

“E Pluribus Unum: From Many, One”

**Sermon by
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**All Souls
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I am a Unitarian Universalist minister ordained to serve in the community. I serve as a chaplain at a Catholic hospital, where I daily work in an interfaith environment. The other realm where I devote myself as a minister is interfaith work in the Kansas City community. I have been privileged to serve on the Kansas City Interfaith Council since 1999 and I am proud to serve in the great tradition of Unitarian Universalism, where our roots in interfaith work are strong and deep.

Our history shows us that both Unitarians and Universalists have long recognized the wisdom of other faith traditions. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were both interested in Eastern religions. Emerson first read and was inspired by the Bhagavad Gita in 1832. This interest in the “Light from the East” grew and eventually led Unitarians and Universalists to lead the way and organize the 1893 Parliament of World Religions. Hundreds of Unitarians and Universalists participated in the Parliament, probably, as Rev. David Johnson writes, because “[n]either denomination was intimidated or feared contamination by the vigorous non-Christian world (as did so many others) there represented.” As Unitarian Universalists, we have formalized the importance of the world’s religions in our principles and purposes. If you look inside your hymnal, you will find our sources of faith, one of which reads: “The living tradition of Unitarian Universalism names many sources of faith, including [w]isdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.”

My journey into interfaith work began when I attended my first Kansas City Interfaith Council meeting. It was February of 1999. Ted Otteson, who was then the Unitarian Universalist member of the council, had asked if I would serve as the alternate member of the council. I was honored that Ted asked me to join the council. I was in seminary at the time, and so was interested in world religions from a rather academic and intellectual perspective. I felt serving on

the interfaith council would be a good learning opportunity. And so I accepted Ted's invitation. I walked into that first meeting and found a seat at the table. As it was close to Valentine's Day, someone had brought heart shaped cookies, and placed one on the table at each seat. I don't think I said a word that first meeting, other than introducing myself. I remember sitting there, overwhelmed by the company of which I was a part, looking at my cookie and trying to get a grasp on what it meant to be part of this gathering. The council is composed of the vibrant faith groups who live in the Kansas City area. We jokingly say the faith groups run from A to Z: American Indian, Baha'i, Buddhist, Catholic Christian, Protestant Christian, Hindu, Islam, Judaism, Pagan, Sikh, Sufi, Unitarian Universalist, Vedanta, and Zoroastrian. And there we were all sitting in the same room, around the same table! The intellectual orientation I arrived at that meeting with did not at all prepare me for what it was like to join the council. I was not prepared for the sense of awe I experienced when I took my place at the table. And now, seven years later, I'd have to say I've lost my sense of shyness. But I have not lost that sense of awe I experienced at my first meeting with the council. Yes, I enjoy the intellectual engagement with people of other faiths. But now, it is my heart that sings when we come together.

Today, on this 4th of July weekend, we will explore what it means to live in the midst of religious diversity, both as a nation and as the greater Kansas City community. The title of today's sermon, "E Pluribus Unum," literally means, "From Many, One." But, "One what?" E Pluribus Unum was adopted as our national motto in 1782. It was originally a political motto, meaning from many colonies, one nation. And then with the huge influx of immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, our nation motto took on a cultural meaning: "From many nationalities, one people." But its not just about politics or culture. We are a nation of immense religious diversity. In America today, there are estimated to be about 6 million

each of Jews and Muslims, 4 million Buddhists, 1 million Hindus, 1 million Pagans, 250,000 Sikhs. These are just a few numbers—the religious groups present in this country also include American Indian, Baha’i, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christian, Confucian, Secular Humanist, Shinto, Sufi, Taoist, Zoroastrian.

This diversity of religions was something our forebears could never have imagined several hundred years ago, and yet their wisdom guaranteed a place for each. Our nation is built on the twin principles of religious freedom and the guarantee that no religion would ever be established as a “state religion.” And so, our national motto will never mean, “From many religions, one religion.” This was important for the immigrants flooded into this country, bringing hopes for a better life. As they passed through Ellis Island, they brought not just their luggage and their families, but also their cultures, their traditions, and their religions. America has adopted several approaches toward diversity for those who have come to this country and brought their differences with them. These attitudes are exclusivism, assimilation, and pluralism.

The attitude of America as a “Christian Nation” gave birth to exclusivism, which insisted that America should be built on the values of “Americans”—more specifically, the values of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants from northern and western Europe. These fallacious values led to an attitude of exclusivism, which simply means, “If you are different, do not come here, and if you are here, go home.” I would like to think we are beyond this attitude. However and unfortunately, hate crimes toward ethnic and religious groups are not unusual. And so this attitude of supremacy, of exclusivism is still alive.

The second attitude we have adopted toward immigrants is that of assimilation. How many of you grew up in the era where we referred to America as the “Melting Pot”? This seemingly-inclusivist

attitude means, “You are welcome here, as long as you can be like ‘us.’” The melting pot is about erasing difference and blending in. We now know that the melting pot, while ideally inclusive, was in reality an exclusive attitude. While Western Europeans were invited to “blend in,” Asians, African Americans, and Native Americans have always been excluded from the face of America.

The third way we have approached immigration is pluralism. Before I say any more about pluralism, I want you to understand a little more about diversity, because it is not synonymous with pluralism. Diversity is a descriptive word; it’s about difference. Diversity means variety and multiplicity, and in many ways, offers us a picture of our ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse nation. The point I want to emphasize is that diversity is not all that it’s cracked up to be. Because diversity is only a descriptor, it keeps us at a safe distance. Diversity does ask us to respect our differences; however, it does not demand engagement with anyone.

In contrast to diversity, we need to understand that pluralism is not simply a description. Pluralism is a relational term. Diana Eck writes, “Pluralism is the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differences.” If I wanted to learn about diversity, I could simply pick up any number of great books on world religions and read about these traditions. I would never have to actually talk to anyone who is different than me. However, if I want to practice pluralism, I must get to know people who are different. I must enter the relationship with humility and the desire to learn. And so, pluralism is not a given; it is a dynamic process that must be created. Living in a diverse society does not guarantee pluralism. Even in the context of pluralism, *E Pluribus Unum* continues to be a challenge. Diana Eck suggests that when we ask “One what?,” it is the “covenants of citizenship” that can become our common ground. We can be one in a civic nature as

we work for justice, as work together to uphold the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom.

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood pluralism. He called it “Beloved Community.” The method, process, and goal of Beloved Community is peace—nonviolent resolution of differences. King was not naïve enough to think that we can have relationship without conflict. Rather, he believed in and committed himself to working toward reconciling differences and conflict through, and I quote, “cooperating together in a spirit of friendship and goodwill.” King also believed that we must be an integrated community, where genuine relationships are possible.

As I have engaged in interfaith work here in Kansas City, I have found kinship with King’s deeply insightful vision of Beloved Community. As the members and friends of the Interfaith Council have worked together, we have encountered many areas where we do not agree. What may seem simple—such as picking a song to include in our annual Table of Faiths luncheon—turned into a discussion of values, use of language, and theologies. When we address social issues, we often find that we cannot agree on a statement of conscience. Some on the council members rightfully assert that they cannot speak as the single voice for the whole of their faith community. We have made the task both richer and potentially more difficult as we have recently adopted the consensus model as our method for doing business and making decisions. Using the consensus model, although more time-consuming, gives us the opportunity to listen with more respect and attention. In our own way, I believe the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council is a Beloved Community. We are deeply committed to making Kansas City “the most welcoming community for all people.”

Our community here in Kansas City has long been engaged in interfaith dialogue and understanding. Vern Barnet formed the

Kansas City Interfaith Council in 1989. The council grew out of relationships Barnet had begun to foster as he left parish ministry and devoted his ministry to the community. The history of Kansas City's interfaith work has its roots at All Souls—in 1985 the first Interfaith Thanksgiving dinner took place here—in this very room. The council has since been engaged in the community through education, interfaith activities, and perhaps most importantly, as a symbol of relationship between people of different faiths. When Barnet was asked what made Kansas City's interfaith council different than others, he answered this question in his Faith and Beliefs column. Barnet wrote, “Interfaith’ here means not so much social service as relationships across faith lines.” What grounded the council's formation—relationship—is still its strength.

Unitarian Universalists who have served on the council are Elizabeth Gordon, Sandy Meezy, and Ted Otteson. I served first as an alternate, and then in 2001, began serving as our Unitarian Universalist member. Peter Griggs is currently serving as our alternate member. Because I am the Unitarian Universalism member, I feel I need to do more to keep you, the congregation of All Souls, informed about the work of the interfaith council. The Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council has undergone changes since that first meeting I attended in 1999. At that time, we were a program of CRES, Vern Barnet's organization dedicated to interfaith dialogue and understanding. The council is now an independent entity, learning what it's like to run the business end as well as serve as an interfaith voice for the Kansas City community. It is out of our strength of relationship that the council has continued to deal with events that have shattered both lives and communities. I have several stories to tell you that I hope give a sense of the depth and healing power of interfaith relations.

On September 11, 2001, the council gathered as had been planned for weeks at Pembroke School for a press conference to

announce the upcoming “Gifts of Pluralism Conference.” I remember this day, as do each of us. I had not turned on the television or radio that morning as I was getting ready for the interfaith council’s press conference. I spent time with our hymnal, finding a reading that would adequately and succinctly represent Unitarian Universalism. And I wanted to take a chalice to display along with symbols from the other religious traditions. I came by church on my way to Pembroke, and found the office staff watching TV in the lobby, watching images that did not make sense, were too horrific to believe. I found a chalice and drove to Pembroke, trying to prepare for our press conference in this new and tragic context. I can tell you, there was not place I would rather have been on that morning, than in the company of my friends of many faiths. We faced the horror together, knowing that we would help and support each other. Our message of interfaith dialogue and understanding took on a new urgency. We knew how important our message was. The success of the “Gifts of Pluralism” conference confirmed what we knew—that people were hungry to learn about the religions of the world and the great wisdom they held for times of crisis.

The relationships that had been developed helped our community through that difficult time following September 11th. For many, especially the Muslims living in this country, it was a time of suspicion and undeserved blame. Kansas City was lucky—the relationships were already in place and there was very little violence against Muslims after September 11th. The following year, our success was recognized by CBS whose attention was drawn to Kansas City after hearing about our Interfaith Passport program. CBS then learned more about our success, especially in the year after September 11th, and made Kansas City the subject of their TV special, “Open Hearts, Open Minds.” Now, I don’t want you to think that the Interfaith Council is the only game in town. In addition to the work of the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council, there are many other interfaith organizations in our community. As

they are too numerous to list, Vern Barnet has generously provided handouts for you to pick up on your way out of the service. He has also provided Interfaith Passports, which are a tangible way for you to document your interfaith involvement.

The story of September 11th and the Interfaith Council's role in the aftermath of that tragedy is an example of how interfaith relationships and understanding can help heal our community. But, one of the things I have learned working as a hospital chaplain is that tragedy can visit our lives and the lives of our families just as unexpectedly. A recent experience I had at the hospital where I work is such a story—a story that started in a family and became a story of our community.

I was working a weekend shift at the hospital where I serve as a chaplain when I was paged to the Emergency Department for an incoming code. I received a second page as I left another family and made my way to the room where the patient was being coded. The unit secretary told me that there was a distressed family member who would not leave the room. As I came around the corner, I saw my friend and colleague, Mahnaz Shabbir, in the hallway just outside the treatment room. Mahnaz and I knew each other from working together at the Catholic hospital where she had been a vice-president, and then from our work together on interfaith causes. I cannot tell you the emotion that filled me as I held my friend, as I hoped and prayed with her. Her husband Farrukh, died that afternoon. He had just returned from Hajj—the pilgrimage Muslims are obligated to make once in their lifetime if at all possible. The first call I made was to one of Mahnaz's closest friends, who is Jewish. The outpouring of support throughout the day and the night of prayer and vigil was amazing. And friends and colleagues of many faiths attended the funeral service the next day. In addition to Muslims, those in attendance were Jewish, American Indian, Buddhist, Sikh, Hindu, Unitarian Universalist, Protestant and

Catholic Christian, and Humanists. We gathered to affirm together the fragile and precious nature of life. We gathered as a community to stand witness to the power of faith and love in the context of our interfaith community. And this gathering, this outpouring of support, would not have been possible if the relationships had not already been in place. There have been many times Mahnaz and I and our interfaith friends have laughed and celebrated together. On this day, as Vern Barnet wrote, we “were given the sacred gift of sharing grief. This is how we become a community.”

When I asked Mahnaz if I could talk about Farrukh’s death today, she gave her permission. More importantly, Mahnaz told me I could share with you anything I felt needed to be told—that she trusted me completely. This was a gift I received personally, and is also the strongest testament to relationships built through interfaith work. These are not stories of diversity; they are stories of relationship. They are stories of healing on many levels. My work with the Interfaith Council has given me the opportunity to learn through the lived faith of my colleagues. None of these values I have encountered are foreign to Unitarian Universalism, but that doesn’t mean we “have it right” or are any better than any other faith tradition. Vern Barnet explains the many religions of the world like this: “The infinite is way too big for any one expression to be adequate.” And so it is right to honor our differences, to learn from each other, to celebrate and grieve together. By doing so, the gift and blessing is that my own Unitarian Universalist faith has become deeper and richer.

Our history continues to inform our faith. One more piece of our history that has grounded our faith is the Unitarian Universalist “trinity.” Unitarian historian, Earl Morse Wilbur, identifies “Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance” as the core values of the Unitarian religious movement, from its beginnings to the present. Now, these are words inspired me when I first began learning about

Unitarian Universalism. They have a nice liberal ring to them. But these words are no longer comforting or adequate for the person of faith I strive to be as a Unitarian Universalist. The word “tolerance” now rings cold and hollow. As Diana Eck writes, “Tolerance is a deceptive virtue.” At its best, tolerance allows us to coexist, to live with difference without the crimes of hate that exclusivism breeds. At its worse, however, tolerance can be, again in Eck’s words, “too minimal an expectation . . . [tolerance] may be a passive form of hostility.” To tolerate someone does not in any way invite me into relationship. Tolerance is a value that may hold up when there are no other stresses or pressures on the community. Tolerance, however, does not guarantee peace because it is a value of disengagement.

As we look at our congregation, I believe we have begun the process of leaving tolerance behind. Ten years ago we started the Religious Odyssey program with the goal of building community within our congregation. Each Sunday during the summer, as we listen to a member or friend’s theological journey, we are invited to move beyond assumptions and stereotypes into a place of understanding. We have also fostered relationships beyond racial boundaries through our congregational partner, Ward Chapel African American Episcopal Church. Since 1998, our two congregations have worked together for justice, created opportunities for our youth to work together, and engaged in social activities. More recently, All Souls has worked with other faith communities to develop MORE2, which is a partnership committed to working for racial and economic equality. And Jim Eller has just been nominated and accepted to serve on the Interfaith council’s “Board of Faith Advisors.” So, yes, we are on the way. But we’re not there yet.

As we continue this journey, the questions we need to keep asking are these: What is it upon which our lives depend? Can we honor the sacred in its many forms? Can we live our nation motto,

“E Pluribus Unum,” as we build relations that will make us one in our covenants of citizenship? Can we build Beloved Community? Isn’t this what we are about as Unitarian Universalists? As religious liberals, we have the faith and the tools to change this broken and hurting world. We have the openness and acceptance to work with others, to know we cannot do this alone, and to build bridges between our faith traditions.

We have long been a tolerant people. I am no longer satisfied with “Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance.” As we celebrate our successes, we must also revise the classic Unitarian Universalist trinity. Let us take the next step beyond tolerance to relationship and understanding. I invite you to begin the process of building Beloved Community by opening your hearts and minds as you build relationships across differences. We can be one. We can be one in our vision of a nation devoted to the covenants of citizenship that believe that life can be good, that there can be justice for all of creation, and that we can resolve our disagreements without the use of violence. As Diana Eck writes, “[W]e have the unparalleled opportunity to build intentionally and actively a culture of pluralism among the people of many cultures and faiths in America. We may not succeed. But if we succeed, this is the greatest form of lasting leadership we can offer the world.” Let us give ourselves to the task of justice and peace, the task on which our very lives depend. And as we do so, may our hearts sing.