

I'll bet most of you didn't even know I'm a minister. I was ordained on December 17, 2006, by the Universal Life Church. Now I know most churches, and some states, don't acknowledge the legitimacy of the ULC or their ministers, and it is an understandable position. I didn't have to go to seminary to be ordained; I never took a course in homiletics; and this is my first sermon. "Judge not."

Around the time of my "ordination," I made the mistake of wandering into the wrong church, by which I mean, a conservative, charismatic, "evangelical" church. I had recently moved to Florida to be with my partner (who is now husband, thank you New York!). I had no car, and this was the nearest church, so I walked down there one Sunday morning.

The service opened with a contemporary praise song, and then another, and then another. During the third song, I thought to myself, "If they play one more song after this, I'm leaving." They didn't, but then the prayers started, during which they prayed for the salvation of a Jewish doctor of one of the parishioners. It was at this point that I quietly left.

This experience was a bit unsettling. As a gay Christian, partnered with an atheist, at that time living with his Hindu Brahmin in-laws, and interested in interfaith dialog, this church community reminded me of everything I felt was wrong with modern Christianity in America. It reminded me of every community and situation I had found myself in, where I couldn't be honest and open about who I am or what I believed. Thank God we've since moved to New York, and thank God for churches like Judson! But, again, "Judge not."

In this gospel reading, from the Sermon on the Mount, something seems a bit odd. We're told not to judge, because the standard by which we judge will be used against ourselves. We're told to take care of the log in our own eye before we try to remove the speck from our brother's eye. A very admirable, humbling message. Then, Jesus tells us not to give what is holy to the dogs, or cast our pearls before swine. This verse seems out of place here. It seems ugly and judgmental. As you may know, dogs and swine were derogatory slang for the gentiles. I'm going to offer an interpretation, which may or may not be correct. I'll come back to that verse in a moment.

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened for you." The problem with asking, seeking, and knocking, is that sometimes what we get, what we find, what's on the other side of the door, isn't what we expected. We may be blindsided by something that forces us to reevaluate our situation or our world-view. I know this has happened to me a few times. It can be frightening and debilitating, but it can also be an opportunity to grow and learn.

Something happens to us when we encounter ideas that run contrary to what we hold as true. Our initial reaction might be anger or frustration that such an idea dare exist and challenge our deeply-held beliefs. We might dismiss it as absurd or nonsensical. In some cases, we might be forced to engage the idea. It may get stuck in our head, nagging us, challenging us to dig deeper. We may come to realize that what we originally held to be true was, in fact, wrong. We may develop a more nuanced and complex understanding of the world. Those of us who don't fit into heteronormative standards and grew up in more conservative environments have seen how this phenomenon unfolds.

Being gay and raised in a conservative Catholic family was a challenge. I didn't even come to terms with my sexuality until I was an adult. I was fortunate to have gone to liberal Catholic schools, so I had access to books that weren't thinly-veiled propaganda. I read books on theology, Christian ethics, scripture, and human sexuality. I came to understand that what the Bible says about sexuality had to be taken in context of the time it was written, who was doing the writing, and why. I became critical of

the Roman Catholic Church's argument that sex was meant to be both unitive and procreative, and therefore homosexual relationships were sinful. It was this experience that made me think critically about other aspects of church teaching and conservative thought. As the years went by, I found myself less and less in agreement with the church on issues of social justice, and even certain doctrinal teachings. While this particular experience probably challenged me more than my parents, it left me with an insatiable desire for knowledge, which ended up creating a different set of challenges for my parents as I began to embrace Buddhism, Marxism, veganism, and Protestantism. (The last one being the most difficult for them to accept.)

Seek, and you will find. I sought. I read all sorts of books on religion and spirituality, including "Living Buddha, Living Christ" by Thich Nhat Hanh, and "The Power of Myth" by Joseph Campbell, which got me interested in interfaith dialog. I also became enamored with philosophy, and started reading Plato, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Sartre. My interest in social and economic justice led me to read Marx directly, instead of taking at face value what others said about him.

The more I read and engaged these ideas, four things became clear to me:

First, while scripture may be a source for understanding God, our own God-given capacity for reason is more immediate.

Second, my belief in a just and merciful God led me to believe God reveals God's Self in different ways to different peoples. God reaches us at a level we can comprehend, in the context of our own language and cultural understandings. To give primacy to my own limited human understanding of God—to take what modern conservatives call an evangelical approach to my engagement with peoples of other faiths—would be the height of arrogance. If we do this, we are giving what is holy (that is, holy for us) to the dogs (that is, the outsider), who will trample it (reject it outright) and turn against us. Think about the last time you rode the subway and saw a Bible-thumper preaching to a captive audience. I suspect the modern evangelical movement has managed to create more atheists than Christians.

My own sense of Christian humility led me to embrace a type of universalism. The Great Commandment to love God, and love your neighbor, is observed by peoples of all faiths. It is also observed by secular humanists, as loving your neighbor is inseparable from loving God. This is what I believe authentic evangelism is: living in loving service to all God's children, regardless of what name they have for God, or even whether or not they believe in God.

Third, belief is not a choice. I cannot choose what I believe. I can use that capacity for reason to critically examine my beliefs and experiences, and come to a conclusion based on them. Beliefs, thoughts, and ideas, evolve and change only when they are critically engaged. This is true not only for spiritual matters, but how we come to understand and relate to the world around us.

Remember that church I mentioned earlier. Their understanding of salvation may be different from mine, but they are in the same boat as we all are. Our disagreements aside, they are also pilgrims on the journey; they are also the body of Christ. It's easy, as progressives, to forget that point, but I joined the United Church of Christ partly because of the Still-Speaking campaign: "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." For better or worse, that includes fundamentalists. Again, "Judge not." Also, "Love your enemies."

Fourth, the more I studied Marx, and other Marxists like Erich Fromm, Raya Dunayevskaya, and C.L.R. James, I came to understand that Marxism is a humanism; it is a philosophy of human

liberation. What attracted me to Marxism was his theory of alienation, and his belief that, as a society, we can do better than this. We can transcend the social stratification, debilitating and oppressive labor practices, and have a truly cooperative society where the free development of each is the precondition for the free development of all. What Dunayevskaya and James called the New Society, Christians might call the Kingdom or Commonwealth of God.

As a Christian and a Marxist, I've been asked how I reconcile those two aspects of my life. Didn't Marx say religion was the opiate of the people? Marx's critique of religion was more nuanced than that. The meditation quote on the bulletin is the paragraph that proceeds the sentence "It is the opiate of the people." "*Religious suffering is ... the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.*" His point wasn't that religion dulls the senses. He saw religion as having a role in society, but religion under capitalism can placate with promises of divine intervention and heavenly rewards, and alienate with threats of damnation. And yet, when spiritual convictions drive a person to work for social justice, to settle for nothing less than human liberation, then it is working towards bringing the new society. When it brings hope to the oppressed, that she is not forsaken, and allows her to carry on and continue to struggle for freedom, then it is, as Martha Stewart would say, a good thing.

Now more than ever, there is a need for real, constructive dialog between progressive Christians and socialists. We are in the twilight now, and it is very difficult to tell which kind. We are in the midst of a terrible and enduring economic crisis. We see the possibility of frightening people coming to power in this country. We see secure communities and a broken immigration policy. We see Arizona, Uganda, and Moscow. But at the same time, we see Wisconsin, Egypt, and London. We see oppressed people everywhere struggling for freedom. We don't know what the future holds, but we keep daring to dream of a better future, and working towards that dream in solidarity, in loving kindness, with all who are oppressed.

I believe Mother Jones put it best when she said "Pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living."

Ancient Testimony: Matthew 7:1-8

Modern Testimony: From *The Power of Negativity: Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx* by Raya Dunayevskaya [page 321]

It never fails that, at momentous world historic turning points, it is very difficult to tell the difference between two types of twilight—whether one is first plunging into utter darkness or whether one has reached the end of a long night and it is just at the moment before the dawn of a new day. In either case, the challenge to find meaning—what Hegel called "the undefined foreboding of something unknown"—becomes a compulsion to dig for new beginnings, for a philosophy that would try to answer the question "where to begin?" This was the reason for a new revolutionary philosophy—the birth of the Hegelian dialectic—at the time the great French Revolution did not produce totally new beginnings in philosophy. It caused Hegel's break with romanticism. His deep digging went, at one and the same time, backward to the origins of philosophy in Greece around 500 BC and forward as the French Revolution was followed by the Napoleonic era trying to dominate all of Europe.