

## *When Hatred..*

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson  
August 3, 2008

I am sure that all of you are aware of the shooting last week at the UU congregation in Knoxville, TN. The service that morning was a children's program – they recreated the musical Annie – and, during the service, a man came into the church, pulled a shotgun out of a guitar case and began shooting. He was able to fire three times before church members tackled and subdued him. Two people died and a number were injured, several critically. The first person to die apparently got in front of the gunman to stop him and was shot point blank; the second person who died succumbed to gunshot wounds.

The alleged shooter left a four-page letter in his home in which he railed about liberals and how they were ruining the country. Apparently, he targeted the Knoxville Church because it was liberal and active and visible in the community in its support of the LGBT community, civil rights, improved race relations, peace and justice issues. In short, it was a solid Unitarian Universalist congregation.

The terror in the sanctuary – sanctuary means safe place – that morning must have been just awful. Children on center stage, parents proud of their children, old and young together celebrating their community. It was probably one of those services you expect to come out feeling just good about life, a time away from the struggles of living.

And then gunshots and blood and the smell of death and fear. I am sure the children began screaming and crying, people dove under their chairs and looked for escape, looked to protect the kids and themselves. No doubt there was some panic. But at the same time a number of members had the presence and the courage to tackle the gunman and subdue him, and prevent further tragedy.

The shooter apparently expected to kill a number of people and be shot by the police in an ensuing gun battle. He had 175 rounds of ammunition with him; he used three. The letter he left was filled with hatred. He apparently was unemployed and about to lose food stamps. I am sure we will learn more in the days to come but it is not hard to imagine that he felt desperate, that his life was closing in around him and that someone was to blame for his plight. In his apartment were a number of books by right-wing pundits.

Support for the Knoxville congregation has poured in – from their Presbyterian Church neighbors who responded immediately, to UUs across the country, people have sent notes of support. There is a website set up by the UUA for notes of condolence and a trauma team has been sent by the UUA and the District office. I am sending a letter for all of us to their minister.

And, of course, we will continue to keep them in our prayers and thoughts. And we will continue to be diligent here for our safety while at the same time being open and welcoming. No one wants to live in fear and we will not.

The shooting, of course, raises the age-old question of why and now what? Why is there such hatred in our souls, and why is there evil?

Questions about how we respond and whether we can forgive, questions about how close any one of us is to violence and where hatred resides in our own hearts, questions about desperation and illness. After all, the alleged shooter is one of us, fully human, filled with all those conflicting dynamics that make up the human soul and personality. We all carry in us the seeds of good and evil, of peace and violence. He is one of us.

These are not easy questions, and if I had the answers – well, we would be done here, I suppose.

Maybe there are two questions we might ask ourselves – what is it that causes someone to hate so and then to act on it, and second is how might we respond?

It is an irony of sorts that Radovan Karadzic was recently arrested and is now in the Hague facing war crimes prosecution, and that the president of the Sudan has also been indicted for war crimes, for crimes based on hatred of one group against another – remember Szymborska – hatred – it's always ready for new challenges.

This is an ancient story. Cain kills Abel and the ground cries out. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers; the Greek Gods run amuck; Shakespeare mined jealousy and hatred, vengeance and violence in his plays. I think of Gilbert Osmand in James' Portrait of a Lady, or the Misfit in Flannery O'Connor; Hannibal Lector and Anton Chigurh in No Country for Old Men, Lester Ballard in Child of God. Hatred.

I know that I have mentioned before Andrew DelBanco's book 'The Death of Satan' in which he argues that Americans have lost the ability to talk about evil. Beginning in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, DelBanco argues, we began to think of evil, not as real, but as a fault, as something wrong that might be cured or changed. He places Emerson at the heart of this optimism about human nature.

Contrast this with Melville – yes, Melville – who wrote in the chapter 'The Whiteness of the Whale' 'Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright.' As important as reading Emerson might be for us, we should also read Melville. Read Melville as a cure for a too sunny notion of human nature, but read Emerson, too, for hope.

The invisible spheres were formed in fright; that is, the evil in the world is real and there and most often hidden, but real. Our first principle reads 'the inherent worth and dignity of every person.' Bill Schultz, former president of the UUA and head of Amnesty International for a number of years has said he can no longer believe in that – he saw too much torture, too much evil committed by humans to believe that first principle. Perhaps, though, it is not that our first principle is wrong, but rather just incomplete. Perhaps the worth and dignity is inherent, but so is the capacity, even the inevitability of doing evil, inherent as well.

The shooter in Knoxville was desperate by all accounts. Perhaps he was ill – I dealt with enough people at the psychiatric hospital I worked at who had acted violently, even killed others, out of their illness. Perhaps, but many are ill and do not descend into a hatred that results in violence.

That seed is in all of us, you know. That seed, the remnant of the invisible sphere, is in all of us. It is not the devil out there, but the devil in here we must watch. Ever hated anything or anyone in your life? Ever been so angry you have either struck out or almost did? Ever wanted revenge – these are fruits of the seed in all of us. I know it is in me. It shows most often in pettiness, in getting angry when I don't get my way or have what I want. It shows when I feel entitled, when I think that somehow I am better. It shows in selfishness.

This is an on-going struggle. Every day, it is a struggle for the better angels of my nature to be expressed.

But still, why? I have been reading a number of books this summer [today's sermon was going to be a bunch of my favorite poems and my comments on them] and one I am struggling through is James Carse's The Religious Case Against Belief. In it Carse argues that belief is the enemy of religion what has to do with faith, and faith has to do with an openness to mystery. When we believe something, we hold it to be true, otherwise we would not believe it, right?

But Carse says that the nature of belief insists that there is a backside to this – it means we believe something else to be not true. He also argues that belief is something that comes to us; it is a gift as it were. Unlike knowledge, belief is a gift. It may come after struggle and work, but it somehow appears. [I'll explore this later this year but let it be for now]

So belief, Carse suggests, needs an enemy. It goes like this: I believe taxes are evil. Therefore, those who advocate higher taxes are my enemy. I believe marriage should be available to any committed couple, regardless of gender. Therefore, those who disagree are against me. I believe Manny Ramirez is the savior of the Dodgers, and those who disagree with me are my enemy. And so on.

This is not wrong, to believe, but you can see the danger. The danger comes when we think our beliefs are true and indisputable, untouched by doubt. Hatred grows out of arrogance, at a least an adopted arrogance that what we believe or who we are is right and that therefore others are wrong. This is why fundamentalism often leads to violence.

The danger comes from ego, from putting our self at the center.

Here, Buddhism offers something important to us. At the heart of Buddhist belief is the notion that attachment is the cause of all suffering, so that the religious goal in life is to lose the ego and become free of attachments. The goal in Buddhism is not to become detached but rather free of attachments. Does this make sense?

Buddhists talk about the eightfold path, the path of moderation, the path of balance as the response to attachment. It is not to want too much, to be too attached, not to be obsessed. This, I think we can understand. When we become too attached to our position, or to our beliefs or views, or to our things is when danger begins and hatred can arrive.

But while we are all the shooter, that is not the end of the story. We are also those in the Knoxville church who tackled the shooter; we are those members of that church who are re-dedicating their building; we are those who will not live in fear; we are also those with courage.

Here is a story to end with, a true one.

Some years ago, I was leading an orientation session for people considering membership in a UU congregation. There were round 25 of us, and almost everyone who had signed up was present. I noted two people missing, but that was not unusual. We began by going around a circle and telling a little of our story of why we were there. There was a lot of variety, from people coming because they were looking for religious education for their children, to those who were already UUs and had moved from out of town, to people struggling with sorrow or death or illness or addiction.

During this time, one of the people missing came in and apologized for being late. He was about 70 and looked a little like Santa Claus, or Ernest Hemingway. He said he was late and that his friend would not be there because she had just had heart attack and he had taken her to a hospital. She was OK, but still ...

What people said began to change, after that. A bit less indulgent and a bit more serious. Soon, we came around to him again and he told his story, of how he had discovered UUism. He was a physicist, and worked at the Lawrence Livermore labs in Northern California. One day, coming back from the Sierras with his wife and two children, a drunk driver crossed the median and hit them head on. His wife and daughters died instantly. He survived, though he has no idea how, and he spent a long time in recovery and rehab, with much time to think while he dealt with what he called 'unbearable grief.'

It lasted a year, but he then decided he could not let grief rule his life. He wanted to make his life count, and so he moved to New York and took a low level job with The Union of Concerned Scientists, working mostly on nuclear disarmament issues. There he met his friend – the one who had the heart attack that night – and she introduced him to UUism, and he found, he said, a place where people tried to live a better life, where people looked for the courage to live justly; where people knew how to forgive, both themselves and others.

Well, whatever happened that night besides his presence and story is forgotten. He was without bitterness, even as he had drunk deeply from the cup of sorrow. What mattered to him was not the past he could not change the future he might effect.

The story does not end there. A couple of years later, he and his friend – she was in her 70s as well, eloped and got married in Las Vegas by an Elvis impersonator.

It does not end there either. He came in to see me some time later and said he was in a quandary. His niece, for whom he was the closest living relative, had been murdered by her ex-husband. The man was found guilty and the sentencing part of the trial was coming soon. The state in which this occurred had victim's rights laws and he had the opportunity to express his thoughts on the sentence. It was a death penalty state and the murder was a brutal one.

He told me, though, he did not believe in the death penalty and thought that forgiveness was a more powerful tool than revenge. He understood that forgiving is not forgetting, nor does forgiveness eliminate what happened. Forgiveness is not absolution, but rather a letting go, and he wanted to let go so that he could go on, so that he could, again, focus on a future he had hope for.

He asked me if that was OK.

It means we have a choice not to hate or seek revenge.

My prayer for Knoxville is that they are able to move on and focus on the future they can affect, on a future where hope and justice and compassion are possible. Perhaps the most dangerous attachment we can let go of is the attachment to the past. Our life moves forward or our spirit will die. It does not mean that sorrow is gone or that deep hurt does not remain; it does not mean we turn a blind eye to hatred and injustice. It just means that, each day, we take a step forward, arm in arm, hand in hand, with others.

Only by this can hatred be defeated; only by this can love conquer. It takes courage, and it takes us all.

God bless those who risk their lives for others, who stand courageously for the good, for justice and peace and equality.

I had wanted to read some of my favorite poetry today, but instead I want to thank you for helping me face my fears, for finding courage, for standing together to confront hate.

We are a hate free zone here. I love you all.