continually to look at the world in new ways, and to understand my own values and beliefs more fully. Every Sunday I learn something or am challenged by someone in the Coming of Age class here at Third Unitarian. As a seminarian, I have done a lot of theological thinking, and those youth still manage to make me think of something I haven't thought of yet!

In fact, it was not until I taught Sunday School in college that I realized I was not really a Christian. I had been content to believe, or at least put up with, many of the doctrines that I did not believe in my heart, until I had to impart those beliefs to third-

graders. I might have remained there, stagnant in my faith, for any number of years, if I had not had the experience of working with children.

The children are our present, they are our future, and if we are to be a living faith, a prophetic voice in the world, we must move outward from a firm internal foundation. I have been exceedingly impressed at the outreach and social justice efforts that Third Unitarian Church is involved in. For much of our history, this church has done great work in many social movements and for the surrounding neighborhood. From the moment I got here, I have been aware that this church has a culture of outreach, a generous spirit and one that stands up for the oppressed.

At the same time, as a newcomer here I was also aware that the focus on being outward-moving has limited our inward-looking vision, especially when it comes to the commitment to religious education. The idea that “in order to care for others, one first must care for oneself” is an idea that has possibly been lost in the drive to continue the community mission of this church. Rev. Howard Thurman once said that our

hearts must be a swinging door, opening outward *and inward*.

This year, our program has seen the addition of several new children. The growth of the program is a blessing, but it also poses a challenge. Without a solid base of volunteers who are willing to dedicate time and energy, our religious education program is reduced to childcare. Childcare is helpful, but I assure you that our children will not be saved through babysitting.

I have seen it over and over again, the quality of the programming increases exponentially as the congregation becomes involved in a hands-on way. This is not a problem that we can fix with fundraising. It is a problem that can only be fixed with hands, heads, and hearts.

The Coming of Age class this year was greatly supplemented by the involvement of several mentors. Adults from the congregation were paired with the youth to help with faith development and interact in fun ways throughout the year. Coming of Age would not have been successful without the dedication of

those volunteer mentors. And I believe this is only the beginning of the growth of Religious Education involvement here at Third Unitarian.

And as we care for our children, confront their questions and encourage their growth, we too will be confronted, challenged, and encouraged. The gift of serving the children will come back around to us many times over. As we save our children, we too will be saved. We will be reminded why we are committed to this faith and why our message is important enough to bring out into the world.

Why is Third Unitarian Church important to you? Why do you bother to wake up on your day off to come to this place? Why do you give your money and your time, your energy and your voice? What is it about Unitarian Universalism that speaks to you?

For all of those reasons, we must make a sacrifice, beyond that which we have already made, for our children. Because it is through our children that joy, freedom, life, and the continuation of our people can be realized. Amen, and blessed be.

...LONG PAUSE...

**NOW, please rise in body or spirit and join in singing our closing hymn, #110 found in your hymnal, “Come, Children of Tomorrow.”**