

“ROOTS OF PREJUDICE”

(Note: sermon outline at bottom of document)

University Unitarian Church

July 17, 2022

Rev. Bruce A. Bode, Guest Speaker

Welcome

Good morning and welcome to University Unitarian Church, both to those of you tuning in virtually and to those of you here in the sanctuary.

I'm Bruce Bode, retired minister from across the Puget Sound in Port Townsend, Washington, where I served as the lead minister for the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship for fourteen years from 2004-2018.

This is my third consecutive summer to be present with you, and I thank my colleague and friend John Luopa for the invitation to be here.

I also wish to thank staff members Susan St. James, Byron Krystad, and Janine Larsen for their assistance in preparing for this service ... as well as Dwight Beckmeyer and Larissa Cox, who are providing the music for this service ... and, also, Jax Wokas, who along with Byron Krystad, will provide the technical support, which makes this service possible. Thanks to all of you!

Call to Worship

The words of this morning's Call to Worship are those of author William Saroyan from the Preface of his book *The Time of Your Life*:

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time
There shall be no ugliness or death
For yourself or for any life that your life touches.

Seek goodness everywhere; when it is found
Bring it out of its hiding-place
And let it be free and unashamed.

Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption.

Encourage virtue into whatever heart
It may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow
By the shame and terror of the world.

In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time
You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world,
But shall smile instead to its infinite delight and mystery.

(Excerpts from Preface of “The Time of Your Life” by William Saroyan)

Meditation & Period of Silence

As I mentioned earlier in my Welcome, two years ago I was one of your summer speakers – August 16, 2020. This was the summer, you may recall, that our nation was reeling from viewing the excruciating death on May 25 of George Floyd by suffocation at the hands of police officers in the city of Minneapolis.

My sermon that August, titled “The American Creed & Liberal Religion,” directly addressed the racial injustice related to the protests that erupted around the world in relation to George Floyd’s death.

It was primarily a call to fulfill the promise of the “American Creed,” as the late Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church characterized it in his book titled “The American Creed” – a creed that embodied a moral and spiritual vision which affirmed, as Forrest put it, “those truths our founders held self-evident: justice for all, because we are all created equal; and, liberty for all, because we are all endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights.”

The service that Sunday included reading excerpts from the powerful/poignant poem by Langston Hughes titled “Let America Be America Again:”

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—

So, my message on that Sunday two summers ago was one of *advocacy* in terms of taking steps to concretely address the issues of racial prejudice and systemic racism in our society that were ignited in the wake of George Floyd’s death.

Now this morning, as a kind of companion sermon – and with a little distance from the heat of that summer, as well as with an uneven record since then in terms of dealing with these issues – I want to step back a bit to speak more broadly and analytically about the subject of prejudice.

And let me begin, then, in our time Meditation, by reading a selection of proverbs that I have pulled together as food for thought – proverbs, some, perhaps, challenging; others you might question as too one-sided – proverbs that have to do with shifting the perspective from societal advocacy in regard to prejudice to personal understanding and grappling with prejudice.

(You will be able to follow these proverbs as I read them on your screen at home or here in the sanctuary.)

A Selection of Proverbs

Judge not that you be not judged, for the judgments you give are the judgments you will get. (Jesus of Nazareth, Matthew 7:1-2)

We condemn in others what we ourselves would commit; we attribute to others what is a problem for ourselves.

What we acquit in others, we will acquit in ourselves; what we condemn in others, we will condemn in ourselves.

If you have hate for something out there, this is yourself tho' hard to bear; you hate yourself and think it's me.

The thing we reject is what we will end up serving; the thing we resist sooner or later overpowers us.

Far indeed you fling the stone, but upon yourself will it fall.

To wrong those we hate is to add fuel to our hatred; to treat our enemy with magnanimity is to blunt our hatred for our enemy.

“The one who despises another will never be able to make anything of the other. Nothing we despise in the other is entirely absent from ourselves. We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.”

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters from Prison, 1945; adjusted for gender)

Hatred does not cease by hatred at any time; hatred ceases by love.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,” but I say unto you, love your enemy. (Jesus of Nazareth, Matthew 5:43)

Make friends of the enemy; it is your disguised self.

One's own self conquered is better than all others conquered; not even a god could change into defeat the victory of one who has conquered one's self.

(Dhammapada, ch. 8, lines 103-105)

“ROOTS OF PREJUDICE”

Introduction

Prejudice, of course, is a vast subject that can be approached at a number of different levels – social, cultural, political, ethical – and from a variety of different perspectives.

My approach to the subject this morning will *not* be at the social, cultural, political, or even ethical levels; but, rather, at the biological and psychological levels. It will be an attempt to understand the very basis of prejudice itself – not any particular prejudice but the roots of any and all prejudices; an attempt to understand the *structure* of the human being that makes such a thing as prejudice possible.

The horror and disfigurement of prejudice

I don't think I need to rehearse at great length the horror and destructiveness of prejudice.

At the group level, as we are all too aware, prejudice is the source of our worst social problems ... and, in other contexts, prejudice is the basis of holocausts and genocides.

And, at the individual level, there's probably nothing more humiliating, frustrating, and disfiguring than to be the object of prejudice: to be put in a box, dismissed, snubbed, overlooked, disregarded, pre-judged, teased, mocked, and even persecuted ... because of one's:

appearance, color of skin, language, place of origin, religious or political affiliation, sexual orientation;

or, because of one's age, occupation, education, level of wealth, disability of some kind;

or, simply because one is a minority, not like others, not part of the larger group.

At both group and individual levels, prejudice is a horrific thing whose destructive and harmful effects cannot be overestimated.

So, what causes prejudice? Why is it so difficult to eliminate it? Can it be eliminated?

Non-primary causes of prejudice

There's a line of thinking that seems to hold that the primary cause of prejudice is religion, or politics, or nationality – or, perhaps, all three together. And it's thought that if only we could eliminate religious denominations, or political parties, or nation states; then we would eliminate prejudice and solve the difficulty.

To my mind, that wouldn't solve the problem of prejudice at all. We might not have that *particular* expression of prejudice, but we would still have prejudice ... which is a cast of the mind or a state of the soul ... and any number of things can trigger it and set it off. Eliminate one avenue of expression; it will find another.

The occasions for prejudice are many and they are continually shifting. It can be: ethnic difference, racial difference, religious difference, national difference, political difference, ideological difference, class difference, educational difference, sex difference, sexual-orientation difference, difference in appearance or ability, difference in age.

But these and other differences, I suggest, are not the primary or even the secondary causes of prejudice; rather, they are the *occasions* that trigger and activate the prejudiced mind and soul.

Some distinctions

Thus, my approach to understanding prejudice has to do, first of all, with a basic distinction ... a distinction between what can be called the “causes” of prejudice and the “triggers” of prejudice ... that is to say, the occasions upon which prejudice is manifested.

And, to nuance this a bit further, I would distinguish between “primary causes,” “secondary causes,” and the “immediate causes,” which are the “triggers” or “occasions” of prejudice.

The analogy of a tree

By way of analogy, think of prejudice in the shape of a tree – a tree with roots, a trunk, and branches that bear fruit.

The *roots* of this “tree of prejudice” represent the “primary causes” of prejudice. These are the biological-psychological dimensions that make us the type of species that we are, providing the *possibility* for prejudice. These “roots of prejudice” are beneath the ground, mostly unseen, and yet they nourish the whole tree, creating the structure of the mind and the psyche.

The *trunk* of this “tree of prejudice” represents the “secondary causes” of prejudice. And these are the social, cultural, economic, political, historical, geographical, and personal family factors that determine what shape the tree will take. These are “above-ground factors” that can be seen. They bend and shape and mold and twist and scar and form and deform the trunk of a tree and give it its particular shape and texture.

And the *branches* of this “tree of prejudice” represent, then, the “immediate causes” of prejudice. These are the specific differences that are the occasions or triggers for prejudice, the places where the prejudice is manifested ...

... so that each branch of the tree stands for a particular kind of difference, whether that be racial, sexual, national, religious, political, educational, class-related, age-related, gender-related, and so forth. The environmental conditions will determine which branch or branches will bear the “fruit of prejudice.”

Examining the roots only

What I wish to do with you this morning is to look at the roots of this “tree of prejudice” – not the trunk or the branches, but the roots only, identifying five different biological-psychological roots, each of which has to do with the structure that gives rise to the possibility of prejudice within our human species.

Not expendable roots

And what I would have you initially note is that each one of these five biological-psychological roots of prejudice is a *natural and necessary component* of our human species ... so that prejudice, you might say, is the “downside,” or the “backside,” or the “underside” of these natural and necessary elements.

In other words, I don’t think you can’t just cut away or prune away the roots that create the possibility of prejudice. They are not extra or expendable roots; rather, they are essential roots that are vital to the overall structure, growth, and health of the human organism.

Five roots of prejudice

1) Development of personal identity/formation of shadow

So, here we go: The first root related to prejudice – the tap-root, really, and the one I will spend most time on – has to do with the development of *personal identity* ... in which we divide our natural energy, potential, and wholeness into good and bad, right and wrong, clean and unclean, moral and immoral, good angels and bad angels, God and the Devil.

Nature has equipped us to be products of nurture and culture. We humans don’t just live by instinct and urge ... but we shape, we form, we built, we craft, we civilize, we cultivate, we domesticate, and we enlighten.

And whenever we focus light on one thing, a shadow is automatically created. The brighter the light and the sharper the focus, the darker the shadow ...

... which is to say that the more we strive to be without blemish, upright, perfect, pure of heart, disciplined, diligent, morally correct, well-mannered, responsible, spiritually keen, etc., etc., the stronger grows the pull from the other *unutilized* impulses and energies.

And so it is that in the enculturation and civilizing process a great deal of our natural instinct and urge can get split-off. And if we’re not allowed to connect with our *natural* emotions, feelings, potentials, desires, and drives in some way, we can be left with only a thin sliver of our potential personality.

The “invisible bag” we drag behind us

Poet and author Robert Bly, in a tiny little book titled *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, writes about an “invisible bag” that we drag behind us into which we stuff those

parts of ourselves that are not acceptable to our parents, our peers, and our culture. By the time we're in our twenties, says Bly, we may have only a thin slice left from that original, radiant globe of energy with which we were born; the rest has been stuffed into this long, invisible bag that we drag behind us.

Thus, we can come to hate who we are, even when we're successful, because to some extent it's not really us; to some extent, it's a "false self" that disregards and ignores a great part of our own nature and its potential.

Split-off energy and shadow-carriers

But what happens to our split-off potential? What happens to those parts of us that we reject in our self-development and don't integrate in some way into our person and character?

The energy of that split-off potential doesn't simply evaporate; it accumulates, it builds, it disturbs in dreams; and, if it's not dealt with, it can be *displaced* and *projected outward*. It can take the form of a prejudice, sometimes a fierce prejudice, an unbelievable hatred.

And when you add one and one and one and one to get a group, then you have a most potent social force that may erupt in all the ways that disfigure and destroy our human communities and our world.

Those on whom the split-off energy falls, those on whom the shadow falls, are our designated *shadow-carriers* – the "scapegoat" or the "black sheep," a term which itself carries a particular prejudice.

Jesus and Judas

In Christian theology, for example, it isn't only Jesus who takes away sins of the world, even though that is what the doctrine says; but, more truly, it is the despised and hated alter-ego, Judas. Judas is the true shadow-carrier in Christian theology, not Jesus.

Jesus stands in the light and atones for the sins that we recognize and deal with. But the shadow sins, the disturbing things we that cannot deal with, the things that we despise and hate, the things that are deeper than our awareness – these are dumped on Judas, the "Judas-goat."

So, the capacity to split apart our natural, instinctive wholeness and to develop and to cast-off our shadow is, what I would call, the "taproot" of the possibility of prejudice.

2) Love of community/division into in-groups and out-groups

A second root of prejudice is the need for and love of community.

Of course, it's the most natural thing in the world to want to belong to a community, such as the community of this wonderful religious body.

And: it's absolutely necessary for our survival ... more so, no doubt, in our human species than any other, helpless as we are at birth, in infancy, and as youngsters.

To survive, we have to have those who will protect us, provide for us, keep us safe, give us love, give us a place in the world.

Thus, we create an "in-group" – *our* community. And those outside the "in-group" are "out-groups."

Now, the formation of an "in-group" doesn't *necessarily* imply hatred of an "out-group." Just because one loves and is attached to one's family, community, place of birth, religion, ethnic heritage, or country doesn't mean one despises other such groups.

The opposite might more plausibly be argued. That is, to the extent that one is secure and loves one's "in-group," one can feel empathy for other such groups.

Nevertheless, the natural division into "in-groups" and "out-groups" is certainly a root that can nourish the tree of prejudice ... so that our deep need to belong to a group provides for the *possibility* of prejudice against other groups.

The phenomenon of "social pressure"

Also, to be mentioned here is the tendency to conform to the *will* of the "in-group" ... what is called "social pressure" ... an immense force for both "good" and "ill."

How many times, for example, have you gone along with *your* group ... even with a feeling of unease, even against your own better judgment, even against your personal conscience?

The pressure to conform to your "in-group," to "your tribe," is immense ... because, if you "rock the boat," if you stick out from your group, you make yourself a target. You may yourself – Liz Cheney-like – become a subject of disapproval and group prejudice.

Are not our most virulent hatreds and harshest penalties reserved for those perceived to be disloyal to *our* group, "whistle blowers," for example? We call them "traitors," "turncoats," "heretics," Representing what we ourselves may have considered, they are all the more despised!

3) Pull of the known/fear of the strange

A third root of prejudice, somewhat related to the love of the "in-group," is the "pull or attraction of the known" ... and the other side of this is the "fear of the unknown" or the "fear of the stranger."

From about six-months-old, a child will cry when someone unknown, no matter how friendly, picks the child up. The child will adjust shortly if there is no apparent danger, but the first impulse is to withdraw and to be afraid.

And this fear of the strange or unknown continues to one degree or another throughout one's life. The strange, the different, the new, the alien, the odd, the unusual, the weird is always, to some degree, unsettling. (It may have its draw, too, but it is still unsettling.) And the more strange something is, the more adjustment is needed. It's a natural and normal protective device.

But it's also a root of the possibility of prejudice, for:

Prejudice falls upon the "stranger within our midst": the recent arrival, the foreigner, the minority, the one of different skin color, of different appearance, of different religion, of different language, of different thinking, of different culture.

Prejudice falls upon the deformed, the crippled, the scarred, the stutterer, the unclean, the diseased.

Prejudice falls upon the minority in a culture: the gay, the lesbian, the bi-sexual, the trans-sexual.

Prejudice falls upon the non-conformist, the oddball.

Prejudice falls upon anyone thought to be different or strange. And it doesn't take all that much to be thought different or strange. As a song by Simon and Garfunkel from my youth put it, "They think I'm a Communist because I'm left-handed."

4) Need to categorize/tendency to stereotype

A fourth root of the tree of the possibility of prejudice is the need we have to put things into categories.

Obviously, as we make our way through the world, we can't take the time to evaluate and judge every situation on its merits or every person by his or her own qualities and character. We have to make some quick judgments.

Thus, the human mind must think with the aid of categories, classes, clusters, and groups. Any kind of orderly living depends upon this.

But this need to generalize also easily tends toward the human tendency to over-generalize, to stereotype, and to pre-judge.

And our busyness, or laziness, or inertia, or complacency, or self-satisfaction can cause us to be content with categories and not want to let go of them or dig deeper ... not want to go beyond first impressions, or to work from the general to the specific.

This, then, is another root that nourishes the possibility of prejudice.

The phenomenon of “re-fencing”

And when it comes to stereotyping and prejudice, there is a most interesting phenomenon called “re-fencing.” That is, we can make an *exception* to our general rule ... open the fence briefly, as in “Some of my best friends are...” ... and then quickly close the fence to keep the field as it was with our general category intact.

Gordon Allport, in his book *The Nature of Prejudice* (p. 22), reports the story of an Oxford student who once remarked, “I despise all Americans, but have never met one I didn’t like” ... a glaring example of “re-fencing;” that is, maintaining the stereotype and prejudice with all personal experience to the contrary.

5) Desire for unity/loss of the individual

A final root of the possibility of prejudice I’ll call the “desire for unity.”

Here I’m thinking of the marvelous experience of wholeness and unity, the feeling of being one ... which will, actually, be the title of our Closing Hymn today, “ We Would Be One.” It’s a subject about which I, personally, love to speak.

There’s a religious and mystical sensibility, supported by the use of ritual, ceremony, and myth that desires and creates unity.

But there’s a danger, a great danger involved, and the danger is this: Our desire for unity can also wipe out the individual ... wipe out the one who is “out of step.”

There’s something very, very compelling about the experience and feeling of being caught up with others in the same activity or the same state of being.

Just marching together, moving arms and legs in unison ... or playing as a team ... or singing together ... or cheering together ... or attending a political rally or political protest together ...

... being of one body and mind and heart and soul and spirit and strength ... there’s hardly anything more compelling than this experience of unity.

And this is what a good ritual does: It brings people together; it binds them together into a state of blessed unity and oneness.

Example of a Nazi ceremony

I’ve read, for example, of a Jewish prisoner during WWII in a concentration camp who happened to be in a situation where he observed one of those very impressive Nazi

ceremonies. The effect of the ceremony upon him, he reported, was so powerful that he had all he could do to keep his arm from coming up in a Nazi salute.

As a species and as individuals, we desire unity and oneness, and we need ritual in our lives. But these marvelous capacities can also sway us, carry us away, and put us in a group-mind that can run over others ... erase and eliminate the one who is out of step, singing out of tune, not in harmony.

Thus, the mystical dimension can wipe out the ethical dimension ... and so I name it as another root of the possibility of prejudice.

Summary

So, these five elements of our species, I suggest, are some of the natural and necessary components of our human make-up, which I also judge to be the root causes of prejudice. They provide the biological and psychological foundation that makes prejudice possible.

Dealing with prejudice

Now, whether or not prejudice will manifest itself, and the way it will manifest itself, depends on all the other conditions of our lives ... all the social and cultural conditions that we can see and to which we can respond ... the way, for example, a child is raised, whether in an atmosphere of freedom and respect for its own integrity and value.

The most important *inner work* we as individuals can do is to try to become a little bit more aware of own shadow, to become aware of:

the *downside* of the civilizing process,
the *downside* of our need for and love of community,
the *downside* of the pull of the known,
the *downside* of our need for and tendency to categorize, and,
the *downside* of our desire for unity and oneness.

Prejudice not inevitable

I'm not saying that prejudice is absolutely inevitable (though maybe I am), or that acting upon prejudice is inevitable; but what I am saying is that we must know that the *possibility* of prejudice is inevitably built into our species and built into us as individuals ...

... which is why I don't think we can't simply wish it away or legislate it away. To my mind, the "germ of prejudice" is a germ that we all carry ... each of us ... always and forever. None of us is free from it; nor can we be permanently inoculated against it.

I do think I am safe in saying that the question is not whether or not we have prejudice, but to what degree we have it, and to what extent are we are trying to become aware of it and deal with it.

By looking to the roots of prejudice, the roots of our own prejudice, we can do our little bit in lessening the effects of its horror in our lives and so also in our community and world.

A positive paradox

Finally, paradoxically, the same human capacity that is at the root of distinguishing differences *between* ourselves and others is also the capacity we have that can recognize our similarity *with* others and, thus, engage our empathy and sympathy ... so that, ultimately, we see that we *are* one body ... and that we belong, each to the other.

Let us close, now, with the hymn I mentioned earlier, “We Would Be One.” Please, rise in body or in spirit to sing, “We would be one in living for each other to show to all a new community.”

Benediction

Our Closing Words of Benediction are from the Rev. Frederick E. Gillis:

May the Love that overcomes all differences,
that heals all wounds,
that puts to flight all fears,
that reconciles all who are separated,
be in us and among us,
now and always.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the University Unitarian Church in Seattle on Sunday, July 10, 2022. The spoken service, which can viewed on their website, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

“Roots of Prejudice” (Sermon Outline)

1) Introduction

- a) Approaching the subject of prejudice at psychological and biological levels, not social, cultural, political, or ethical levels
- b) An attempt to understand the very basis of prejudice itself, the roots of any and all prejudices
- c) An attempt to understand the *structure* of the human being that makes such a thing as prejudice possible.

2) The horror and disfigurement of prejudice at group and individual levels

- a) List of types of prejudice
- b) Questions: What causes prejudice? Why is it so difficult to eliminate it? Can it be eliminated?

3) Some distinctions

- a) A basic distinction between “causes” of prejudice and “triggers” of prejudice
- b) A further distinction between “primary causes,” “secondary causes,” and “immediate causes”
- c) Eliminating secondary and immediate causes of prejudice doesn’t prejudice itself, which has deeper causes

4) Prejudice: the analogy of a tree

- a) The *roots* of the “tree of prejudice” represent the “primary causes” of prejudice, which are the biological-psychological dimensions of prejudice, mostly underground
- b) The *trunk* of the “tree of prejudice” represents the “secondary causes” of prejudice: social, cultural, economic, political, historical, geographical, and personal family factors that determine what shape the tree will take.
- c) The *branches* of the “tree of prejudice” represent the “immediate causes” of prejudice.

5) What this sermon will examine

- a) This sermon will examine the roots only
- b) This sermon will examine five roots of prejudice
- c) Can’t simply cut away the roots, as they are the “downside” of what is natural and necessary for the growth of the tree

6) Five roots of prejudice

- a) Development of personal identity/formation of shadow (the “taproot”)
 - i) Humans are products of nurture and culture
 - ii) The inevitability of the formation of “shadow”
 - iii) The brighter the light, the darker the shadow
 - iv) An “invisible bag” that we drag behind us
 - v) The split-off energy of the “shadow” falls on the “shadow-carriers”
- b) Love of community/division into in-groups and out-groups
 - i) The human need to belong to a community, an “in-group”
 - ii) Those outside the “in-group” are an “out-group”
 - iii) The division into “in-groups” and “out-groups” doesn’t necessary imply hatred of an “out-group” but it does create the possibility
 - iv) The pressure to conform – the phenomenon of “social pressure”
 - v) Harshest penalties reserved for those who are disloyal to the in-group: traitors, turncoats, heretics
- c) Pull of the known/fear of the strange
 - i) Fear of the strange and unknown in small children as a protective device
 - ii) Prejudice falls upon the “stranger within our midst,” upon anyone thought to be different or strange
- d) Need to categorize/tendency to stereotype

i) The human need to create categories, classes, clusters, and groups, which provide the possibility of stereotyping and pre-judging

ii) The phenomenon of “re-fencing”

e) Desire for unity/loss of the individual

i) The compelling experience of joining with others in the same activity creates the possibility of a “group-mind,” which may run over others

7) Dealing with prejudice

a) Prejudice not inevitable but a germ we all carry

b) We must do our part in overcoming prejudice through self-examination

c) A positive paradox