

*Transcript of “sermon” of David Niose, at the First Parish (Unitarian Universalist) in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, on September 25, 2016. Sermon title: Humanism and Our Common Humanity*

Thanks for the kind invitation to be part of your service here today.

You know, I have to say, I’ve never considered myself “a man of the pulpit.” Which, if you’re familiar with my resume, is stating the obvious.

Growing up Catholic, as a little kid, I had priests and ministers up on a pedestal – they’re men of God, right? Not that I was a bad kid or anything, but I never thought I could measure up to the exceptional moral character it must take to be religious clergy.

As I got older, I learned more about Christian clerics. I saw Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, and many others – Ted Haggard, a married man and anti-gay minister, doing meth with a male prostitute in a hotel room. And I realized, that bar for religious clergy isn’t quite as high as I thought. Maybe I could’ve made the cut as clergy.

Anyway, I went to law school instead, which I suppose is where you go if you can’t live up to the moral standards of Ted Haggard.

Well, here I am at the pulpit today anyway. The title of this talk is “Humanism and Our Common Humanity.”

It’s no secret that America has become a very polarized society. The rhetoric of public discourse tends to be very harsh these days. Many of the ugliest aspects of our culture – racism, misogyny, homophobia, religious bigotry – are quite prominent and visible. Not that complete social harmony has ever existed here, but most of us realize that the divisiveness has definitely gotten worse – especially in politics, where prejudice and bigotry are really out in the open now.

Now, some blame this on the 24-hour news cycle, on Fox News and talk radio. Others point to the Internet and social media, where uncivil discourse is the norm. For some reason, people feel perfectly comfortable being much meaner online than they ever would be in real life. Who knows why. But it’s real – the divisiveness and polarization.

So, I think most would agree that our society needs some kind of healing, we need to find a way to be *united* again. The question is how – how can we find solidarity?

The most common answer I hear – usually from the right, but not exclusively so – is that patriotism should unite us. Sounds nice, doesn't it? We're all Americans, so let's unite in our love of country, let's celebrate *that* commonality. That might sound good in theory, but I'd like to talk about why that's *not* the answer. In fact, the way patriotism is utilized politically today, it actually *contributes* to the polarization of the country. In several ways, it actually divides us.

First of all, patriotism doesn't work if you're mistreating large segments of society I'm thinking mainly of minorities and the poor, but there are others. Patriotism can't be expected to cure, or gloss over, deep-seated social dysfunction. It's like a totally dysfunctional family pretending everything's hunky-dory—you can only pull that off so long.

We're seeing this play out these days in the controversy over those who are taking a knee for the National Anthem, in protest over the way minorities are being treated. I'm sure you're familiar with it, but to really understand the issue we need to look seriously at what this country has done, and is still doing, to its African-American population. Never mind the centuries of slavery, and the generations of Jim Crow that followed. Look at today, at the rates of incarceration for black men. The dropout and poverty rates – they call it the “school-to-prison pipeline,” and for good reason. Mistreatment at the hands of law enforcement, and the entire criminal justice system, is a very real problem. Whether it's getting targeted for driving while black, or being shot while unarmed – the problem is real.

So, to protest this mistreatment and call attention to it, the “Black Lives Matter” movement arises, and it gains steam. And much of the country responds – how? – with a complete lack of empathy, by saying – “No, All Lives Matter!” Really? Members of our society—our brothers and sisters, and fellow Americans—are clearly carrying a terrible burden and they've come up with the slogan “Black Lives Matter” to call attention to the injustice, and to seek validation—and the response is to whitewash it (that pun is intended) by expanding the statement to include everyone—All Lives Matter. Can you think of a more insensitive and callous, a less compassionate way to respond to a sincere cry for help?

So, fed up with still getting no understanding, seeing their complaints about racism met only with more racism, Colin Kaepernick and others decide to do what? – to respectfully dissent from a song. They don't get violent, they don't call for upheaval and revolution—they sit out a song, in peaceful protest. And they get heat for it. They get derided as unpatriotic.

As I said, patriotism doesn't unite us—it divides us—when we're mistreating an entire demographic this way. In that context, alluding to national greatness and patriotism only rings hollow and stirs resentment.

And there are other problems with American patriotism. For one, too often it's really not patriotism at all, but nationalism and militarism. If you doubt this, just try opting out of a patriotic exercise publicly someday. I defend kids who do this all over the country – kids who opt out of the Pledge of Allegiance (which they have an absolute right to do). It's entirely predictable what will be said by overzealous teachers who try to force them to participate: "You're being disrespectful, to the troops!" Why, I wonder, the automatic association of patriotism with militarism? Surely this is why, in the American mindset, you can't be a true patriot if you oppose a war. This by the way is directly contrary to the humanist view. From a humanistic standpoint, there's no better way to support our troops than to be sure not to send them to unnecessary and unjust war.

And as a secular activist, I have to point out one more divisive problem with patriotism, as it's practiced in America: Patriotism won't unite us if you insist on injecting your God into it. Unfortunately, those who are most assertive in promoting what they call patriotism, are the same ones who insist on using God-based patriotism. God Bless America. We're one nation under God. [Numerous religious elements were injected into American public life in the 1950s, Many Americans assume they've been around since the founding, but most of them date back to the McCarthy era. I don't know about you, but I'm highly skeptical of those who comingle God and patriotism, who claim to have God on their side. I'm always reminded to the Nazis – the belt buckle that SS troops wore said "God With Us" Indeed.

One big fad nowadays is for sheriffs to slap "In God We Trust" stickers on their cruisers. Also, the religious right has a movement to have cities and counties make IGWT their official motto. Say what you will about these measures, nobody can seriously claim that they are being done to unify us—they know that many people object strongly to it. It's an intentionally divisive measure, done with the culture wars in mind. Again, this kind of patriotism divides us.

None of this is to suggest that patriotism is a problem per se—we can appreciate a benign, healthy fondness for one’s homeland and its people. But contrary to popular belief, patriotism is not something that needs to be instilled in people. Loyalty to one’s tribe or nation is natural, an innate human impulse as social animals. People will generally be pretty loyal to their homeland, so long as they aren’t being affirmatively mistreated. Those most adamant about instilling patriotism often have a hidden motive – institutions, politicians. They are more often trying to manipulate, to stifle dissent, promote militarism, or keep us passive and distracted. Often, to ensure corporate profits. Corporations are among the biggest promoters of patriotism, which is ironic because they have absolutely no national loyalty themselves. But it helps their bottom line to promote it, for several reasons, so they do. That’s a talk for another day.

With that said, let me suggest that there is a much better way to unite a society: by remembering our common humanity. By treating all people with respect and empathy, as core values of the nation in which we live. Instead of seeing members of our own society as “the other” (which is what we too often do), we need to have a sense that we’re all in this together. We can do this by promoting *common values* that work for the betterment of real human beings—everyone—and not just a few, and certainly not institutional interests. Values that start with an understanding that we strive for a general prosperity. We can reward true ingenuity (get rich), but we’d also ensure that society’s wealth and technological advancements benefit everyone. Education and health care would be rights, not privileges, in this society. Critical thinking, creativity, and healthy democracy would flourish, because society would revolve around what’s best for humans, not around an obsession with the profits and stock prices of institutional interests.

Last week David Brooks, the New York Times columnist, had a column about patriotism. He was urging kids not to take a knee during the national anthem. In making this argument, he pointed to studies that say Americans are the most patriotic people on earth. I had to laugh, because I see those studies and I say, isn’t that the problem? When patriotism gets to a certain level it’s not even patriotism anymore—it’s nationalism and it encourages militarism. And America is proof, isn’t it? Maybe the fact that we’re so patriotic is the problem here.

Much better, I would suggest, to find our unity through other means, especially through our common humanity.