

Deeds, not Creeds: the Life and Legacy of James Luther Adams

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

January 23, 2011

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Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful the custom
Which brings us together,
In the presence of the most high.

To face our ideals,
To remember our loved ones in absence,
To give thanks, to make confession,
To offer forgiveness,
To be enlightened, and to be strengthened.

Through this quiet hour breathes the worship of ages,
The cathedral music of history.

Three unseen guests attend,
Faith, hope and love:
Let all our hearts prepare them a place.
Robert French Leavens

Let us light our chalice, kindling the flame of our heritage.

Opening hymn: #121, We'll Build a Land

Children's story

Candles of Joys and Sorrows

This is the time during our worship when we invite you to share with this community the joys or the sorrows that are in your hearts this morning. If you have a joy we can celebrate with you, or a sorrow we can hold with you, I invite you to come forward, light a candle, tell us your name, and share with us what is on your heart this morning.

Prayer and Reflection

I invite you to join me in a moment of prayer, then quiet reflection as we remember what has been shared.

Spirit of Love and Life, we ask for your presence with us this morning. Be with us in our joy, in our hopes, our confusion, our frustration. In this place may we all feel less alone. May we feel the grace

that can turn compassion into helpfulness, our pain into mercy, and every new morning into a chance to begin again. (pause, then ring chimes)

Sing the children to class

Reading - #591, I Call that Church Free

Sermon

Every once in awhile I feel it's a good idea for us to stop and consider our roots as Unitarian Universalists and to pay tribute to those theologians, scholars, and ministers who, as part of our heritage, have defined who we are and what moves us forward as a faith community. It also keeps me humble, as I go back over some of their writings, and realize that very little of what I preach about is original thought. I find my words all over the place when I read them! This morning I'd like to introduce you to one of our more contemporary scholars, the Rev. Dr. James Luther Adams – Luther to his family and Jim to his colleagues; JLA to many of his students. Adams was a bit of an icon when I was in seminary. He had been a professor at three different divinity schools – Meadville Lombard in Chicago, Harvard, and Andover Newton – in the early to mid-20th century, spanning almost 50 years of teaching, so he's had a lot of influence over generations of Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist ministers. Although I never knew him, he always intrigued me because many of my professors had studied under him, and would be misty-eyed as they spoke of this man they always referred to as JLA.

You can get a sense of a man (or a woman) from reading his or her sermons, essays, and class notes, but you learn even more from listening to those who knew him and spoke of him with such reverence. What his students often talk of is that Jim and his wife Margaret made a habit of opening their house to late –night conversations with students whenever a few of them wanted to come. One of his favorite sayings was, “Now isn't *that* a remarkable idea!”

You can also get a sense of someone by knowing their story, and in particular, understanding their conversion experience(s). Let me explain what I mean by “conversion.” Some years ago I did a study, asking people to tell me about a religious experience they'd had. Each experience, although very different from each other because these were all UUs, they all had some common threads. Each described the experience as “difficult to describe,” something beyond words, yet each experience left the individual with a strong conviction about something, a strong sense of “truth” about themselves, a new sense of direction for their lives that felt strong and deepened over time. The experience left a strong impression about how they need to respond to the world with a new sense of meaning and passion. This kind of transforming experience is what I call “conversion.”

If you read biographies of people who have been strongly committed to a life's work, you will often find they've had such an experience. James Luther Adams did. It came during a trip to Germany during the Nazi occupation.

James Luther Adams was born in Washington state in 1901, the son of an itinerant Baptist preacher and farmer. When he was 16 his father became ill and he went to work for the North Pacific Railroad to support the family. In 1920 he decided he wanted to get an education, so he looked for a university on the rail line so he could take classes during the day and work at night. He settled on the University of Minnesota. In the twin cities he met the Rev. John Dietrich, a Unitarian minister and scientific humanist, who influenced him greatly. He decided to pursue the Unitarian ministry and graduated from Harvard in

1924. Adams served a congregation in Salem, Mass. While pursuing graduate studies, again at Harvard. It was during this time that Adams championed the cause of striking textile workers at the Pequot Mills in Salem. The controversy that arose from his work there became for him a paradigm for the role of the church in social issues and public policy.

It was also during this time that Adams, as part of his graduate studies, began translating the work of the German theologians of the day into English, and became close to a number of German colleagues. He traveled there on three occasions to seek out and study with church leaders and theologians, in 1927, 1935, and 1936. He tells the story of his first visit, during which he was watching a military parade, and got into a heated discussion with some bystanders on the sidewalk. Finally a man pulled him aside, pushed him down an alley, and shouted at him, "You fool! Don't you know? In Germany today when you're watching a parade, you either keep your mouth shut, or you get your head bashed in. That's what would have happened if you'd continued that conversation five minutes longer." (*JLA*, p. 180)

Some of his closest collegial relationships were with members of the anti-Nazi Underground churches, but he met many others who were Nazi sympathizers. In particular, he paid attention to the way in which the lack of religious pluralism and the Lutheran doctrine of salvation through faith alone resulted in churches devoid of responsibility for social or political concerns. Throughout his visits, and through conversations with these colleagues in between, he was struck by the different ways in which these religious leaders were dealing with the growing political crisis, a crisis he felt demanded the response of social-ethical engagement by the churches. During his final visit in 1936, he was detained for questioning by the Gestapo. This is the event which he says triggered his conversion to a deep understanding of the social consequence of faith. He came away with a deep conviction that the church has a decisive role to play in political, social, and economic affairs. These convictions were galvanized over the years as he heard time and again from members of the anti-Nazi underground churches that if they had simply acted together, as voluntary organizations in the 1920s, they could have kept Hitler from rising to power.

The year after his encounter with the Gestapo, Adams began his career as a professor of religious social ethics at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, and he was on fire! He is perhaps best known for his writings on the role of voluntary associations in society. Because of his experiences in Nazi Germany, he came to believe that freedom of association is central among our freedoms, and that free religious communities hold a particularly important role in democracies. Yet Adam's thought encompasses so much of how we as Unitarian Universalists look at free and liberal faith communities today.

If we look again at the reading, "I Call that Church Free," we can see the backbone of the theological social ethics Adams taught for 50 years. Adams was first of all an institutionalist. He uses Channing's turn of phrase, "I Call That Mind Free" (see the next reading, #592) which many in his day would have been familiar with, to emphasize the church as a free association for faith-in-action.

"I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence, that sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands."

For Adams, the congregation is a special voluntary association because it understands itself as being oriented toward a Higher Power and is called by that Power to act prophetically in the world. To act prophetically is to seek social transformation, to stand at the edge of our own culture in order to ask, who do we need to accompany in their search for justice? Adams was heavily influenced by the

theologian Henry Nelson Weiman who defined God as a creative, transformative power. Adams saw this Power most evident in the gathered community, and defined God as a community-building or community-creating power. Still, the covenant with that ultimate source is paramount to remember why we're gathered.

"It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority."

In the decade prior to Adams teaching career, he watched as Germany succumbed to authoritarian rule under the Nazi party. During that decade he watched as the freedoms of economic association, freedom of religion, the freedom of workers to form unions, the freedom to institute changes in society, all disappeared. He recognized in a very deep way that the bedrock of democracy lies in the freedom to gather and deliberate. This, he felt, is our greatest protection against totalitarianism.

"I call that church fee which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship that protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom that yearns to belong to the church universal."

Adams taught what he called the "priesthood of all believers." Not only are we called to be prophets, but we are also called to be priests to one another. He wrote that "one of the most precious elements in human existence is caring." (*An Examined Faith*, p. 203) We have the responsibility to create systems within our communities that lead to care, and a sense of hospitality for everyone: protecting and nourishing by creating systems that reach out in times of need; that provide guidance and support for our leaders, and education for our children. We are all priests when we bless one another in this way.

"It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, and to new and broader fellowship. It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit."

Adams wrote that "liberalism holds that nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism." (*JLA*, p. 149) It creates broader fellowship because it rests on mutual free consent rather than coercion, and thus liberalism obligates us toward establishing democratic communities. If you read Adams' writings on democratic communities, you would imagine something similar to what we do during our consensus process. For Adams, democracy is useless without time for debate and hearing what others have to say. He writes that at its best, an association should provide an institutional framework where the give and take of discussion is promoted, and within which a given consensus or regular practice may be brought under criticism and be subjected to change. "We've always done it that way" had no place in his thought process. Dispersion of power, in the sense that power is the capacity to participate in making decisions, was something he always advocated. In short, he said that every congregation should have in place the means for gradual revolution.

"The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing."

The two prongs of community life.

"It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit. That bloweth where it listeth... and maketh all things new."

For Adams, the true ground of hope for the liberal faith tradition, and the reason for an attitude of ultimate optimism is the anticipated and actual grace of God – the Taskmaster and community-building power.

So that, in a nutshell, is James Luther Adams. When he returned from Germany that last time, he asked himself, what am I doing as a citizen to ensure this never happens in my country? His answer was to create and help sustain communities of hope and resistance, by starting many himself, and by training generations of ministers to do the same. What I love best about JLA, and what I believe will be his lasting legacy, is his belief that love is the transformative emotion, the source of redemption in human life. It is an agape love that asks us to examine our faith on a regular basis and to ask, what is my responsibility in this time and place to accompany others in love? Where do I need to be a prophet in my community, and where do I need to bless another with my presence as priest?

The sweet refrain through all his writings is the importance of communities such as this. He was not one to talk much about large churches where ministers become program directors or CEOs. Rather, he wanted each of us to be grounded in creating communities where the prophet hood and priesthood of each member and friend could shine. Communities where the way we do business, the way we organize our committees, the way we do our business, identify and are consistent with our beliefs. These things say more than creeds ever could. In fact, Adams often said that he doubted God cared much about creeds. How do you treat your neighbor? Your partner? Your children?

One of JLA's favorite Biblical images was fishing with nets. It suggests many things – the cooperative endeavor of several sets of hands in a great labor, the network of human associations that both lightens and enlightens the effort, the riskiness of the outcome, and the sometimes abundance of the catch. What explains the deep impression he made on countless students, colleagues, audiences and friends is that they felt they had found a man who truly walked his talk, who fought for and achieved the kind of faith he talked about. He believed strongly in the power of small groups and made them happen all around him; he believed it was necessary to seriously consider what our moment in history demands of us, and he did; he believed that all this should be done with loving kindness, laughter and grace, and he was known for this as well.

On July 26, 1994, at the age of 92, James Luther Adams died at home in the house he and Margaret had built years earlier. We are fortunate to have called him one of our own.

Texts used for this sermon include:

The Essential James Luther Adams, George Kimmich Beach, ed. Skinner House Books, Boston. 1998.

An Examined Faith: Social Context and Religious Commitment, George Kimmich Beach, ed. Beacon Press, Boston. 1991.