

**“The Hope Freedom Creates”
(formerly known as “The Audacity of Hope”)**

**31 October 2004
Unity Church–Unitarian**

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SERMON

It was a cold gray October morning everything shrouded in shadows. The sun rose, but it seemed more dawn-like as the light struggled to illumine the village. A great fire was being built in the Town Square. Logs of green wood were being placed around a long pole. People whispered amongst themselves. A convicted heretic, Michael Servetus, was to be burned later in the morning.

Michael Servetus was born into a well-to-do noble family in Spain in 1511. He was a child of exceptional intelligence and was an independent thinker from his earliest days. The world he inhabited was changing rapidly as a result of the printing press and there was a consequent explosion of books and knowledge, making many things more accessible for ordinary people. The Bible, however, was printed in those days only in Latin. Hebrew translations were illegal as was learning the Hebrew language. The church only wanted people to read their Authorized Version! Michael secretly learned Hebrew and read the Bible for himself. In addition, he studied Martin Luther and the Humanist Erasmus. At the age of 17, he concluded that the teaching of the Trinity was not supported by any Biblical passages. According to his biographers, he was already a budding heretic.

The root of the word heretic is found in the Greek, and it means choice. In our modern day, it means not going along with official religious doctrine or creeds. People are still tried and convicted of heresy, but in Michael’s day the consequences for such action was often death. Even in the midst of the kind of religious questioning that accompanied the reformation, Michael Servetus was still risking much when he wrote his first book, *On the Errors of the Trinity*. This book was wildly popular and was passed from friend to friend and hotly debated. In addition to arguing against the Trinity he also maintained that infant baptism was unnecessary because obviously babies were born free of sin. He thought baptism should be a choice left up to the thinking adult. He also envisioned the Holy Spirit as the divine part of the human being, something that everyone – Christian and Non-Christian alike possessed.

Michael Servetus created controversy wherever he went. He was critical of those people with whom he didn’t agree. Throughout his life, he was a thorn on the side of religious authorities. His greatest passion was the study of religion, but the church was determined to have him arrested if he continued to espouse his radical, heretical thoughts. He narrowly escaped arrest numerous times and eventually assumed a pseudonym and took up another profession. He was encouraged to pursue the field of medicine, which he did and became a celebrated physician and a man of letters. When the plague broke out, he attended the poor and rich alike. But he couldn’t stay away from his first love: religion. He wanted more people to see the light, more people to understand that there were simple inclusive concepts that were foundational to Jesus’ ministry and teaching. The doctrine and dogma the church added through the centuries only made Jesus’s simple teachings less excisable, he argued. He wrote another book, *The Restoration of Christianity*, and continued to correspond with the prominent religious thinkers of his day who experienced Serevetus as obsessed and whose ideas were simply too radical.

With the publishing of the new book, he was arrested again and condemned to death by the Inquisition. He was imprisoned but managed to escape only to be recaptured in Geneva and put on trial there where eventually John Calvin himself became his prosecutor. The religious debate lasted from some days as each man argued at a level few understood.

Serevetus’s religion was a simple and gentle one. He envisioned a religion that was based more in deeds than creeds, a religion with some simple precepts, a religion that was inclusive rather than exclusive. He dreamed of a religion that didn’t cause confusion through doctrine that wasn’t logical or reasonable.

His teachings were to reappear again and again in dozens of reform movements, including Quakers, Baptists and Unitarians. He wasn't the only reformer or movement to be concerned with the Trinity, infant baptism, the nature of the Holy Spirit, and how inviting and inclusive a faith could be. But he was the one of the few who dared to speak forcefully when others spoke in whispers. He challenged the dominant dogma of the day when others thought it was easier just to quietly not believe. He was 42 years old when he died in 1553, burned at the stake with green wood for fuel so that his death would be slow and agonizing. Out of the Flames.

Our religious history is full of heretics. Heretic's insight, doggedness and determination won the free faith we practice today. Our religious ancestors who gave their lives for the right to question the prevailing beliefs of the day wrote the story we have inherited.

Another Unitarian martyr, Transylvanian Francis David said, "We do not have to think alike to love alike." Those of you in our covenant groups or those of you who have engaged in conversations of belief and principle know the spectrum of belief that exists here. Differences of opinion and belief can and does add richness to our lives for we can see that the opinion is not the person. The person is judged by what she or he does. We call this "salvation by character, or by deeds." And even then, we must be ready to forgive one another and make room for a person to become who they really are in the depths of their spirit.

The progress of the world is dependent on people who dare to question and doubt. The Swiss Mathematician Blaise Pascal said, "People never do evil so cheerfully and so completely as when they do so from religious conviction." Yesterdays heretic is often accepted without much question a decade, or century later. But what heretical Unitarians have been saying for centuries continues to be challenging to the status quo. For centuries we have held up a view of doubt as a necessary ingredient of evolving truth. We have been unwavering in our dedication to reason, tolerance and freedom in matters of religion. We hold to a broad embrace that seeks to include rather draw lines that keep people out. We believe that a common humanity binds us in a way that goes beyond dogma and doctrine.

To be a heretic one must hold fiercely to one's beliefs and opinions. One must be willing to courageously speak those convictions in the public realm. One must believe that truth is an ever-evolving process, so that you are willing to risk much to influence that evolution. The person willing to challenge the prevailing status quo must have confidence in the freedom in which they live their lives. They answer to a higher calling if you will. And lastly, they must be grounded in hope and in the belief of the possibility of change. For if they did not, then why bother in the first place. Speaking out against prevailing attitudes or beliefs no matter what the context is never easy. It is difficult to practice a truly inclusive and tolerant faith that promotes a true diversity of opinion and thought. To be a Republican and a Unitarian Universalist is to chart a difficult and challenging course. They are experts in our ability to live out our inclusive and tolerant faith.

My friends we are all heretics today. The heresy we embrace? We are all religious liberals and in today's world, that is heresy indeed. The core values that Michael Servetus lived and died for still seem to provoke and challenge those people who look for answers that fit neatly into a system of dogma and doctrine. We don't want easy, neat answers. We hold onto the ambiguity, the uncertainty and doubt and hold them close, guarding their precious place in the life of this nation.

We have been blessed to be able to live in this land. It is a land founded on the principles of freedom and responsibility. Freedom is a right that is given to us, but paradoxically it is a right enforced by all of us. Freedom only exists when human beings join with one another to protect it. This is the covenant of freedom. It is the pact that civic minded citizens make with one another to maintain something of common worth.

The covenant of freedom is one human being's promise to another: I will keep you and protect you against the forces that would take your freedom away. I will ensure your worth and dignity if you'll ensure mine. It is a promise we make in the name of everyone not just those who believe as we do, or vote as we do. The covenant of freedom is based on universal salvation, not individual salvation. It includes all. This covenant that binds us calls us to work for freedom for all, not just members of our families.

Whatever the outcome of this election, the good news is that more people are involved in the election. For too long we have shirked responsibility that the covenant of freedom entails. The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, which monitors voting rights around the world, reports that out of 131 world democracies, the United States ranks 103 in voter participation. How can we have what Theodore Parker called for (and which Abraham Lincoln borrowed for the Gettysburg address) "A government of all the people, by all the people and for all the people. How can we have that when in the election of 2000 half of eligible voters didn't cast a ballot? I can only hope and pray this time will be different.

But with participation so scant is it any surprise that the government, regardless of which party is on top, seems to serve the interests of the few rather than the many.

Over 200 of us have been involved in some get out the vote work. We have cased grocery stores, knocked on doors. We have spent weekend after weekend trying to interest our neighbors in participating in this democracy. By our actions, we have asked them to join us in the covenant of freedom.

Our work isn't over. It will continue long after this election is over. It is the work that all engaged citizens participate in and we can do nothing less than answer its call.