A HIGHER STANDARD OF BEING

By David Herndon

Commitment Sunday

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First Unitarian Church
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This morning here at First Unitarian Church we celebrate Commitment Sunday. This is a time when we recall the importance of this religious community for us and for others. This is also a time when we consider our personal responsibility for making sure this religious community has the financial resources to remain healthy and to continue sharing our progressive religious message with the larger community.

Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams once said: "The decisive forms of goodness in society are institutional forms."[1] All by itself, the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh may not be tremendously decisive with regard to the fate of the world. But we can be part of a network of progressive institutions, from prophetic liberal Christian congregations to progressive political organizations, which together can bring about significant change in our society. This morning, on Commitment Sunday, I am inviting all of us to show that we believe that this congregation can make a difference. This morning, I am inviting all of us to show that we believe that this congregation can be a decisive form of goodness in society.

Many people in our society nowadays find it difficult to trust institutions. Two episodes of recent history in our nation have encouraged this difficulty. The first episode I have in mind is the 1960s. During the 1960s, many established institutions, customs, and practices here in the United States experienced strong challenges. The Civil Rights movement challenged racial segregation and Jim Crow laws. Widespread protests against the war in Vietnam challenged long-standing beliefs about the role of the United States in the world. The feminist movement challenged traditional understandings of the appropriate role of women in society. Academic institutions experienced various challenges, from student protests and strikes to calls for increased relevance. Established political processes and institutions were challenged, perhaps most visibly during the disruption of the Democratic National Convention in 1968 in Chicago. The

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[1] James Luther Adams, "Guiding Principles for a Free Faith," in On Being Human Religiously, edited by Max L. Stackhouse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), p. 18. The section of the essay in which this quotation appears is entitled "The Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism."

environmental movement challenged established practices of production and consumption, calling on both businesses and consumers to adopt more environmentally-friendly standards. At the end of the decade, gays and lesbians began to organize politically, challenging deep-seated beliefs about homosexuality. Religious institutions experienced challenges as they struggled to clarify and claim their prophetic voices in this period of polarized public opinion.

Much of the rhetoric of this time was anti-institutional. Slogans such as "Don't trust anyone over thirty" and "Burn, baby, burn" hardly inspired confidence in doing things according to the time-honored wisdom associated with established institutions. Similarly, widely-circulated books such as 1984 and Brave New World pointed to the potential shortcomings and even dangers of the institutions of government. Moreover, much of the popular music of the 1960s included political and social messages which encouraged challenges to established institutions, customs, and practices.

Yet the 1960s also provided splendid examples of institutions that served as "decisive forms of goodness in society." Among these examples were the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which provided extraordinary leadership for the Civil Rights movement, and the United States Congress, which passed the Voting Rights Act and launched the Great Society programs, including the War on Poverty. Going back a few years, one might add the Supreme Court at the time of its landmark decision in 1954 when it declared the doctrine of "separate but equal" unconstitutional, a decision which reverberated throughout the 1960s and beyond.

A second episode in the recent history of our nation also encouraged many people in our society to mistrust institutions, particularly the institutions of government. This episode began in 1980 with the Presidency of Ronald Reagan, who was a staunch advocate of lower taxes, smaller government, reduced social programs, and increased deregulation of business. It was this same philosophy which, years later, led Grover Norquist to make the infamous comment that his objective with regard to the federal government was to "starve the best" to the point where he could "drown it in the bathtub."

Some will trace the smaller government philosophy back to Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, who had run unsuccessfully for President in 1964. In fact, this philosophy first found organized expression in the 1930s, in reaction to the reforms of the New Deal under President Franklin Roosevelt. Prior to the New Deal, according to President Calvin Coolidge, "most people would scarcely have noticed if the federal government had gone out of existence."[2] But the New Deal vastly expanded the scope and scale of the federal government. Historian Michael Barone has observed: "In 1930 the federal government consumed less that 4% of the gross national produce; except for the Post Office, it was remote from the life of ordinary people. By 1936 the federal government consumed 9%of GNP and through WPA employed 7% of the work force; it was a living presence across the country."[3] Thus, in 1933, a group of conservative politicians led by North Carolina Senator Josiah Bailey drafted a "Conservative Manifesto," which "denounced the sit-down strikes, demanded lower federal taxes and a

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[2] Calvin Coolidge, quoted in Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929 – 1945 by David M. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 340.

[3] Michael Barone, quoted ibid., p. 285.

balanced budget, defended states' rights as well as the rights of private enterprise against government encroachment, and warned of the dangers of creating a permanently dependent welfare class."[4] Roosevelt had summarized his approach in this way: "I am not for a return to that definition of liberty under which for many years a free people were being gradually regimented into the service of the privileged few. I prefer and I am sure you prefer that broader definition of liberty under which we are moving toward to greater freedom, to greater security for the average man than he has ever known before in the history of America."[5]

In the 1960s our country witnessed a movement toward progressive social reform which challenged many of the established institutions, customs, and practices of our society. In the 1980s our country witnessed the rise of a political philosophy that promoted disdain for many of the institutions of government and engaged in a determined effort to shrink the resources of the federal government. Both of these movements, each in its own way, encouraged a climate of suspicion toward organizations and institutions. However, the more enduring debate has to do with whether or not the federal government shall use its powers to supplement the workings of the free market to ensure some measure of security and opportunity for all citizens -- those with financial resources and personal connections and educational attainments, and also those without these privileges and advantages.

Since the 1960s, even as many people have maintained an unfortunate suspicion toward organizations, Unitarian Universalists have been learning how to build stronger religious institutions. We have been learning how to say "we" more easily and more effectively instead of just insisting on "I" no matter what. We have come to appreciate what former Unitarian Universalist Association President Bill Schultz has called "the disciplines of community." We have come to appreciate that, as James Luther Adams has said, "the decisive forms of goodness in our society are institutional forms."

Here at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, we have been quite deliberate about our aspirations toward creating a larger and stronger religious institution. In recent years, we have created a campus ministry program, we have instituted a second weekly worship service, we have instituted a second set of religious education classes to go along with our new worship service, we have expanded our music program, we have created a covenant group program, we have instituted a new system of congregational governance, we have invested nearly one million dollars in building renovations, and we have established, thanks to the generosity of Herbert and Dorothea Simon, three program endowments, in music, campus ministry, and social justice. At present, conversations are already beginning among us with regard to establishing a Unitarian Universalist preschool or early childhood education center as well as having our congregation adopt policies and practices reflecting a commitment to environmental sustainability, and we have completed the first step toward setting forth our vision for the future of our church, a vision that may well call for a capital campaign in the near future. Far from reflecting suspicion of organizations, this record of institutional development demonstrates that we share a healthy appreciation for the possibilities and promises of this religious institution. Yes, we could have set our aspirations lower; we could have not bothered with some of

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[4] Ibid., p. 340.

[5] Franklin Roosevelt, quoted ibid., p. 247.

our accomplishments; we could have avoided the trouble of accommodating more people and more activities. But I think our congregation is much more interesting and much more alive because of our strides toward becoming a larger and stronger institution.

Nevertheless, to be a member of any congregation, including ours, requires no little grace. The minister may say something with which you disagree, or say it in a way that you find disagreeable. The Board of Trustees may adopt policies that you find nettlesome. The congregation may not change as quickly as you would like, or it may change much more quickly than you would like. The financial priorities of the leaders of the church may differ from what you would prefer, so that there never seems to be enough money for the one project for which you have special enthusiasm. When all is said and done, invariably much more is said than is done. And as if all that were not enough to put up with, then you are asked to provide financial support with money that you could certainly use in other ways.

This morning, however, I am inviting all of us to consider the following trade-off. I am inviting all of us to consider freely choosing a slightly lower standard of living in return for a significantly higher standard of being. What do I mean by this invitation? I mean that our lives can be made significantly more meaningful and worthwhile by our participation in voluntary associations that create and sustain community, voluntary associations that promote justice and compassion, voluntary associations that affirm the human rights of all people, voluntary associations that identify and oppose oppression, voluntary associations that promote caring and responsibility, cooperation and fairness, service to others and stewardship of the earth. Personal participation in a religious community or some other voluntary association devoted to these values is worth doing without some luxury or some other unnecessary item. Choosing a slightly lower standard of living is worth having a significantly higher standard of being, worth the opportunity of participating in the process of bringing progressive values into the larger community.

Some of you may have seen the recent New Yorker article about Saddleback Community Church in Orange County in Southern California. This conservative evangelical congregation includes some twenty-five thousand members. In the article, the senior pastor tells this story: "Last Sunday, we took a special offering called Extend the Vision, for people to give over and above their normal offering. We decided we would not use any financial consultants, no high-powered gimmicks, no thermometer on the wall. It was just, 'Folks, you know you need to give.' Sunday's offering was seven million dollars in cash and fifty-three million dollars in commitments. That's one Sunday. The average commitment was fifteen thousand dollars a family. That's in addition to their tithe. When people say megachurches are shallow, I say you have no idea. These people are committed."[6] The New Yorker article also mentioned that this congregation committed itself to feeding "every homeless person in Orange County three meals a day for forty days."[7] As a result of this commitment, nine thousand two hundred people volunteered to help, and two millions pounds of food were distributed.

Whatever they make think of other institutions, apparently these people have little reluctance to be profoundly supportive of their church and its mission.

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[6] Rick Warren, quoted in "The Cellular Church" by Malcolm Gladwell, The New Yorker, September 12, 2005, p. 63.

[7] Ibid.

Here at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, we do not ask for financial support on this scale. But maybe we should. Indeed, some Unitarian Universalist churches have begun giving all the loose cash in the Sunday morning offering to some worthwhile progressive charitable organization – the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee comes to mind – as an expression of their commitment to extending their sense of care and responsibility to the larger community. Maybe we should start doing something like that. But in the meantime, I will simply invite all of us to consider the trade-off I mentioned earlier: choosing a slightly lower standard of living in return for a significantly higher standard of being through participation in the process of bringing progressive religious values into the larger community. It is in your self-interest to make this trade-off. It will also make a difference in what happens in this religious community and what happens in our world.

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