

## **Bound by Covenant** **August 14, 2011**

So, this past Wednesday, I was driving to my yoga class, having a nice, ordinary morning, not even really fully awake yet, when, as I rounded the curve on Mary Street that comes to South Lamar, I spotted a billboard advertising a morning talk show on KLBJ AM radio. Above the smaller lettering at the bottom giving the names of the show's hosts and the station's number on the AM dial, the billboard said, in big, big, bold letters, God, Gays and Guns.

God, Gays, and Guns. Now, when I've told people about this sign since then--and believe me, I've *told* people-- a few have asked, "What's it mean?" And I guess that's a legitimate response. But being a gay person, I can assure you *my* reaction has been much more visceral than intellectual. Sure, the station can say, as it has been saying to people calling in, "these are the topics that get the phones ringing." And alongside that, it can claim innocent yet clever alliteration.

But imagine for a moment, if you will, living in a far away land, in a state known for its right-wing Christian culture *and* for its love of guns. Imagine being a gay person living in that state. What would *you* think, reading that billboard?

Honestly, I wasn't sure what I was thinking after I saw that sign. But I knew what I was *feeling*. I was feeling my whole body shaking, my heart hurting, my very inherent worth and dignity being threatened. This wasn't innocent advertising. This wasn't, oh, three coincidental topics that just happened to fit the bill...board. This was and is the insidious, intimidating implication, that if we wanted to, because God is on our side, we could pick all you gays off, one by one. Bang, bang, and bang. Rarely have I felt so eerily unsafe and unsettled. And, fearing other people might just drive by that billboard without giving it much thought or care, until one day some ignoramus shoots a gay person because "God told him to," I catch a suddenly much deeper understanding of the prophetic and elegiac words, attributed to the German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemoller. It is he who is believed to have said:

First they came for the communists

And I didn't speak out because I was not a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,

And I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,

And I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me  
And there was no one left to speak out for me.

Sure. Some of you may be thinking, surely you're over-reacting. It's just a billboard. Bad taste, bad humor, yes. But nothing seriously hateful would ever happen *here*, not in *Austin*. But understand, such rationalizing and minimizing have always been part of how people respond to threatening messages and movements.

Also, remember, *even* if the station's claim is true that, "God, Gays, and Guns" is simply what gets the phones ringing, what they're saying by that is, we prioritize our ratings; that's how we market ourselves, that's how we manage to succeed.

OK, if so, then remember what Chris Hedges writes in *Empire of Illusion*: "A culture that does not grasp the vital interplay between morality and power, which mistakes management techniques for wisdom, which fails to understand that the measure of a civilization is its compassion, not its speed or ability to consume, condemns itself to death."

In other words, I'm having a really hard time believing that KLBJ AM has grasped the vital interplay between morality and power. In fact, with such audaciously hateful advertising as that of this radio station, and with

this year's ever-growing cast of very *religiously* conservative presidential candidates and the groups supporting them, I fear a very slippery slope toward the regression of human rights awaiting us if we do not act.

That's why, when people don't respond to the billboard with much alarm, I can't help but think, oh dear: When the rubber hits the road, when the other stuff hits the fan, are there people out there who are going to end up having to say, "Then they came for the gays, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't gay"? Or, you know, "Then they came for Planned Parenthood," "Then they came for the poor," "Then they came for the mentally ill..." you name it.

The good news, I am grateful and happy and relieved to report, is that many, many people, including those who first didn't understand the significance of the billboard, have been calling the station to complain. Thanks to social media, even friends from Boston, Massachusetts; Scranton, Pennsylvania; Portland, Oregon; and Tuscaloosa, Alabama, have called in complaints. All they had to do was dial 512-832-4051. That's 512-832-4051.

Of course, the billboard is still up. And I found out it's up in *three* Austin locations, not just South Lamar. Regarding the one on South Lamar, though, in the days since I first saw it, I admit I have thought about shooting

at it with a paint gun. I've also fantasized about climbing up to the billboard and sitting there in protest, calling local news stations, and telling them I'm not coming down till the sign comes down. (Or the police drag me down.) I have not yet followed through with either idea, though I'm still tempted by the latter.

I know, though, that the best way, to respond is to express my anger, my fear, and my hurt in ways that reflect my religious values, that shine light on the best of whom I wish and strive to be. That means, for one, not vandalizing the sign. Climbing up and sitting, well, I might categorize that as an act of civil disobedience, which I'm all for. But I promise to shelve that one for now, unless I hear otherwise from the congregation or my conscience.

For now, I am meeting the radio station's freedom of speech with freedom of speech, speaking freely to the station, to friends, family, and strangers about how much this frightens, hurts, and angers me.

And that is, in large part, what we as religious people are called to do--to speak honestly, respectfully, and boldly. Similarly, when someone *else* is suffering, we are called to listen deeply, authentically, and with the understanding that our lives are not separate, but interrelated. That is why,

in our own congregational covenant of right relations, we covenant, for example:

- To practice caring for one another, especially in times of need
- To contribute to the mission of Wildflower Church while practicing self care and staying mindful of our own needs
- To practice mutual responsibility and shared leadership

Ours is a religious community in which the interrelated nature of our lives must be held at the *forefront* of our lives. In fact, as we heard Tom read from *Worship that Works*, it is the basis, the *foundation*, of who we are. Arnason and Rolenz quote Rev. Bret Smith as saying, “the basis of a community is an individual’s faithfulness to and with others during life, conceived of as a spiritual walk with others.”

All around the world, though, we witness so many people seeming to have faithfulness only to *themselves*. With the rise of the Arab spring, for instance, there was at first, and still is, a very moving, powerful phenomenon of people gathering in nonviolent protest, singing, marching, camping together in public squares. But in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, among other places, such spiritual walking together has been met with violent military action, rolling right over such hopes and visions, in leaders’ own determination to maintain their power. In London, people are justifiably

horrified by the violence of mostly young people rioting, looting, and setting buildings on fire. But what of the more surreptitious violence of racism and classism, poverty and high unemployment that was a catalyst for such an angry free for all?

Believe me, I'm not arguing innocence on either side. Whether we examine the events of North Africa, the Middle East, London, Washington, DC, Wall Street, or Ames, Iowa, everyone involved, especially those with any power, seems to have strong *beliefs* about what is right. But how many among them is walking in sustained and sustaining covenant with one another? Seeing such failure of deliberate cooperation and inclusivity is one reason why it is particularly important to remind ourselves, as Unitarian Universalists, of the covenantal nature of this Free Church we share. As Rev. Bret Smith says,

In the Free Church understanding of religion, covenant is prominent. Theology “begins” with the question of human nature, because the nature of God is unknown, each individual having a different and uniquely direct relationship to God. The most important question is “How do I treat my neighbor, that is, others?”.... Consent [Smith continues] is always operative and always shaping the individual because the freedom to explore and understand one’s unique and direct relationship

with God is the purpose and aim of spiritual community, of giving one's consent to walk with others.

“The most important question is, ‘How do I treat my neighbors?... Consent is always operative.’” The late Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams, when writing about the five basic principles of liberal religion known as the five smooth stones, proclaimed among other things that all relationships ought ideally to be based on mutual consent, rather than on coercion. Mutual consent acknowledges and affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person, while coercion objectifies others as less than. Consent demands you see the individual soul. Coercion allows you to use those you have objectified as means to meet your hoped for ends.

At this congregation, we covenant:

- to engage in direct, respectful communication and active listening, particularly in times of conflict and misunderstanding, and
- to honor and celebrate our differences.

By being in covenant this way, we cannot *get* away with objectifying and manipulating. I mean, we can certainly try. Consciously or unconsciously. But if we do, I hope we will call ourselves, or be called by others, back into

covenant. It may be scary, or embarrassing, but it's worth it. I've seen it work wonders.

During Time for All Ages, as you'll remember, I talked to the children about how every night at summer camp this past July, the teenagers that created their own covenant would go over it, seeing where they had succeeded, where they had fallen short, discerning whether anything needed to be added to the covenant, and then they would recommit to it. The youth did not live their covenant perfectly. I doubt anyone does. Still, every day they were courageous and honest and bold enough to reflect upon their actions and attitudes, and that courage and honesty and boldness drew them deeper and deeper into beloved community, as well as into individual wholeness. These Unitarian Universalist teens convince me again and again that the Bible is right when it says, "And a little child shall lead them."

Of course, teenagers aren't so little. But you get the point. It's the *spirit* of the child that is at work. It's the spirit of life and love, not yet hindered by very adult kinds of hatred or greed. As adults, we too must seek the spirit of the child, and we too must strive always to stand on the side of love, seeing the holy in every person, standing up against hatred and violence--others' and our own. That being so, let me end by saying this: 512-832-4051. Or, ok, that was my penultimate statement. Let me really end by saying once more these words:

We come to this time and this place:

To rediscover the wondrous gift of free religious community;

To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness, and beauty of life;

To reaffirm the way of the open mind and full heart;

To rekindle the flame of memory and hope; and

To reclaim the vision of an earth made fair, with all her people one.

So may it be. Amen.

#1014 Standing on the Side of Love