

Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion

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This morning's scripture reading had a cliff-hanger... David, the shepherd boy was about to approach the mighty warrior Goliath. King Saul had offered him his armor but unable to walk under the weight, David chose to wear his simple shepherd's cloak instead. King Saul offered him his sword, but David chose to carry his staff and a sling. Then David picked up five smooth stones from the wadi that is from the Valley of Elah where the Israeli and Philistine armies were camped on either side.

Most of you have heard the story of David and Goliath before so I doubt you've been holding your breath through the Anthem waiting to hear who wins this fight. However, I want to remind you of the odds that are so carefully illustrated in this biblical story.

Goliath is huge! Some of you may remember Andre the Giant from the World Wide Wrestling Federation or in movies like *Princess Bride*. Andre, who was known as the Eighth Wonder of the World was about seven feet tall and weighed over 400 pounds. Well, compared to Goliath, Andre the Giant was tiny! 1 Samuel describes him as six cubits and a span, which measures nine feet six inches tall. This certainly explains why Saul and his army were "dismayed and greatly afraid" at the prospect of hand-to-hand combat.

Enter David. He has not even reached manhood. On his father's orders he has come to the valley to deliver food to his three older brothers who are serving in the army. Unlike the soldiers, David's response to the Philistine's challenge is indignant that anyone should "defy the armies of the living God". Saul is doubtful that a boy could go up against a warrior but David's confidence and faith convinces him. The fact that Saul gives David his armor foreshadows that he will become King.

When David approaches Goliath in his simple dress bearing no heavy weapons, the Philistine's reaction is disdain that Israel would send a ruddy and handsome youth. Using his slingshot, David slings one of those smooth stones striking Goliath in the one spot unprotected from armor, the middle of the forehead. Goliath falls "face down on the ground".

Through out time, this biblical story has been used to illustrate the victory of the underdog. That with faith and confidence it is possible to overcome what appears to be impossible odds. The story is an illustration of another treasured line from the Hebrew Scriptures attributed to the prophet Zechariah, "'Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit', says the Lord of Hosts." (Zechariah 4:6)

This morning I would like to share with you the "Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism". These principles were outlined by Unitarian minister and theologian James Luther Adams who lived from 1901-1994. His writings continue to have a great influence not only on Unitarian Universalists but among other religious liberals.

In an essay outlining guiding principles of a free faith, Adams offers five principles of religious liberalism. The allusion to David and Goliath actually came from the publisher who felt it was a catchy title. So, if the principles of our faith are like the smooth stones tucked into David's pouch who is Goliath? Are Unitarian Universalists

the scrappy underdogs trying to knock down those with greater numbers, more wealth and larger influence than ourselves? Should we challenge the Catholics or the Mormons to a rumble, each coming from different sides of Easton's beach and then see whose side God is really on?

Of course, I am joking. The only reason I would suggest such a thing as a Religious Rumble is because it is so far from our Unitarian Universalist way. Our respect for the perspectives of other people and the importance of religious freedom means it is more likely that we would host a dialogue or collaborate on a service project than fight our neighbors with different beliefs.

However, taking the David and Goliath metaphor a bit further, there are some things happening in the world that call on us to be more courageous and assertive about our faith. Although I do not support physical combat, there are some trends in America and around the world that need to be challenged not simply to preserve our Unitarian Universalist values but to establish a more just and loving world.

Smooth Stone #1- Revelation is continuous.

The truth is not sealed within the pages of the Bible or in church doctrines. The Sacred continues to breathe this very moment and is revealed through nature and history and through out our lives.

As religious liberals, our ultimate faith is not in our selves but in God. You may be surprised to hear me say that. After all, this congregation is open to members who are Atheist, Buddhist, Pagan, and Humanist. Although some people in this community believe in God, many do not. Personally, I like the way that James Luther Adams defines "God." He himself was a liberal Christian but he had a broad inclusive faith; Adams defined God as "that which ultimately concerns humanity" or "that in which we should place our confidence".

As religious liberals, our faith is not in the doctrines of the church, the truth as found in the Bible or even in our own powers of reason—we are dependent on a power not of our own making. You can call it God or the Spirit of Life or the Interdependent Web of all existence. James Luther Adams writes, "God is the reality that works upon us and through us and in accord with which we can discern truth, beauty, or goodness. It is that reality which works in nature, history, and thought and under certain conditions creates human good in human community."

This brings us to the Second Smooth Stone- Free Choice and Respect in Human Relations.

The other day, I drove behind a car on Bellevue Avenue with a bumper sticker that read, "The road to Hell is paved with Liberals". Boy, would I have liked to have caught a glimpse of that driver! Sometimes people who hold a more conservative or orthodox faith accuse liberals of being arrogant by refusing to "submit" to God's authority and "the truth" found in Biblical tradition. The irony is that as liberals we do not claim to be infallible. We do not "submit" to the divine authority of tradition because revelation is continuous. As our UCC brothers and sisters would say, "God is still speaking." The workings of the sacred in nature and history calls us not to submit but to engage with ancient wisdom, current opinions, our own life experiences, and to promote free and open discourse.

Free and open discourse is important because it is our moral obligation to **Establish a Just and Loving Community- Smooth Stone #3.** A just and loving

community is not just a good idea or something that would “be nice”. As human beings we can either obstruct the establishment of a just and loving community or participate in creating one. Our faith in the goodness of life calls us, you and me, to speak and work, live and love in order to bring more understanding and healing into this world.

We have caught glimpses of what a truly just and loving community for all would be like. There are many metaphors used to help us picture it. One of them is the Freedom Land that we sang about in our opening hymn. Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God or the Reign of Love.

Jesus often used the metaphor of a seed to describe the creative powers of God at work in the world. The descendants of Channing chose the Sower as the central image of our worship space. This image of a man walking confidently through the landscape sowing seeds reminds us that we are partners with the sacred. We participate in processes that bring about universal justice much like planting a seed. As human beings, we do not have the power to make a seed germinate, grow and blossom, but we can help create the conditions that make such growth possible.

Smooth Stone #4- Make Good Things Happen One of James Luther Adams famous maxims was “By their groups ye shall know them.” He was a big proponent of voluntary association that is, choosing to become an active participant of a community. Our reading this morning talked about “the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing.”

Over the past ten years or so, this church has become dedicated to “Ministry Together” or shared ministry. Together we make good things happen, more than we ever could on our own.

James Luther Adams calls this “social incarnation”. The holy made manifest through the time and energy of people working together not just to preserve this church but to create a new and broader fellowship.

For example our hosting Margaret Starbird’s lecture this week on Mary Magdalene gave a forum for women and men of this community to consider the forgotten feminine side of the Christian story. Next Sunday, you will hear more about our Green Congregation effort that not only empowers us to examine our impact on the environment but also inspires other congregations and individuals to do the same.

This brings me to the **Fifth Smooth Stone- Positive Change is Possible**. There are so many negative trends in society that it is easy to despair and to imagine that our efforts make no difference. Liberal religion offers ultimate optimism. Looking at history and nature, you can be assured that we have the resources both human and divine to bring about positive change.

Now, I am not a Pollyanna and neither was our theologian. We may not see immediate change. We live with the reality of war, terrorism, prejudice, crime, storms, and pollution. Human beings are subject to oppression, disease, corruption, and greed.

Our faith is in the face of reality to hold on to the five smooth stones of our faith and trust in the living God. Not a man with a beard sitting on a cloud. Not a God of war and judgment. Not a magical God that requires blind faith. Remember God is not God’s name. In our broad inclusive faith, God is “that which ultimately concerns humanity” or “that in which we should place our confidence”.

On the cover of your order of service, the five stones are listed as reminders. Sometimes it is hard to describe a free faith. I offer these insights to you not to hurl at anyone but as spiritual touchstones as you face seeming insurmountable obstacles:

- Revelation is Continuous
- Free Choice and Respect in Human Relations
- Establish a Just and Loving Community
- Make Good Things Happen
- Positive Change is Possible