

TO TELL THE TRUTH

A Sermon by Barbara W. ten Hove, *co-minister*
Paint Branch UU Church — Sun., July 8, 2007

CALL TO WORSHIP:

As a child, I spent a few years attending a pretty traditional old New England Unitarian church in Lexington, MA. Each Sunday, we would repeat this covenant:

Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

I did not know a real person wrote this covenant. Like so many beautiful, short poems, it came to me through the oral tradition. I learned it as a child and never knew, until I went to seminary, that these words actually had an author. His name was James Vila Blake, and he was a 19th c. Unitarian minister. A bust of him stands in a niche in the library at Meadville/Lombard, the seminary where I received my Master of Divinity degree in 1985 and where I only just received, in June 2007, my Doctor of Ministry.

I don't think James Vila Blake would mind that children learn his words without giving him credit. He probably hoped it would become a part of the oral tradition within our faith—and it did. But I think it is also important to acknowledge his authorship. It keeps him alive, even though he's been dead for a century.

Today our worship addresses one important element from Blake's covenant: the quest for truth. As Unitarian Universalists, we value truth and are, hopefully, vigilant in our approach to finding it. Honesty is an ethical issue, worth our consideration. So as we worship together, let us give thanks for those who have shared their truths with us over time and commit ourselves to speaking our own truth as best we can.

REFLECTION:

(NOTE: The following text was read to the congregation as if I had written it. Credit was not given anywhere, including in the Order of Service, until the opening of the sermon that follows. I did this to show the insidious nature and the ease of plagiarizing in today's world. Some minor text changes, shown in brackets, make it seem more like I wrote it.)

All of us who preach live off the treasures of the ages and the insights of fellow [ministers], of outstanding preachers, of thoughtful theologians. It's also true that few people want a sermon to sound like some clunkily annotated series of bibliographic citations. Still, particularly in this age when so many thousands upon thousands of whole sermons are available on the Internet, the temptation to take over another person's sermon on a nearly wholesale level is very real. But the pain and the consequences can be severe.

I [speak] from some experience here, not as someone who has ever passed off another person's sermon as [her] own but as someone who has had [her] own work plagiarized by others. I well remember a fellow preacher calling me some years ago and tearfully admitting to having preached whole sermons of mine that he found on my [former] church's website. He sought my forgiveness, and I gladly gave it to him. But through a series of events that were sparked by his congregation's discovery of his plagiarism, this man [has now left the ministry]. More recently, a colleague of mine was reading through a few of my sermons online while doing some sermon research of his own. He then explored the same topic a bit more via Google only to find my verbatim, identical sermons posted on another church's website under another [minister's] name. Once I was alerted to this, I dug deeper into that website and discovered at least another half-dozen of my sermons there [without any] attribution. When I confronted this [minister], he confessed and sought forgiveness and promised it would not happen again. Whether he has ever come clean with his congregation, I do not know.

Ironically, the first sermon of mine that I discovered had been lock, stock, and barrel plagiarized by that other [minister] was a sermon that had a one-word title: "Integrity." Those who have ears to hear let them savor the grim irony in that!!

"On Preaching" by Scott Hoezee, February 6, 2007
From *The Center for Excellence in Preaching* Website
Calvin Theological Seminary

SERMON: *TO TELL THE TRUTH*

Barbara W. ten Hove

Be ours a religion, which like sunshine goes everywhere, its temple all space, its shrine the good heart, its creed all truth, its ritual works of love.

(Words by Theodore Parker, found in Hymn #1054)

Truth has always been an essential element of our faith tradition. For example, our Unitarian and Universalist forebears were hungry to know what in the Bible was true and what was not. They also studied long and hard to learn what many called “natural” truths about our world, which led to significant scientific discoveries. And, over time, many in both pulpit and pew encouraged people to tell their own truth, realizing that the more we know of each other and our struggles, the more we could help each other grow in wisdom.

This “quest for truth” that I said as a covenant in my childhood church, is often understood to mean simply the process of uncovering intellectual truths. That is important, of course. But truth is not only intellectual. Truth has a spiritual side as well. I am more and more convinced that the most important role religion can play in people’s lives is to help us become who we are truly meant to be.

Faith in this way is not reliant solely upon words or ideas that others tell us are true. No, the spiritual life is based on a willingness to explore our own truths, and then to share them lovingly with others so that our truths (and theirs, too) can be honed and refined. Ultimately, we learn from each other so much about who we are. But that learning can’t take place, I believe, if we lie about things that matter. Truth, particularly within religious communities, is an essential quality, and by that I mean it is a necessary part of faith development, both individually and collectively.

This morning I choose to wrestle with an issue that has become an epidemic in our culture. It’s found in all fields and is having an impact on people in almost every line of work. Plagiarism is an ugly word, but its meaning is clear. Plagiarism is using someone else’s material and passing it off as your own. It’s something I just did a few minutes ago.

Perhaps you thought I actually had the experience of someone stealing my sermons that I spoke of before the hymn? Well, I didn’t. I took those words almost verbatim from an article written by Scott Hoezee, a writer for the *Center for Excellence in Preaching* based out of Calvin Theological Seminary. I purposely spoke his words as if they were mine to show you how easy it is to plagiarize today. How did I do it? I googled plagiarism and preaching and up popped Hoezee’s article. I chose this article because it seemed easy to pass off as my

own. I changed a few things—the word ‘pastor’ to “minister” for instance. But it’s pretty much all Hoezee’s words, and thus a clear example of plagiarism at work.

I’ve grappled a lot with this topic over the past year because there have been two incidences of plagiarism by clergy people I know personally within our Unitarian Universalist Association. Both got caught and within weeks (in one case) and months (in the other) were out of their jobs and most likely out of the ministry.

The personal process of dealing with this was very tough for me. I wanted so desperately to believe in these colleagues. I care about them, I appreciate their gifts, and I thought they were doing good ministry. What came out in these cases was a strong sense that both these ministers were in over their heads. And rather than asking for help from colleagues or congregants, they did something that was all too easy. They went on the Internet and “borrowed” sermons from other ministers.

Now let me be clear about what these two people did. They did not borrow a short citation or a generally known story or just a paragraph or two written by someone else. They stole whole sermons, including personal anecdotes, and passed them off as their own.

It seems sadly ironic to me that it was by the use of web search engines that these plagiarists got caught. The ease with which one can steal material (by trolling the Internet) is also how and why one can get caught so handily. Both of my colleagues posted sermons on their congregations’ websites that they claimed were theirs, but weren’t. Once outed, it was just a matter of time before what they did caught up with them.

But what I have found even more interesting is the response to plagiarism by others impacted by it. Of course, most of the ministers whose sermons were stolen were angry and upset. But a few found it flattering. And a few even said, “What’s the big deal?” Turns out that you can buy already written sermons on the Internet, just like you can buy term papers. In doing research for *this* sermon (on the Internet, of course!) I came across an article written by Steve Sjogren, the founding pastor of a Christian megachurch called the Cincinnati Vineyard. He talks about how Rick Warren, probably the most popular preacher today and author of a very popular book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, doesn’t care if others plagiarize his sermons. Warren thinks a good sermon should be preached—no matter who wrote it. Steve Sjogren tells of other pastors of big churches who do this, and here I will quote him directly.

Each of these pastors has recently come out on their blogging sites and admitted...they get approximately 70 percent of their messages each week from other people – word for word according to them. They fill in their own personal illustrations and stories, of course. Two of the guys that I am thinking (of)...have churches of more than 10,000 in attendance each weekend.

Sjogren goes on to say,

We need to get over the idea that we have to be completely original with our messages, each and every week. In my mind there is a tremendous amount of pride (let's call it what it is) when we insist on being completely original as communicators. In our desire to give “killer messages” we are dishing out something far less. Think about it for a second: If you really were giving a killer message each week, would your church be the size that it is right now? Maybe you need to be open to doing things a different way.

[From Steve Sjogren: Growingedgebuzz.com/blog; found on pastors.com]

It all sounds so reasonable, doesn't it? Give the people something good, even if it's not yours, and they will grow spiritually. It's far too much trouble to give other writers credit, and they don't care much anyway, do they? Rather than struggling to find the words and the heart and the spirit to preach something original, why shouldn't I just read you a terrific sermon by a famous UU minister such as Forrest Church, for example? Or Bill Sinkford? It isn't likely any of you would know these sermons, right? If I've had a busy week or month or year, why not just modify someone else's sermon and make it my own?

Because it's lying, that's why. Forgive me if this makes me angry but it does. It's not just Christian ministers like Steve Sjogren who think it's OK, however. At our annual UUA General Assembly in June I attended a session on plagiarism and was shocked to discover a number of UU ministers also thinking it's no big deal.

Well, it is a big deal. I teach students preparing for ministry that the most important tool we bring to the religion business is our own life. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his famous Divinity School Address (preached at Harvard in 1838) said that a good preacher “deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of thought.” I believe Emerson got it backwards. I believe we are dealing out thought—thought passed through the fire of life. It's perfectly OK, even smart to do research, read lots of books, even listen to other people's sermons as

we struggle with the thoughts we want to communicate in worship. But unless those thoughts pass through the fire of our own life, they are simply ideas. Life brings them to life.

That's what makes pulpit plagiarism so wrong in my view. When I stand here on Sundays, I hope what I say means something to you. One reason it might is the trust you have in me to tell you the truth to the best of my ability. One of the reasons that some preachers give as an excuse for plagiarism is that churches ask too much of their clergy on Sunday morning. And it is true that in our UU congregations expectations are particularly high. We are the best educated of any religious organization in America and even with my shiny new doctorate, there are plenty of things that plenty of you in this room know plenty more about than me.

And so yes, some Sundays I worry that I'll make a mistake, say something dumb or ill informed, or just not give you my best. And there are times when I do all of those things. But should I let your high expectations keep me from giving you what I believe you deserve—the truth? If I did, I would have to walk away from this pulpit forever.

The two plagiarism cases I have encountered recently hit very close to home and I've thought a lot about why I was so deeply distressed and saddened by them. I admit I find it hard to understand why my friends would do something so obviously wrong. As my mother will tell you, I have any number of sins but lying just isn't one of them. I've never been very good at it anyway. But I've tried to understand why people feel a need to lie about their lives to others.

Much of the need seems deeply rooted in our culture. As Americans, we are supposed to be the richest, smartest, best-looking people in the world. We're supposed to win all the games we play and all the wars we fight. Admitting imperfection is for weaklings—something Americans definitely aren't ever supposed to be.

This drive for perfection underlies this epidemic of plagiarism, I believe. Kids can't accept that their writing is good enough so they buy a term paper and try to pass it off as their own. Lonely singles put a digitized, cleaned up picture of themselves on their Internet dating service so no one will see what they really look like. Public officials are in too much of a hurry to put out a report so they "borrow" heavily from other sources without crediting them. Preachers too tired to write their own sermons spend Saturday night cobbling one together based on other people's ideas, other people's style, and even other people's personal stories.

Isn't it time for us to call a halt to this drive for perfection? Nothing any of us do will ever measure up if Perfect is our goal. Our faith teaches that all of us have worth and dignity and that all of us must take part in the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" [from the UUA Principles]. It has to be okay for us to not do everything well. It has to be okay for us to make mistakes. It has to be okay for us to tell our own stories, even if they aren't as pithy and powerful as someone else's.

When we tell our own stories and speak in our own voices we acknowledge that who we are matters. We recognize that what we think and feel has value. We trust that we can be accepted as we are. When we are able to do this, it allows us to accept others as well. And there should never be shame in acknowledging the many people we learn from and whose stories and ideas impact us. It doesn't take much to give credit where credit is due. A simple, "I heard this story from my friend so and so," or, "I read this in a wonderful book of stories by you know who," will suffice.

I believe telling the truth lies at the heart of the spiritual life. It's the beginning of acceptance and understanding. It's the way we enter into meaningful relationship with others. It's how we live lives of integrity.

When we are tempted to lie it is often because we don't think we're good enough or smart enough to be accepted. We encourage lying in others if we demand perfection. Kids who are pushed and shoved toward perfect grades may cheat simply to get their parents off their backs. Workers may steal an idea or plagiarize a report because their bosses demand too much too fast. Preachers may download another's sermon late on Saturday night because they are expected to be brilliant each Sunday even while attending every meeting and social event at the church. I know that pressure can cause good people to do stupid things.

But sometimes kids turn in purchased term papers because they think it's okay since "everybody's doing it." Sometimes people take credit for another's work because they are pretty sure no one will know and they don't care. And sometimes preachers steal others sermons because they are lazy and unwilling to do the hard work. But more often than not it's a mixture of all of the above. Yet, when such lying happens it hurts everybody, those doing the lying and those being lied to. It breaks trust, and trust is one of the most important things we bring to any relationship. Without trust, respect and even love are compromised.

When my colleagues plagiarized sermons written by their peers in ministry, they broke trust not simply with the preacher they stole from. They broke trust with me and other colleagues

who now risk being held suspect by members of congregations who fear that if one preacher does it, others must as well. They broke trust with people in the pews who now might worry that their minister is not trustworthy. They broke trust with their friends and family who believed in them and now cannot. And they broke trust with themselves, ruining their good name for a few minutes of time saved and a better story.

This experience has humbled and hurt me deeply. I feel sorry and sad for my colleagues and friends and I worry about their future. Yet, I can't help but think that maybe this has been a warning shot across the bow reminding us of the importance of integrity in both pulpit and pew. I know that it has forced me to look at shortcuts I might make in my work and think twice about it. I know it has challenged our Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association to be more explicit about what plagiarism is and why it is wrong. I know it has encouraged people throughout our association to question our unrealistic expectations of each other and find ways to help build healthier habits to deal with stress. All of that is good.

For now, the best I can do is stand before you and promise that I will do my best never to intentionally lie to you. I will do my best to speak in my own voice and risk making mistakes. I will do my best to model both integrity and respect. And I will be compassionate to you and to myself when I fail and when you fail.

Community is built on shared values and trust. Religious community goes even deeper, asking us to become, as a children's chalice lighting I learned long ago states, "the best people we can be." Accepting our imperfections, making mistakes and learning from them, doing what we can to learn and grow all lead to spiritual health and wholeness. Telling the truth, as we know it, is one way we can maintain our integrity as we struggle to create a better world.

It isn't easy. But I believe that the religious life is not an easy path. It's a good path. At times it is even a joyous path. Yet it always calls us to do our best, to tell our truth, and to respect one another, which can at times be so very hard.

But I did not enter the religious life nor stay in it for twenty-two years without some understanding of what it means to be in this precarious, wonderful, challenging, exciting, terrifying, fabulous relationship with you. Telling the truth is just a part of the job.

And a mighty fine one it is, too. Thanks for giving me your trust. I hope I never intentionally break it.

CLOSING WORDS:

Many years ago, a Unitarian minister named James Vila Blake wrote these words:

Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

As we go forth this day, may we commit to help each other seek the truth in love, so that we may dwell together in peace, and give our measure of caring service to a hurting world.

And may the spirit of this church always be a loving one, giving us both roots and wings to build community and justice wherever we may go. Amen.

