

The Top Five Religious Stories of 2017
January 7, 2018
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I'm sharing this sermon with you this morning because, when I was an intern minister at our Unitarian Universalist congregation in Sherborn, Mass, my mentor there, Rev. Nathan Detering, used to give a "Top Ten Religious Stories of the previous year" sermon. Now, this was always a favorite of the congregation, but I wasn't sure you'd enjoy the two-hour long worship service it lends itself to, so you're only getting the top five.

Now, a disclaimer before I start:

I'm sure that I missed something big or important in the religious news world this past year. So, if you feel like I left something out, let me know! I want to hear all the religious news stories I may have missed! And, since I might do this again if it goes over well, if you hear of religious stories I should include in NEXT year's top five sermon - please do send them along.

Ok. Are you ready to get started?

So I hate to say this, but I'm beginning this list by cheating a little. Before we get to the top five list I have one "honorable mention" story.

It's called:

Do I have a New Colleague?

According to an excerpt from the much anticipated book "Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump Whitehouse" by Michael Wolff that was released on Friday, Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner is able to marry people because he is a quote "internet Unitarian minister" end quote.

Now, this story received an honorable mention because despite supposedly happening in 2017, the story broke just three days ago on January 3rd. But I couldn't help including it.

Friends, let me assure you, there is not such thing as an "internet Unitarian minister."

This story has prompted response in the press by a spokesperson for the Unitarian Universalist Association, who assures everyone that Unitarian Universalist ministers have to go through a much longer process than simply filling out a form on the internet. And so let me also assure you that I went through quite an extensive process to become an Ordained minister that included three years of school to get my Master's of Divinity, a two year half time internship in a church, three months of full time hospital chaplain training, a two day psychological evaluation, preparation of a one hundred page packet, and two in person interviews with a panel from the Unitarian Universalist Association.

It's likely that Jared Kushner is ordained by the Universal Life Church, a body that does allow people to get ordained for a small fee in order to perform marriage ceremonies. But

regardless of his credentials, or how reliable the source it, suddenly Unitarian Universalism is in the news in a rather strange way.

So, no, no new colleague in the White House for me!

Ok, moving on to the actual list. My top five religious stories of 2017.

Number 5:

Hating Gays is So Passé

Call me naive, call me ignorant, call me overly optimistic, but I really feel like religious organizations having it out for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people is really falling out of fashion.

Maybe it's because I'm living in this Unitarian Universalist bubble here at First Parish in Malden, a community that welcomes LGBTQ people with open arms, but it feel like most of the stories that I hear about LGBTQ people and religion are positive ones.

From churches that hire openly transgender ministers... (that's kind of a joke because YOU did that) to the fact that even a majority of young white Evangelical Christians claim to support same-sex marriage, it really seems that LGBTQ people and religious organizations are no longer the foes they once seemed to be.

Which is why my first response to the "Nashville Statement," a Christian anti-LGBTQ statement, was to ignore it, because, I mean, really? Y'all know you are fighting a losing battle, right?

The Nashville Statement, which came out in August of this year, was written and signed by 150 Evangelical Christian leaders at the conference of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. It is an anti-LGBTQ statement that affirms the idea that men and women are born different, that those differences are important to enforce, and that sexuality should be exclusively in married heterosexual relationships. I will spare you a reading of any of the 14 articles of affirmation and denial - sufficed to say, the statement goes against everything I know about Christianity greater message of acceptance and inclusion. And it has real consequences. LGBTQ teens are at a much higher risk of suicide and homelessness than their non-LGBTQ peers. Documents that claim that affirming these identities is anti-Christian and directly leads to death. Releasing a statement like the Nashville Statement is spiritual abuse, and I'm not afraid to say that.

Luckily, thankfully, joyfully, many, many Christian groups released counter statements affirming the promise that Christianity is inherently an LGBTQ inclusive faith, such as the Christians United Statement which calls for Christians to repent for the harm they have done to LGBTQ people, and, of course, my personal favorite, the Boston Declaration, drafted at American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature that condemned all forms of hatred and oppression, including against LGBTQ people.

Alright, on to our next story.

Number 4:

I Probably Wouldn't Have Told You Who To Vote For Anyways

The tax bill that was recently passed had originally included a provision that would have applied directly to churches and other religious organizations. It was a repeal of the Johnson Amendment.

The Johnson Amendment has been in place since 1954 and it prevents 501(c)3 organizations from endorsing or opposing political candidates. Since Churches, among many other types of non-profit organizations, claim this designation, a repeal of this amendment would mean that religious organizations, such as First Parish in Malden, could publicly endorse or oppose those running for elected office.

Earlier in the year, Donald Trump had signed an Executive Order supporting this repeal of the Johnson Amendment citing churches explicitly, stating that it was to “defend religion and freedom of speech.” I’m sure he wasn’t thinking about Unitarian Universalists at the time.

Now, this amendment wasn’t dropped. And most churches and religious leaders, including yours truly, are in favor of that. Churches are able to endorse and support specific political statements or opinions, even take stances on ballot initiatives - which we should do as they align with or against our values - but taking a stand for or against someone who is running for office is still forbidden.

And this is actually a good thing. It helps keeps us out of political fights where we could spend all our energy, from becoming a Political Action Committee, instead of a church, dedicated to ministering to all people. It means that you are not subjected to *my* whims about who you should and shouldn’t vote for in local, state, and federal politics. It means that churches and clergy can tell people who to vote for because “God says it’s right.”

And, frankly, I think that it means that, if we do decide to speak out in favor or against a candidate, we can still do so, but we do so knowing there may be consequences. And we know that those consequences are sometimes are worth the risk.

In my research about this story, however, I found out that this amendment has never been used to remove a church’s tax exempt status. Still. The risk of corruption remains too high to not have this law on our books.

On to the next story.

Story Number 3:

Literal Nazis and other Anti-Religious Hatred

Something I think we will all always remember from this year was the “Unite the Right” rally that happened in Charlottesville, Virginia, that included white supremacists, white nationalists, neo-Confederates, Klansmen, and, yes, actual Nazis. Much of the languages used by those in this rally was explicitly anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic. This overt religious intolerance was a large part of what united these groups. One woman who was counter protesting was killed. Our country was shocked at this violent display of white supremacy. Our President stopped short of condemning those in the “Unite the Right” rally.

If you made the mistake, like I did, of watching the video that VICE put out you saw the crowd of white, presumably Christian men, chanting “Jews will not replace us” as they walked down the street. Terrifying.

And if you think these protests came out of nowhere and aren’t connected to what’s going on in our executive office, you are mistaken.

In January, less than week after Donald Trump had taken office, he signed Executive Order 13769, a sort of follow-through on his campaign promise of a “Complete and Total Ban on All Muslims,” restricting the entry of immigrants from several countries, including six that were majority Muslim. This order led to detaining 700 travelers, including people who were in the air when the law was enacted. People were literally being turned away at airports.

When our government and our elected leaders put into place such anti-Islamic laws, is it any wonder that those private citizens, those Nazis, would feel free to show their faces and spread their anti-semitic, anti-Islamic hate for all to see?

Here’s the things. This news story is not all doom and gloom. Because, in both cases, there was a response, and often it came from people of faith.

Here, in our own Greater Boston Area, 40,000 people turned out the week after the Charlottesville protests for a “Fight Supremacy” response.

After the so-called Muslim Ban was put into place, people showed up, at airports across the country, in solidarity with those who were being detained. But the work is not over. Though it has been halted and some parts of revoked, the Supreme Court allowed a third version of it to go be implemented in December.

Our work continues for religious freedom and liberty in this country. For liberation. May we Unitarian Universalists have the courage to stand as allies against white supremacy.

Which leads me to my next story.

Number 2:

“First Take the Log of Of Your Eye, So You Can See Clearly the Speck in Your Neighbors” - A Bible Quote from Matthew 7:5

So this is another story about Unitarian Universalists. While the country was fighting racism and white supremacy in our government, Unitarian Universalists seriously started examining it in our own institutions.

And everything kind of blew up.

First it came out, after the hiring of another white male minister to a position over a woman of color who was not ordained for a role in the Unitarian Universalist, that there was a lot of work that needed to be done to actually examine how racism and white supremacy might be impacting, not just the world outside of us, but our own hiring practices. If we Unitarian Universalists claim to be actively anti-oppression, what are we doing to examine the ways in which WE are a part of it.

What you need to know is this: In March of this year, the President of the UUA, Peter Morales, resigned from his position following a letter to the Unitarian Universalist staff stating that, among other things, he wanted to see “less hysteria” regarding the hiring practices at the UUA. This was three months before his term was up.

It seemed dramatic at the time. There was concern over the future of our religion. I was months from being Ordained into the Unitarian Universalist Ministry and I began to wonder what exactly it was I was professing as my faith when we clearly had so much work to do.

But, ultimately, it was a good thing for Unitarian Universalism.

This threw the UUA into a hire freeze for a while, and now they have fully committed to doing a audit of themselves to see how they can improve their hiring practices with regards to white supremacy.

In the three months between Presidents, the UUA appointed three people of color to lead us.

In June, at our General Assembly, the meeting of all the Unitarian Universalists congregations, Rev. Susan Frederick Gray, a minister with a long history of justice work, particularly around immigration justice in Phoenix, was elected president, the first woman to be elected to that role. This election signified a desire for the denomination to make bold and courageous steps towards examining our own racism and white supremacy, and other forms of oppression, as we attempt to condemn it in the world around us.

A call back to our “honorable mention” story. On Thursday, Unitarian Universalist Association President Rev. Susan Frederick Gray Tweeted:

So @NYMag says @jaredkushner thinks he’s a Unitarian Universalist! I wonder if he knows we openly challenge racism, bigotry, heteropatriarchy and systems of oppression. We have no record of him, but it’s never too late to shift your life towards love and justice.

And now for our final story, the top religious story of 2017 (as determined by Otto):
More than Just a Church: A Sanctuary

I end with this story because you have to end on hope, and for me, this story shares the true meaning of what it is to be a person of faith in today's world - to see the face of God in the most marginalized and oppressed, and to offer what you have to them.

In 2017 the number of faith communities that are offering themselves as sanctuaries for Immigrants has more than doubled.

As the government tries to increase deportation and resist immigration, more and more faith communities are opening their doors to those in need, and hundreds more are offering pledges to support this New Sanctuary Movement. Despite the threat of consequences.

Like Bethel AME Church, a predominantly Black church in Boston who decided to offer sanctuary for a man from El Salvador, or University Lutheran Church in Cambridge who provided shelter to a woman and her children from Ecuador. As the minister of Bethel AME Church, Rev. Ray Hammond, said, "It's not a political issue. Ultimately, it's a human issue."

This movement also includes UUs all over the country, and eight right here in Massachusetts, including neighboring Medford... (Might I suggest we reach out to them and find out how we can support them? Just a thought of a place to start.)

I end with this story because it's so important for us to see the ways that faith communities are doing good in our world, and the ways in which churches, like our church, whose mission is bring love beyond walls, can live that our more fully in the world. And there are many ways for us to do that.

So there you have it. My top 5 stories of 2017. The ups the downs, the strange, the wonderful. One thing is for certain, as much as we talk about the decline of religion, it's still influencing our world and our politics. And so I ask, who are we called to be in times like these? What stories do we want to see in our world in 2018? What stories can we be a part of?

And so as let us contemplate and act. For we have the power to shape the conversation and to transform our world.

Let us say together Amen. Amen.