

**“A Heretic’s Welcome” by Rev. Barbara Merritt  
The Worship Service of September 7, 2008**

FIRST READING

— *from Philippians IV, 8*

“Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

SECOND READING

-*from “Socrates’ Defense” by Plato*

The Greek poet, George Seferis wrote: “There are always but two parties, Socrates, and his accusers. One must choose.” I read to you from *Socrates’ Defense* as he faced his own accusers in ancient Athens. Socrates was on trial for heresy for which the penalty was death.

“I do not know what effect my accusers have had upon you, gentlemen, but my own part I was almost carried away by them—their arguments were so convincing. On the other hand, scarcely a word of what they said was true.

What did my critics say in attacking my character? I must read out their affidavit, so to speak, as though they were my legal accuser: ‘Socrates is guilty of criminal meddling, in that he inquires into things below the earth and in the sky, and makes the weaker argument defeat the stronger, and teaches others to follow his example.’”

Socrates responds by saying, “This is what I do. I go about seeking and searching in obedience to the divine command, if I think that anyone is wise, whether citizen or stranger, and when I think that person is not wise, I try to help the cause of God by proving that he is not. Perhaps someone will say, ‘Do you feel no compunction,

Socrates, at having followed a line of action which puts you in danger of the death penalty?’

I might fairly reply to him, ‘You are mistaken, my friend, if you think that a man who is worth anything ought to spend his time weighing up the prospects of life and death. A person has only one thing to consider in performing any action—that is, whether he is acting rightly or wrongly, like a good person or a bad one.

The truth of the matter is this. Where a person has once taken up his stand, either because it seems best to him or in obedience to his orders, I believe he is bound to remain and face the danger.

Suppose you said to me, ‘Socrates, on this occasion we shall disregard your accusers and acquit you, but only on one condition, that you give up spending your time on this quest and stop philosophizing. If we catch you going on in the same way, you shall be put to death.’

I should reply, ‘I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you, and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practicing philosophy.’

Please do not be offended if I tell you the truth. No one on earth who conscientiously opposes either you or any other organized democracy, and flatly prevents a great many wrongs and illegalities from taking place in the state to which he belongs, can possibly escape with his

life...the difficulty is not so much to escape death; the real difficulty is to escape from doing wrong, which is far more fleet of foot.

If you expect to stop denunciation of your wrong way of life by putting people to death, there is something amiss with your reasoning. This way of escape is neither possible nor creditable. The best and easiest way is not to stop the mouths of others, but to make yourselves as good as you can.

Now it is time that we were going, I to die and you to live, but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but God.”

## SERMON

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Where were you this summer? On a beach enjoying a cool ocean breeze? Or working in your garden? Did you travel far or stay close to home? What work did you accomplish? How playful were you able to be? Did your summer include visits with friends and family? Did you get to worship in your own way—here or elsewhere? Part of being together in religious community is sharing stories about where we have traveled outside this sanctuary.

My own summer included a family reunion in Sedona, Arizona, and some wonderful days in Maine. But the vast majority of my summer was spent in the 16th century in Europe. Not by choice, mind you. I was assigned last spring a major academic paper on The Effect of the Radical Protestant Reformation on the Unitarian Universalist Church of Today. To do that, I had to read four very long books on our history; on our founders and martyrs and original visionaries who first imagined the kind of a church where all souls would be welcomed and find encouragement.

It is not a bad idea to go back to the beginning. Ed Friedman (one of the great systems analysts) claims that the vision of the founders of any institution (or indeed any school of thought) transmit their genius and clarity through generations and centuries. It is almost like an intellectual form of DNA—replenishing over and over again. But it is not only ideas that get transmitted. There is also an emotional climate that filters through the ages, measured in the way people imagine their surroundings, take risks, self-differentiate and trust new possibilities.

Doing intensive historical research also carries the additional bonus of discovering arcane (but fascinating) details about the ordinary. For instance, the word *influenza*—I always assumed it was just another word for the flu—but it literally translates “influenced by the stars.” Back in the 16th century, the source of illness was believed to be astrological.

And these pulpit Bibles that sit at the front of almost every Protestant Church. I never gave it too much thought. There have been pulpit Bibles at First Unitarian Church for 223 years. (I

assumed they came with the candlesticks.) But back in the 16th century, when Martin Luther said that the basis for religious was not the Roman Catholic Church, but the Old and New Testaments, Bibles were expensive and rare. So in Protestant Churches, the Bible had to be visible and accessible so that everyone might be able to see for themselves. “Feel free—anytime.”

The churches and synagogues and temples have been trying to make truth accessible since time in-memorial. We often choose different bells, books and rituals. But all religious groups ask, “How can we share the truth we have discovered?” “How can we reach out to the larger community?” “How can we let people know that they are welcome here?” One of the questions that has arisen here at 90 Main Street is, “How we can better relate to a vital and expanding Hispanic community in Worcester?” How can our free church tradition be accessible to that particular demographic?

May I suggest that we at least might begin with the announcement that our founding, visionary, martyr, Michael Servetus was Spanish?! Michael Servetus, born in Spain in 1509, was the only man that John Calvin had burned at the stake as a heretic.

What I learned this summer was that there were literally hundreds of thousands of men, women and children in the 1500's who were slaughtered and tortured and burned for their religious convictions. What you believed about the church, the Bible and the appropriate time for baptism would often determine whether you lived or died, whether you could remain in your home and whether or not you could continue to work.

So why does history record, focus and revisit the violent clash between John Calvin and Michael Servetus? Why did this one burning of a theologian get so much attention then, and deserve so much attention now?

Some historians believe that John Calvin was “the last great medieval mind” and that Servetus was one of the “first great Renaissance/Enlightenment minds.”

Now until my current in-depth reading, I had always thought that John Calvin was a rat-fink for burning my guy at the stake. But now, after further research, what I think about Mr. Calvin can not be said from the pulpit. Well, I can at least give you a sense of what I think of John Calvin. He was a creep, a bully, a hypocrite, a malevolent, hateful, despicable, heinous, loathsome, reprehensible, revolting, vicious child of God.

Now, I have been told that only human acts are evil. We cannot (and should not) judge the person himself or herself. But the moral philosopher, Hannah Arendt wrote that hypocrisy is, in truth, “the most hateful of vices because it desires to appear virtuous and convinces itself that it is virtuous, all the while destroying all possibilities for integrity with duplicity and lies.” She says (and I quote), “It makes the hypocrite rotten-to-the core.”

I knew since I was a child that Servetus was tortured and killed by Calvin. So Calvin killed someone in a particularly cruel way. It happens. What I didn't know, until July, was that Calvin actively collaborated with Calvin's own worst enemy, the Catholic Inquisition, to try to get the Inquisition to do his dirty work for him. The Inquisition was busy killing tens of thousands of Protestants (Calvin's Protestants) when Calvin (hearing that Servetus was being held on trial by the Catholic Inquisition for heresy) sent his personal correspondence with Servetus to the Inquisition to provide conclusive evidence that Servetus should be destroyed by the Catholics. (In Calvin's defense, he claimed that he had not personally put the postage on the letters that were sent. His first lieutenant had actually delivered the package.) This act of collaboration with the enemy would be the modern-day equivalent of George Bush calling up Osama Bin Laden and saying, “I know you've killed quite a few of my people, but there's one really bad Pakastani that I think we can both agree is harmful to the order of the state. While you are in the region, would you mind killing him for me?”

Luckily for Servetus, after the Catholics had found him guilty of heresy and condemned him to die, he escaped. Unluckily for Servetus, he decided to go to Geneva. Calvin had him arrested, tried and burn. So why did Calvin hate Servetus so desperately?

First and foremost, this was about authority and the source of authority. Servetus in his writings, in his books did not just claim that the trinitarian formulation of creedal confession was not biblical. Servetus said something far more threatening. He said that neither the church, nor the state could decide what was true or false. Neither was the Bible an infallible source of truth. For Servetus, truth rested within the human heart, mind and soul. It was the conscience that would lead us in the right direction. It was the choices human beings made that mattered.

Servetus wrote: “All seem to me to have part of the truth and a part of error, and each discerns the error of others and fails to see his own.” (Some things never change.)

But Calvin believed that allowing human beings to decide for themselves what was true and real, and what was false and in error would result in anarchy for the state, the complete destruction of the civil order, and would reduce the church to being “small and impotent.” (So, he was right on the last one.) Servetus' humanism represented for Calvin the destruction of everything he knew and loved. And yet that was not the worst of Servetus' sins in Calvin's eyes.

They clashed about the nature of God. For Servetus, God was gracious and expansive and accessible—present in the individual soul. Servetus wrote, “One soul is a certain light of God, a

spark of the spirit of God, having an innate light of divinity.” According to Servetus, God was to be found within and everywhere in the creation. Servetus wrote about Christ and the holy and true: “He descends to the lowest depths and ascends to the highest and fills all things. He walks upon the wings of the wind, rides upon the air and inhabits the place of angels. His place is not any particular part of heaven...he dwells within us.” For Servetus, human beings were meant to find union with God. Human beings were meant to participate in the divine nature.

Contrast Servetus’ mysticism with Calvin’s understanding of the Almighty. For John Calvin, God was distant, unapproachable, absolute sovereign and wholly other. God created human beings to be totally depraved—born in original sin and sometimes predestined to damnation. Completely determined not only in their final destination, but each soul had been either selected for salvation (or condemned to everlasting hellfire and damnation) since before the creation began. And you didn’t get to know whether you were a goat or a sheep—saved or damned until you died. The idea that God was close, loving and accessible drove Calvin “round the bend.” At the trial Calvin described himself screaming at Servetus. These are Calvin’s own words: “When Servetus asserted that all creatures are of the proper essence of God and so all things are full of gods (for he did not blush to speak and write his mind in this way) I, wounded with the indignity, objected: ‘What, wretch! If one stamps the floor would one say that one stamped on your God? Does not such an absurdity shame you?’ But he answered, ‘I have no doubt that this bench or anything you point to is God’s substance. This is my fundamental principle that all things are a part and portion of God and the nature of things is the substantial spirit of God.’”

Servetus went so far as to say that God was in children. Calvin insisted that children were completely evil. I read from the book, The Hunted Heretic, a biography of Servetus: “When Servetus declared that children could not commit a mortal sin, Calvin answered, ‘Servetus is worthy that the little chickens, all sweet and innocent as he makes them, should dig out his eyes a hundred thousand times.’” Calvin was a little twisted. I don’t think Calvin was a nice man, but I’ve told you that already.

The issue of when to baptize and christen was a big question back then. I am pleased that this morning after church (and many other times this fall) we will be welcoming little children into the world. In our christenings and welcomings and baptisms we welcome each child of God as innately good, as innocent and loved souls not as “condemned and predestined and depraved.”

Servetus was also condemned to die because he was declared to be an Anabaptist—a person who believed that one’s commitment to God had to come as an adult, as a choice, an important choice. Back then if you believed in adult baptism or re-baptism as it was called, you were a heretic and tens of thousands were killed in Calvin’s Switzerland and in Germany and throughout Europe.

To be fair, the Anabaptists didn’t just say that only an adult could commit his or her life to Christ. They said that infant baptism was satanic. There was a lot of name calling back then. And a lot of conviction that if you were on the right side of God, you would be saved and civilization would flourish. If you were on the wrong side you would go to hell, and you would destroy your church, your country and western civilization.

In the end Servetus begged for religious tolerance and as Calvin writes, “the plea for toleration was itself a confession of guilt.” So this is how Servetus died on October 27, 1553, and I quote from Fail, an eyewitness source: “Servetus was led to a pile of wood still green. A crown of straw and leaves (sprinkled with sulfur) was placed upon his head. His body was attached to the stake with an iron chain. His book was tied to his arm. A stout rope was wound four or five times around his neck. He asked that it

should not be further twisted. When the executioner brought the fire before his face, he gave such a shriek that all the people were horror-stricken. As he lingered, some threw on wood. In a fearful wail he cried, “O Jesus, son of the Eternal God, have pity on me. At the end of half an hour, he died.” Servetus’ biographer, Roland Bainton adds: “Servetus might have been saved by shifting the position of the adjective and confessing Christ as the Eternal Son rather than as the Son of the Eternal God. That expiring cry was therefore one last gesture of defiance to human folly and confession to God.”

Returning to the 21st century where Servetus' world view has triumphed—except in one arena: the source of ultimate authority. Many still consider it heretical to allow mere human beings to decide what is true and what is not—what is real and what is false. Some hold that the Bible is the infallible source of truth or the Koran. Some look to the church or the mosque or the temple.

The terrible ongoing conflict about abortion in our country is not about whether you think abortion is moral or immoral. (We are, of course, free to make our own decisions about that.) The argument between the pro-choice and the anti-choice forces are about who has the authority to make this decision to terminate a pregnancy. The anti-choice forces claim it must be mandated by the state. The pro-choice say that the decision must be made by the individual who will bear the child.

Even in 2008, Unitarians and Universalists are usually considered heretics by the orthodox, indeed by most religious people. We continue to insist on this radical principle that the source of ultimate religious authority is not in Rome or in Washington, D.C., not in bishops, not in this pulpit, not in these Bibles. The source of truth and goodness and divinity is within your own heart and mind and soul.

I hope you come here on Sunday mornings to be reminded of your own powerful spiritual center; of your strength, of your courage. Remember that what is holy holds you up day after day. In the floor boards—in the wind, in every breath you take. Because every Sunday you will be sent forth, out into the world to do what Socrates says is ultimately important, “trying to act rightly, devoting our lives to goodness.” With this gift of our own powerful and sustaining legacy of heresy, may we continue to dedicate our lives to the pursuit of truth and goodness.