

Ephesians 4:3

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

When my predecessor, the Reverend Philip Pearsall Carpenter, took on the ministry of Cairo Street Chapel in Warrington, in the winter of 1846 to 1847, it was during a time of great famine. In a letter to an American friend, Carpenter wrote that most of the mills had stopped; and a great many people had no work. There was a fever going around that was twice as bad as cholera - the stench of sickness in some of the boarding houses was almost unbelievable. He wrote they had now gotten so accustomed to see people with starving faces that one hardly thought of it, to see the faces of Warrington residents stretched thin with hunger.

This was the beginning of his ministry. You can imagine he might be daunted by the prospect; I know I would have been. Yet he wrote to his friend, speaking of his family's move to Warrington, "I consider it a great mercy that we were sent here when we were; for we have not only been useful ourselves, but have been able to stir up others."

Friends, my aim for this sermon is to ask you to consider what a mercy it is that we are here, in this challenging world, this hurting world today. It is a mercy that we are here, for we have the great possibility to be of help to others, and to stir one another up to save the world. How lucky we are, and how blessed, to be alive at this moment in world history.

There's a great day we can do as individuals, every day – even from our own homes, on days like this. But since this is the anniversary service, I want to talk about what might be possible for us as a movement, of Unitarians and Free Christians.

For as long as the word "Unitarian" has been in use in Britain and America, for the last two hundred years or so – we have been asking what the role of Unitarianism is in the world. What is our point, why are we here. I propose no final answers to that question here today, but I would like to address it, looking at both our traditions and the extraordinary challenges we face as a global community, this year and in the years to come.

One of the aspects of these discussions has been the creative tension between the specificities of our tradition with the generalities of how we apply that tradition. What I mean by that is: Unitarianism, historically, comes out of a specific tradition. Here in the UK, Unitarianism has been an ever-evolving branch of the dissenting Christian tradition. Our pre-Unitarian ancestors broke away from the church of England in 1662; a few of the congregations that sprung from that dissension would identify as Unitarian, several generations later, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (such as Rivington). Unitarian refers to a particular view about Jesus: that he was a human being, like us, and taught that

the greatest worship of the one God was in devotion to our universal father, and in acts of love and justice. Many Unitarians have claimed Biblical support for their arguments, including the text from Ephesians we heard today.

The generalness of our faith comes out of our specificity. If Jesus was human like us, and preached the worship of God, it follows, not unreasonably, that Judaism and Islam are not wrong in urging devotion to God as well. And perhaps, Unitarians continued, from about the 19th century on, perhaps there is some grain of truth to Buddhism and Shintoism and Hinduism as well, however many Gods they do, or do not, profess.

For most of our history, we have been a faith tradition that stresses tolerance and pluralism. Part of this stems from the fact that, historically, we know what it feels like to not be tolerated. Indeed, Theophilus Lindsey's 1774 sermon, on the founding of Essex Street Chapel, is all about toleration. He stressed that surely God meant for there to be different interpretations of Christianity; God did not mean us to be all exactly the same; nor did God intend that our differences would prevent us from working again. Now, to be historically precise, in that 1774 sermon Reverend Lindsey was only explicitly discussing Christianity; he did not say that other faiths were also valid, but it wasn't very long before Unitarians said that maybe the other great religions have some truth to them as well. Maybe no one faith has a monopoly on all the truth.

So we have in Unitarianism, from very early on in our tradition, this interplay between the generality of all religions having some truth to them – universalism, you might say – as well as the specific of Jesus' call, as we read in the gospel, to follow him in service, to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, to love our neighbour.

Through that interplay of the specific and the general, around the 19th century, we somehow came up with the invention of the modern world. As I said, in that first congregation of Essex Street Chapel, we have Joseph Priestley, who had recently moved South from Leeds, and Priestley's buddy from Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin, who was living in London but would sign the American revolution about <> two years later. Priestley and Franklin were two of the greats of the modern world. As well as both being involved in statescraft and religion, they helped discover the properties of electricity and oxygen (as well as helping found America, in Ben's case). Chemicals and electricity! They were helping to found an almost incredible age, of cars and boats and planes and plastics and computers and electro-magnetic forces and so on. All wonderful things – we are meeting today thanks to the internet. All also, extremely dangerous things. Dangerous because we can produce so many of them, endlessly, but there are consequences to producing millions and millions of these things, as we now know, as our oceans fill up with junk, and our skies with unhealthy levels of carbon dioxide. Science has made our lives much better, in so many ways. But there are limits we are learning. To paraphrase Sonny Curtis and The Clash, we fought the law of nature, and the law of nature is gonna win, sooner or later. We need to find a way to work *with* nature rather than fight against it. Potentially science can help us with that. Thousands and thousands of scientists are trying to do just that these days.

Unitarians helped build the modern world. It is an imperfect place, and human society is very unstable at the minute. We could be tempted to say, “well, if Unitarians helped create this mess, enough of this hubris; let us step back from messing around with creation, and be humble.” I do believe humility is an important virtue, now more than ever, but I do not think it particularly humble to say we won’t get involved, to abscond ourselves from moral responsibility – especially if we are still contributing to the problem, still using our cars and going on holidays and eating meat or what have you. A truer humility might be to say, “I know our tradition has been imperfect, and has made mistakes. I know I have made mistakes, errors of omission and commission throughout the course of my life. But I will do what I can. Future generations will look back and say what did you do? I will not seek to go it alone; not pretend I have all the answers. I will listen to the wisdom of others, especially those whose voices have been grievously neglected by society for so long, the voices of indigenous people, of women, of migrants, of the poor. And I will put my shoulder to the wheel of change, careful not to make matters any worse if I can, but mindful that we need to make things better.”

And we can make things better. Together, we can. “There is one body and one spirit,” the writer of Ephesians puts it. Or as you might say, we are all in this together. While we are in the midst of a prolonged global pandemic, it is worth remembering that Unitarians have long been involved in public health. Pearsall Carpenter, who I mentioned earlier, served on the Sanitary Commission in Warrington. He is remembered by a fountain behind the Town Hall – an almost neglected fountain, unfortunately, though I’m glad it hasn’t been torn down. It is not an accident that his friends and admirers chose to remember him with a fountain, because he worked very hard to make sure that the town had a public supply of healthy water, that wouldn’t transmit cholera. Carpenter had a profound moral imagination: he was able to envision a better world for those around him.

Perhaps the greatest moral imagination of that age belonged to Florence Nightingale, nurse, statistician, public health advocate, writer, visionary. Not technically a Unitarian – she didn’t self-identify as one – but we have so much to learn from her anyway. “Rather, ten times, die in the surf, heralding the way to a new world, than stand idly by on the shore.” Nightingale imagined that new, better world. “Rather, ten times, die in the surf, heralding the way to a new world, than stand idly by on the shore.”

A lot of the human failures around this pandemic have been failures of the moral imagination. In 2018 the President of the US, Donald Trump, cut hundreds of millions of dollars of funding from pandemic preparedness programs. Worrying about little things that might, or might not happen in the future – where is the benefit in that, politically? Whether this funding could have prevented the Covid outbreak is unknown; but I think it’s pretty clear that thousands more qualified scientists who would have been working on identifying threats and what to do about them, would have made a huge difference, and saved lives. We know that similar programs, many funded by the US government, were effective in reacting to the SARS and Ebola outbreaks. But when coronavirus came along, the US pandemic defense budget was scraped to the bone, and there was no capacity to react. A failure of moral imagination.

Moral imagination is not quite the same thing as smarts. The president of the US is certainly smart enough to know the basics of how viruses work. He and his vice-President are tested every day. Every one who comes in to contact with him, in the West Wing, is tested every day, and they are traced to see who they come into contact with. If they test positive for coronavirus, they are isolated. So the president knows how this virus operates. He simply refuses to treat others as he treats himself. It's a failure of moral imagination.

"Love others as you love yourself," the heart of Jesus' teaching, isn't complicated. But it isn't easy, either. Many have failed this test of moral imagination. Unitarianism calls us to proclaim truths that are simple to state but very challenging to practice. Proclaim liberty to captives and good news to the poor. One body, one spirit, one hope: proclaim that we really are all in this together, not just as idle rhetoric, but in the ultimate relationships of our lives.

As we face this challenging future – both the pandemic and the wider challenge of how we live sustainably on the earth – moral imagination is of the utmost importance for our species.

We need the moral imagination of Nightingale and Carpenter and Priestley and Franklin, the courage to envision a better world even when it may seem impossible. We need the moral imagination Jesus spurred us on to, to find the means within to love the holy, love God, love this world with all our heart, and love our neighbour as ourselves.

We can change this world. We've done it before. We can make it better – I'm not saying perfect, nothing is perfect but God, I'm saying that if we act with moral imagination and compassion, and if we work together, things will happen beyond our meagre individual understandings and fears, things better than we can imagine on our own. Open your heart to the promise of God. Open your heart to the hope of a better world, and the humility to put your shoulder to the wheel.

There is no reason why we cannot build a better world than this, a fairer world, a kinder world, a more beautiful world. A world of better relationships between ourselves and the majestic laws of nature that govern our ecosystem; a world that is planned with great care and reason, and true to the deepest stirrings of the heart. This is the year of the Lord's favour. It is a great mercy that you are here now. Now let's start saving the world.

Amen