

“What Your Minister Said”

**a reflection
By Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, May 18, 2008
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

I begin my reflection this morning with a disclaimer: Unless otherwise noted herein, the opinions that are about to be expressed are solely those of the speaker. They are not the opinions of Heritage Church. They are not the opinions of anyone sitting in this sanctuary today. And they are certainly not the opinions of the good folks of the Stewardship Committee, who will – in a few minutes – be asking you for your money (and who, no doubt, are right now growing more and more nervous about what their minister might be going to say today!).

In other words – I’m Bill Gupton, and I approved this message...

Perhaps you’re familiar with the phrase “political junkie” – used to describe a person who follows politics with the same kind of avid interest that a sports fan follows sports. Well, your minister is both a sports fan, *and* a political junkie. As a result of this – and probably also because of the *passion* I tend to have around matters of public policy – people have, on occasion, said to me that I should consider running for office.

I always respond to their comments the same way: with a laugh, and words along the lines of, “Yeah, but the trouble is, I could never get elected. Being a Unitarian Universalist minister would be the kiss of death!”

Surely, I tell them, my religious beliefs alone would be sufficient to sink any shot I would ever have at getting elected to public office. For one thing, I have said publicly, on many occasions, that I am not a Christian. I have said that while I revere the teachings of Jesus, I do not believe him to have been God incarnate, nor is he my personal Lord and Savior.

I have said that the Bible is a book written by men – not God ... men driven by political and cultural agendas. That I do not believe in the Devil, or Hell. That the only revelation I believe is necessary to save us, is a revelation in our own hearts.

Yes, my religious beliefs alone – oft-stated in this pulpit – tell me nothing, if not this: Though they are almost identical to the beliefs held by Thomas Jefferson, I am definitely not electable to public office, in modern America (nor, frankly – and this is perhaps the saddest commentary of all – nor would be Jefferson himself).

Yet until very recently, it never occurred to me that you – each and every one of you – might be unelectable, too. It never really dawned on me that my beliefs might cause others to take a negative view, of *you*. Call me naïve, but I’ve always operated under the premise that each person is responsible for his or her *own* thoughts, his or her own opinions, and beliefs. I’ve never really bought into the idea of guilt-by-association.

But things grow more and more Orwellian with each passing day, so be forewarned – today’s sermon might just be harmful to your political career! The thought police may be listening. What your minister says this morning might, years from now, be held against you...

If you think I’m overstating it – if you think that’s unlikely – I have just two words for you: “*Reverend Wright*.” You can hardly deny that those are two of the most inflammatory words in American society today. It seems everyone has an opinion – a *strong* opinion – about Rev. Jeremiah Wright, though most have never heard him speak, never read a word he has written. Heck, I’d venture that many Americans believe he’s a Muslim – at the least, most certainly know nothing about the Reverend’s beliefs, or his religious tradition. Yet pass judgment on him, they have.

So I’ll admit it, right up front – those of us who serve as ministers in the broadly defined “liberal church” (which, by the way, has nothing to do with political liberalism, but everything to do with *theological* liberalism) – those of us who minister to congregations in the free church tradition, are feeling a little defensive when it comes to Rev. Wright these days – and, I think, with good cause.

Let me say a little more about what we call the “free church tradition.” In our tradition – the Universalists and the Unitarians, the Church of Christ and the Baptists and the Congregationalists and others – the preacher is granted the freedom to speak his or her truth, without censorship or fear of recrimination. In return, the parishioner is free to believe, or not believe – agree, or not agree – with what is said.

A dialogue ensues. In the context of that dialogue, *each* individual – you, and me – is responsible for working out, with care and consideration, responsibility and reflection, his or her own faith, responsible for, as we say here at Heritage Church, growing “into harmony with the Divine.”

In this tradition, the pulpit is regarded as a place where each may shed some light on that elusive thing we call “truth” – and where it is understood – understood – that what I say, from this pulpit, is what I believe – not, necessarily, what *you* believe. Hence, to return to my point, we ministers in the free church tradition – whether that church be black, or white, or gray – have been a bit taken aback, by the uproar surrounding Rev. Wright.

The following is from a recent newsletter column by my friend, colleague, and mentor in Columbus, Mark Belletini:

“I find myself more and more agitated as we approach [this] election. Whereas I always know that there will be mud-slinging and innuendo added to the mix, this particular election ... has ratcheted up the mud-slinging and innuendo to proportions for which the adjective ‘wicked,’ comes to mind as an appropriate modifier. Much of this has to do with the kind of deliberate and malicious distortion ... focused on a colleague [whom] I revere, Jeremiah Wright.”

Careful listeners will note that it was Mark Belletini, not I, who said he reveres Rev. Wright. But there are precious few careful listeners in the world today, and I have no doubt that some will leave here this morning convinced that I have said I revere Jeremiah Wright. Someone walking past in the hallway just then, or someone here in the sanctuary whose attention momentarily wandered, will believe that I had said exactly that. Which is how these things get out of hand.

But what, after all, is behind all this fuss about what someone’s minister said? Whatever it is, I tell you, it affects not only we who preach on Sunday mornings – it also affects you, who *attend* on Sunday mornings. Listen carefully to these words from CNN commentator Roland Martin – who, I suppose it would help to add, holds a Master’s degree in Christian Communication from Louisiana Baptist University:

“To every politician, whether you are a Democrat or a Republican – beware. The die has been cast. The repeated denunciations of [Rev.] Wright will now lead each and every single one of you, to have your pastors’ oral and written words examined. If even one thing is said, that can be construed as criticizing America, or deemed hateful, then expect to see it on YouTube, replayed for millions to see. I suggest you go to your pastor now and say, ‘Please, watch what you say! I don’t want to have to denounce you on national television.’ ”

So if anyone here today has ever thought about running for public office – and let me say, in all seriousness, that I hope some of you *do*, because we certainly could use more Unitarian Universalist values in the public sphere – I thought it might be fun, today, to share with you just a

small sampling of some of the things I have said, in this pulpit, in the six years I have been your pastor here at Heritage Church – a small sampling, but more than enough out-of-context sound bites to convince you that not only I – but perhaps even you – might have trouble taking up a career as a public servant, in the times in which we now live.

Since it's both timely and topical, in light of the California Supreme Court ruling earlier this week, let me begin this anthology by saying something I have said here on many other occasions: I fully and completely support the right of gay and lesbian couples to be married in the United States of America. What's more, on multiple occasions I have, as an ordained minister, officiated at wedding ceremonies for gay couples – though I regret to say, none of those ceremonies held any legal standing whatsoever. They were symbolic, with religious and spiritual significance both in my eyes, and in the hearts of those participating and attending. They were, to a certain extent, acts of civil disobedience.

Now, as if my saying that alone weren't enough to doom a political career, listen to what your minister said about the same subject on Nov. 16, 2003, in a sermon titled "Who Has the Right?":

"Moral absolutes, and concepts of right and wrong, are very much open to debate. And it seems we're having that debate, right now, in the United States... When I hear about 'Defense of Marriage,' I often wonder just what it is about marriage that people want to 'defend.' Will a heterosexual Christian couple in this country suddenly be denied the right to get married if and when my Unitarian Universalist friends Dana and Linda, [a lesbian couple who have lived together nearly as long as Jennifer and I have], are allowed to get legally married? I think not! But perhaps what would be in jeopardy, for that hypothetical heterosexual couple, is their ability to feel socially and legally (not to mention morally) superior to Dana and Linda. What would be denied is their *exclusive* right to marriage. And isn't that exactly what America is, or should be, about – the denial of exclusive rights for some, in favor of *inclusive rights for all*?"

A year and a half after I said those words – with political agendas continuing to fuel a climate of homophobia in our society – I had this to say, in a sermon titled "Ten Things I Like About Jesus":

"Jesus never once, in any known quote or story about him, mentioned homosexuality. Almost all of the bigotry and fear being directed at gay and lesbian people today is done so with some kind of Christian justification – yet the man on whom Christianity is supposedly based never uttered a single syllable about – much less against – gays.

“In fact, his preaching most frequently was leveled *against* those who took a judgmental, holier-than-thou attitude toward the oppressed groups in his culture. This, as much as anything else, provoked Jesus’ enemies – this, and his unrelenting insistence on ... *universalist inclusion*.”

OK – now we’re starting to get warmed up! As an aside, I have to admit, it was kind of fun going back through all my past sermons, and finding some of these quotes. Believe me, there’s a whole lot more, where those came from. Here’s one, on another subject your minister feels strongly about:

“It has now been more than *five years* since September 11,” I said in the fall of 2006, in a sermon titled “Fear and Loathing in America.” “How long will we continue to turn a blind eye to the problems facing our society, while making every single public policy decision from a place of *fear*? I can tell you this: The terrorists have won, when we allow fear to dictate what we do – in the world, and at home.”

Or how about these words, from another 2006 sermon, titled “The Goal”:

“Any religion worth its salt is, when all is said and done, about justice. About both an honest recognition of the fact that our world is a place of injustice – and a powerful motivation to bring an end to that injustice... This ... is no mindless exercise in patriotism. It is a call for world community – a call that could not be more relevant than today, in this troubled time in which we live. Nations are pitted against one another in bloody conflict – and *we* are at the forefront – no longer representatives of justice, or the standard-bearers of a higher moral ground that we once were – but aggressors ourselves, in this sad, worldwide descent into conflict.”

As I mentioned earlier, that quote – and all these quotes – was purposely taken out of context, in order to make a point. When you take a quote out of context, it can more easily inflame, incite. It can give a one-dimensional image of its speaker. Most of you know me. After six years, many of you know me *well*. And I’d like to think that you know my ministry, and what I stand for, is about a lot more than calling America an aggressor. But the fact is that, yes – I *do* believe, in recent times, that sadly, we have become aggressors. This saddens me. This troubles me. This infuriates me. And it calls me to preach – on occasion – from the prophetic tradition, calling to task the powers and principalities that allow things to be this way. Such preaching dates back to the early Hebrews, as enshrined in the Old Testament.

So, too, the preaching of Jeremiah Wright.

As long as I am back here, in the present, let me offer a comment on something I saw in the news, just yesterday, that shocked and appalled me. A U.S. soldier in Baghdad was found to have been using the Koran for target practice. Shooting bullets, into the Koran ... for fun. Folks, it is all too easy to say I am proud of my country – and, in truth, I am often *very* proud of my country. It is much harder still to say I am ashamed – but there are times, yes, there are times, when I am ashamed.

I preached, this past December, about one of those times. I spoke out against the Department of Homeland Security, and its attempt to deport Michigan restaurant owner Ibrahim Parlak, an immigrant to this country who, ironically, came here seeking political asylum.

Not only did your minister say the following words, in a sermon titled “The Price of Freedom” – he was also seen (and photographed) sitting in the courtroom here in Cincinnati, when the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals heard the case of Ibrahim Parlak.

“I must confess,” I preached the following Sunday, “that for most of my life, immigration was never an issue I paid very much attention to. Oh, I found it mildly amusing, whenever privileged white people – and it is almost *always* privileged white people – would grumble about this or that ‘other’ group of people taking away jobs, or needing assistance, or crowding the streets. I found it humorous that they didn’t seem to have a problem with those ‘other’ people as long as they were kept in their proper place – in a service role, cleaning their houses for them, or making their food, or mowing their lawns...

“But then came September 11, and suddenly men who looked like Ibrahim Parlak, men who sounded like Ibrahim Parlak, men who had *names* like Ibrahim Parlak, were under suspicion... I don’t know if Ibrahim Parlak is a terrorist – but I doubt it. What I do know is that he is apparently a man without a country – and what I do know is that, in *this* country, there has always been a price we must pay for freedom.

“What does it say of us if guilt by name-calling – at one time, it was ‘Communist,’ nowadays, it’s ‘terrorist’ – becomes the law of the land, superseding “innocent until proven guilty”? Whatever happened to ‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses’? Whatever happened to the American dream? Is it only to be made available to those of us who were lucky enough to be born here?”

Friends, these are just a few of the things that your minister has said. Should anyone ever desire to conduct a more thorough investigation, there are thick, three-ring binders that record everything I have composed to be said in this pulpit. In them, there is surely enough evidence to convict me –

and therefore, by association, to convict each of you – of what some seem to believe is *criminal*, in our day and time. Yes, I am guilty – guilty of being an independent thinker; guilty, of being a person who cares deeply about our world; guilty, of being someone who hopes to be able to *improve* that world.

Guilty, as charged.

I admit that I have often stood in this pulpit and spoken out against things that I believe to be wrong – just as I have stood here, with tears in my eyes, and lifted up things I believe to be worthy of celebration and honor.

Look, if you will – for a moment – at the bottom of the back of your order of service. Right there, under the calendar of events – are six words that say everything that needs to be said.

I am here – *we* are here – to celebrate life, to create community, and to seek justice. There are many times when we focus on the former, just as there must be those times when we focus on the latter. But no sound bite, no YouTube video clip, can possibly convey the fullness, the richness, of that one, central idea – the vision of the community which we are creating, each and every day, here at Heritage UU Church.

My friends, given the amount of time and effort I put into choosing the words I will say to you on Sunday mornings, I'm almost embarrassed to admit it – but when all is said and done, I believe it's really not all that important, what your minister said.

What is important, is what he *did*. What is important, is what *you* did. What we *continue to do*, together, as a religious community.

“Not by creeds, but by deeds, shall they be known...”

May we continue to speak our truth. May we strive to live out our principles. May we come to embody all that we believe.

And may we do so, until, at last – in the inspiring words of our congregational mission statement – “the world is infused with the values, that are the special aspirations of our faith.”

I'm Bill Gupton, and I approved this message...