**The Chalice and the Constitution**

Rev. Janet Onnie

​About 7 years ago I got an invitation to participate in an event sponsored by a group called the Florida Family Policy Council. I wasn’t able to go, so my beloved volunteered to check it out. Nelson came home a little wild-eyed and reported that it was a group with an agenda not especially open to Unitarian Universalist values. In fact I think he used the word ‘hostile’. In any case, that was that and we all moved along our different paths. BUT. Nelson stayed on their mailing list. Which is how I became aware of their initiative called the Florida Capitol Project.

This is a plan to quietly change the culture of the Capitol where the men and women of the legislature do their work. They report, “It started in Iowa and then now is starting to happen in other states also. It involves a very simple but sophisticated strategy: Bringing pastors to the Capitol together with legislators and other elected officials to meet them, pray for them and care for them.” There’s more, but you get the point.

Being one to act on my irritation, I wrote to the Director of the Florida initiative, one Marty Stubblefield. He promptly wrote back asking for my congregation and its location. I responded. Then there was silence until I wrote again asking for directions in anticipation of my visit tomorrow and Tuesday. Here’s the message I received:

​“Dear Rev. Onnie - Before we agree to host the Pastors that want to join us in our efforts, we ask that they read and accept our Statement of Faith. It is as follows:”

The nine points are about what you’d expect. The belief in the Bible as the infallible Word of God, the Trinity, the deity of Jesus, salvation via the Holy Spirit, saved going to heaven and unsaved going to hell, marriage as the exclusive union between one man and one woman. The concluding statement is: “We believe that God created all humans in His image. Therefore, we believe that human life is sacred, that we must honor the physical and spiritual needs of all people, and that following Jesus' example, every person should be treated with love, dignity and respect.” The email ended, “Please let me know if you have any questions.”

​Did I have questions? By the last point my head was exploding and my blood was boiling. The only question I could think to ask was, Did he believe that Jesus himself would’ve agreed to this statement? Is this your reflection of a loving, inclusive God? And the larger, less snarky question I didn’t bother to ask him: how could an institution veer so far away from the message it was created to hold?

​I have been interested in institutions for quite a while. Many of you have heard me wonder if the message of Jesus – of love surpassing law as the highest aspiration of humankind -- would have survived had Constantine NOT made it the religion of the empire. I doubt it. Would the idea of “We, the People” have been possible without a container – the government -- to hold it? It seems that any big idea – if it is to survive – needs a structure, a container. As the structure of the chalice holds the flame of our free faith. It needs an organization.

​A large part of associating with others involves bumping up against each other’s expectations and learning what to do about it. These tensions can be more lively in church, because church is different from all our business and civic associations. Organized religion has a built-in tension by nature of its being religion and organized; and Dan Hotchkiss has eloquently laid out the unique differences for us:

“Religion transforms people; no one touches holy ground and stays the same. Religious leaders stir the pot by pointing to the contrast between life as it is and life as it should be, and urging us to close the gap. Religious insights provide the handhold that people need to criticize injustice, rise above self-interest, and take risks to achieve healing in a wounded world. Religion at its best is no friend to the status quo. Organization, on the other hand, conserves. Institutions capture, schematize and codify persistent patterns of activity. … A well-ordered congregation lays down schedules, puts policies on paper, places people in positions, and generally brings order out of chaos. Organizations can be flexible, creative, and iconoclastic, but only by resisting some of their most basic instincts. The stability of a religious institution is a necessary precondition to the instability religious transformation brings.”

​I think that is true: that we need to have stable institutions to hold transformations – change: The movement of one thing into something else. But I’m not sure that religion is the only vehicle propelling transformation. I, and maybe you, are used to thinking that transformation is a good thing. But things change regardless of what ethical value we place on them. Sometimes things change that are counter to the values of a specific group. Things like widespread availability of instruments whose only purpose is killing people. Things like separating desperate families fleeing from danger. Things like poisoning the environment of your own home. All of these things are counter to the values expressed in both the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism and the preamble to the Constitution of the United States.

​Let me be more specific. In case you’ve forgotten, the preamble reads, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

“Ordain” is not a word to be taken lightly. It denotes a serious purpose, shared by both our Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations and our United States government. It is no coincidence that the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism dovetail so nicely with the United States Constitution. The framers of both came from the same white European male stock, grounded in the ideals of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment period of history.

​Both the preamble to the constitution and the opening statement of our seven principles start with the word “We.” Both state a lofty purpose: “to form a more perfect union; to “covenant to affirm and promote”. They then delineate those purposes: the constitution to establish justice. Us, too. Principle 2 - Justice equity and compassion in human relations. The constitution, to insure domestic tranquility. We do that by recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of every person coupled with the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. Principles one and five. The constitution provides for the common defense. We affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty & justice for all in our sixth principle. Our third and seventh principles affirm acceptance of one another and respect for our interdependence. This echoes the constitution purpose of promote the general welfare. Finally, the constitution pledges to Secure the blessings of liberty. Our first principle affirms a free & responsible search for truth & meaning, perhaps the main blessing of a free people.

The constitution is much more specific about HOW this ‘more perfect union’ is to be achieved. That ‘how’ is contained in the Bill of Rights. Our Unitarian Universalist principles leave the ‘how’ to be worked out by individual congregations. Congregations full of individuals only held together by the fragile thread of covenant – a promise we make to each other. It’s much harder to be a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation than to be a citizen of the United States. For one thing, our congregations a lot smaller and it’s hard to avoid bumping into each other. For another thing, we don’t have a set of rules on how to behave or what to believe handed down to us. We create behavioral expectations in our communities. We create our belief systems individually.

​What we do have in common is that the processes of creating the HOW we will be together is like, as Marge Piercy said, “watching granite erode.” At Tri-UU it took 30 years before we had a set of policies and procedures outlining how – and why – we are to maintain our institution. It took a year of meeting together in various group configurations to craft a Covenant of Right Relations; our statement on how we intend to be together. “Let us discuss whether we will sit or stand or hang from the ceiling or take it lying down./ Let us argue about the chair and the table and the chairperson and the motion to table the chair.”

​This is how is goes in both the church and the state. The trick is – and this is where I take issue with the Florida Capitol Project – distinguishing between the institution and the values the institution is designed to uphold. One of my colleagues said she’s been taking pottery courses for the last decade, making vessels of one sort or another. She wrote, “I even made a teapot recently, a dragon teapot – but because of an infelicity in the glazing process, you can’t actually make tea in it. I’ve been thinking about containers, about holding things, about decoration and utility, about structure and strength, about art and creativity. Something clicked. I remembered a little saying, a mere sentence fragment: Worshiping the teapot, instead of drinking the tea.

“There it is in a nutshell, or at least a teapot”, she said. “There’s the trouble with religion. Too often we worship the teapot, instead of drinking the tea. It’s so easy to get distracted from the precious tea, the thirst quenching, energy restoring, delicious tea, to get caught up instead in the virtues and flaws of the vessel, to spend all your attention on worshiping the superficial.

​She goes on to say, “But this is not the whole story. Have you ever tried to make tea without a teapot? Or at least a mug? Without some sort of container, your tea will not brew and the hot water will run all over the table. It’s hard to embrace spirituality without some vessel to hold it and shape it. So drink the tea by all means. Brew it well. Try different kinds of tea, plain black tea and green tea, and exotic flavored teas. Share your tea with friends. Offer it to strangers as hospitality. Don’t get all hung up worshiping the teapot.”

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This is what’s troubling me about the Florida Capitol Project’s statement of Faith. It’s worshiping the teapot: The teapot that holds the story what someone’s’ interpreted the life and message ABOUT Jesus. It ignores the message OF Jesus: the tea, the message of love. This is what’s troubling about the current state of our nation. Some of our citizens are so busy restructuring the teapot that they’ve forgotten about the tea of a more perfect union between us.

​The teapot is not to be worshiped, but it holds and shapes and makes the tea available. And so it deserves its share of care and respect. We need our teapots – our institutions -- to insure that our values have a reliable and abiding presence in the culture. The chalice and the constitution hold values that define us as Unitarian Universalists and as citizens of this broken, beloved country. Let us keep these containers flexible and creative and accountable while never losing sight of their purpose: to hold our highest values. May it be so.  Amen.