

This morning we will not—I hope it goes without saying—be equating disobedience with sin. But if you grew up in a religiously conservative environment, that might be the first thing that comes to mind. According to some, there are certain timeless rules you must follow, and if you don't, then God will be mad at you, right? And, if you grew up in a context like that, I wouldn't be surprised if you've had a nagging sense of guilt for much of your life. Anybody know what I'm talking about? Because whatever the rules are, you know you've broken some of them, right? And you probably had fun doing it, too. So you're doubly guilty. Yes? Anybody know about *that*?

Here at First Unitarian, however, you sit at the head of a historical lineage that is marked by disobedience, or as our ancestors' critics thought of it, heresy. Of course, our ancestors, who in some cases lost their lives for their nonconformity, thought of their heresies quite in the opposite way: as obedience to the higher powers of love, reason, and conscience.

So this is by no means a sermon about disobedience that is secretly meant to urge you to be obedient.

And we're not just going to talk about disobedience of religious or ultimate rules, but also about disobeying civil rules, as in *civil disobedience*.

However...it seems obvious when preaching on disobedience to start first with the Bible, because—let me tell you— it is chock full of punks and troublemakers! Liars, rogues, thieves, and other uncooperative humans.

If you want stories of scandal and outrage, lasciviousness and treachery, look no further than the Bible! It's ironic, actually, that the Bible could be thought of as something people should somehow obey, when it is itself brimming with disobedience (not to mention countless contradictions).

The story of creation is just barely completed in the book of Genesis when what happens in the Garden of Eden?

Right. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. God says, in essence, this is your paradise. There is only one thing you aren't allowed to do, and that is to eat from the tree of knowledge. And then the serpent shows up, and urges Eve to eat the fruit. If you eat it, it will make you wise, the serpent tells her.

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That sounds good, so she does, and she offers some to Adam, who doesn't seem to give it any thought at all before he takes a big bite, too.

In the fourth century, the Christian theologian Augustine called Eve and Adam's disobedience the Original Sin, and said that we have all, every one of us, inherited it. We are born sinners.

Naturally, many have taken that assertion very literally, and other theologians have gone so far as to speculate about how sin might be passed, genetically, through conception. But rather than thinking about all that, I think it's more useful to consider the significance of the argument that disobedience is the sin inherent to humankind.

(Augustine, by the way, was famous for his wild behavior—he was quite promiscuous as a young person. It was during that time that he uttered his famous prayer, “[God], grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.” Mañana!)

What does it mean that some of our most ancient myths show humans as inherently, tragically disobedient? What does it mean to say that disobedience is the original sin?

After the creation story in the Bible, we have the book of Exodus, in which the Pharaoh of Egypt refuses to obey God, despite plagues of frogs, lice, locusts, boils, and worse... it isn't until the tenth plague touches down that the Pharaoh finally obeys, and even then—after he liberates the Israelites he turns around and chases them to the Red Sea, which has opened to let them pass, and it closes on the Pharaoh's troops.

Later, King David commits adultery and murder—both in violation of the ten commandments. According to the story, David was chosen by God to be king. Later, Christians identified him as an ancestor of Jesus. But even David was disobedient.

And in another book within the Bible, God tells a person named Jonah to go be a prophet in Ninevah. But Jonah, knowing how people usually treat prophets, runs in the opposite direction and catches the next boat outta there. He's like, forget it, and he just takes off. Then what happens? He gets swallowed by a whale. That's the “Jonah and the Whale” story.

In the Christian bible, Paul, a controversial figure, alludes to how hard it is to be obedient. In a letter he wrote to one of the early churches he said, “I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.”²

Paul was writing to a religious community that faced the same challenge any congregation faces: that religion is ultimately human-made, not divinely made,

² Romans 7:7-8

however divine its object. It's therefore destined to fall short of its own ideals, because it ultimately depends upon humans—wayward, conflicted, frail, imperfect humans.

Paul says to his people, every one of us is familiar with the fact that if you sin you will suffer. And yet everyone is doing these things. And therefore, no one should judge another.

But there is another message in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, too. One that later religious liberals (like the ones who became Unitarians and Universalists) would pay a lot of attention to. Which is that although there are rules, and many of them for good reason, there is one rule, one value, that is higher than all others. And that love. Love god, and love your neighbor as yourself. "The rest is commentary," to quote the Jewish sage Hillel.

Remember what Buechner says in this morning's reading? "To obey Love itself, which above all else wishes us well, leaves us the freedom to be the best and gladdest that we have it in us to become. The only freedom Love denies us is the freedom to destroy ourselves."

Now there are lots of ways to destroy ourselves. If you are a human being, you've tried some of them out. We all have. And by the way, trying to destroy someone else is also self-destruction. It exacts a mighty cost on your soul.

There are lots of ways to violate the love rule, and frankly I don't even think we've thought of them all.

That's some of the wisdom of the creation story—that we are our own worst enemies sometimes and that this is an inherent—if not *inherited*—part of being human.

We are born to be free, even if it means we will make bad decisions sometimes. "Eating the forbidden fruit will make you wise," the serpent told Eve. The serpent was right: our mistakes have a lot to teach us. It is never too late to go back and learn, or to learn more, from something we regret. But it sure can take courage.

This is not a church that requires obedience to a whole bunch of strict rules, but that doesn't mean we are invited to do whatever we want, either.

We are accountable to Love.

Now, here's where we move into an interesting truth: Sometimes, in order to avoid destroying ourselves, love requires us to disobey a lower law.

I'm talking now about civil disobedience.

Gandhi's Indian Independence Movement was an example of love requiring disobedience. So was the civil rights movement, and the farm worker rights movement.

But let me tell you, if their qualities as movements and the effect of civil disobedience seemed pretty clear to me when I set out to write this sermon, when I started my research I realized immediately that I was barely going to scratch the surface of the vast amount of theorizing that has been done on this topic.

There is a lot of writing out there about civil disobedience, and not all of it is accountable to that higher law, Love.

So what I'm going to do is touch on some of the big questions briefly, and then tell you about one example of civil disobedience that I think illustrates some of the best points.

There are big questions about whether civil disobedience should take the form of passive resistance, or something more active;

whether it must always be nonviolent;

whether one person can do it alone, in private, or whether it must be collective and public;

whether it is judged by its outward effect, or whether the integrity of the person doing it is the most important part.

This last part, about collective vs solitary, and effective vs privately meaningful has some roots right in our own UU history. Henry David Thoreau was brought up as a Unitarian at the First Parish in Concord, where (almost 200 years later) I was a ministerial intern, and where they instructed me in the correct pronunciation of his name—like the word *thorough*—before they even offered me the position. (I hadn't even mentioned him.)

Thoreau publicly renounced his membership from First Parish as an adult, but he went on to have a huge influence on our denomination with his writings about nature and transcendentalism.

Thoreau also wrote an essay that is very relevant to *this* sermon. It was originally entitled "Resistance to Civil Government," and later became known as "Civil Disobedience." In that work, he decried the injustice of slavery, which was at its horrifying height then, and the Mexican-American War, which he saw as an attempt to steal land from Mexico.

Thoreau argued that citizens are morally responsible if they support an unjust government, even if their support is required by law. He wrote,

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government,

let it go... but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.

And so, he says, he stopped paying his taxes. He even went to jail for it. He wasn't famous yet, though, and no one really noticed what he had done. So in Thoreau's case, this civil disobedience was private when it happened. Later when he had become a well-known writer and thinker, his essay influenced Gandhi.

By imprisoning him, the government had locked up his body, but not his conscience. The government may have brute strength, he noted, but not superior wit. He said, "I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest."

As for the other big questions about civil disobedience, it is hard for me to imagine any situation of civil disobedience in which violence could truly be in service to love. I would think the exceptions to this are so rare that we can scarcely find them in human history. There are almost always better options. This has been evident in the last couple of weeks, with an escalation of violent rhetoric by protesters on college campuses in the US. It is a contradiction to call for both a ceasefire *and* the murder of anyone who believes in Israel's right to exist.

And in terms of passive versus active resistance, as in whether to sit down at the lunch counter and politely refuse to get up until you are arrested without resisting or, whether to barge in and intentionally disrupt congress so it can't pass a morally abhorrent law

I'll say that passive resistance lends itself better to public sympathy.

But here's a story about someone who was active, and who I think accomplished something very good.

In the last hours of 2008, the Bush administration tried to offer the oil and gas industry a quick and dirty parting gift. Without the legally-required environmental reviews, Bush's Bureau of Land Management put drilling rights to thousands of acres of federal land on the auction block. Much of it was near Utah's Arches and Canyonlands National Parks. Because they circumvented the legal process, there wasn't time for formal objections, and a lot was at stake.

Tim DeChristopher, who was 27 years old and a student at the University of Utah, saw his fellow environmentalists protesting outside the federal building and decided to take it to another level by entering. He planned to make a speech, or otherwise be disruptive, and get himself arrested.

Instead, when he walked in, a receptionist asked him if he was there to bid. And on the spur of the moment, he said yes. Auction paddle in hand, he entered and—despite having no money—proceeded to place winning bids on more than 22,000 acres of land, worth \$1.8 million, before he was stopped by a federal official.

Obviously, he did not get to keep the rights to the land, but he did manage to buy enough time for other environmentalists to file an injunction against the sale. When all was said and done, out of the 116 leases the Bush administration was offering, only 26 were found to be legal.

An article in the Huffington Post afterward pointed out that “improper oil operations can have disastrous consequences.” That summer an ExxonMobil pipeline spilled over 50,000 gallons of oil into the Yellowstone River. The article argued that DeChristopher's actions might have saved at least two national parks from a similar fate.

Naturally, the federal government was not amused. The prosecutor decided to make an example out of him and charged him with two felonies. He served almost two years in prison for that. Then he went to Harvard Divinity School and founded a non profit that supports nonviolent direct action on environmental issues.

Civil disobedience by definition involves breaking a law, and when we engage in it we have to be willing to suffer the consequences. DeChristopher clearly was. At his sentencing hearing, he delivered a calm, thoughtful statement to the judge. In it he pointed out the hypocrisy of a federal government that would incarcerate a student activist for meddling with an auction, while letting the CEO of Massey Energy remain free. Massey Energy has been cited for over 62,000 violations in the last decade and was responsible for the deaths of 29 miners.

In his closing comments to the judge, DeChristopher invited the judge to consider joining him. He said,

I want you to join me in valuing this country's rich history of nonviolent civil disobedience. If you share those values but think my tactics are mistaken...You can sentence me to a wide range of community service efforts that would point my commitment to a healthy and just world down a different path. ...You can steer that commitment if you agree with it, but you can't kill it. This is not going away. At this point of unimaginable threats on the horizon, this is what hope looks like. In these times of a morally bankrupt government that has sold out its principles, this is what patriotism looks

like. With countless lives on the line, this is what love looks like, and it will only grow.”³

This brings us back to the words of Frederick Buechner. [From the morning’s reading].⁴

To obey the law of the land leaves you with your constitutional freedom, but not the freedom to follow your own conscience...

To obey the dictates of your own conscience leaves you freedom from...moral guilt but not the freedom to gratify your strongest appetites.

To obey your appetites leaves you the freedom of an animal to take what you want ...but not the freedom to be fully human.

[But to obey] Love itself, which above all else wishes us well, leaves us the freedom to be the best and gladdest that we have it in us to become. The only freedom Love denies us is the freedom to destroy ourselves.

This doesn’t mean we should ignore constitutional law, or the laws of our consciences, or even our passions and appetites, but that we must hold them to the test of the highest law: love.

So may it be.

³ DeChristopher quote, which is on public record, was sourced here: <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/blogs/national-affairs/a-rosa-parks-moment-climate-activist-tim-dechristopher-sentenced-to-prison-20110727>

There is more info on the story here: <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/blogs/national-affairs/meet-america-s-most-creative-climate-criminal-20110707#ixzz1jUeFaiRZ>

And: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jay-michaelson/why-liberals-should-be-ou_b_910432.html

⁴ What follows is paraphrased from Buechner’s Wishful Thinking: a Theological ABC. (Shortened and adapted for gender inclusion.)