

SERMON TOPICS:

- Oct 5—Blessing of the Animals
- Oct 12—Faith and Justice
- Oct 19—Why I Became an Atheist
- Oct 26—Altars, Shrines, Icons, and Memories

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Fortress of Freedom by Reverend Dr. Neal Jones

I grew up Baptist, and Baptists have traditionally been staunch advocates of the separation of church and state. It may come as a surprise to you to learn, for instance, that the Baptist Association of Danbury, Conn., wrote a letter to President Thomas Jefferson expressing their concern that their state constitution did not ensure religious liberty or prevent the government establishment of religion, as did the federal Constitution.

In his response, Jefferson shared their concern and reiterated his support for the First Amendment, which, he famously said, builds “a wall of separation between church and state.”

On one hand, that wall prevents religious zealots from using the power or purse of the government to force their religious beliefs and practices on the rest of us; on the other hand, that wall prevents overreaching government from intruding in matters about which it has no business.

Baptists used to feel that way—when they were a religious minority. But once they became a dominant religion, especially in the South, they just couldn’t help themselves. Imbued with social status, economic muscle and political supremacy, they, along with other members of the Religious Right, have used the power of the state to impose their brand of conservative Christianity. If power corrupts, it seems to corrupt religious people absolutely.

Even if I were not a former Baptist, I would still feel obligated as a minister to preach the gospel of

separation from the sacred text of the Constitution because of the unfortunate, but well financed and largely successful, misinformation campaign waged by Religious Right activists. Over the past four decades, they have convinced many Americans that the separation of church and state is a myth, that the Founding Fathers were all evangelical Christians and that they established the United States as a Christian nation.

They couldn’t be more wrong if they tried.

Allow me to take a short detour into American religious history to give some context to where we are today. Fundamentalism arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in fearful reaction to the modern understanding of the world. Thanks to public education, more and more people, including religious people, understood that the Bible did not have to be read literally. Scientific evidence, especially the evidence supporting the natural selection of all species of life, makes it difficult to believe that the earth was created 6,000 years ago in six days and that we have common parents, Adam and Eve, who were hoodwinked by a talking snake.

Since fundamentalists pin their faith on a literal reading of the Bible, they regard public schools, college professors, education, science and modernity itself as enemies of faith; and they are right. Education is the enemy of an uninformed, unenlightened faith—but it is not the enemy of

a faith grounded in reason and experience.

The Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, in which the ACLU attorney Clarence Darrow made a monkey out of the Bible-thumping William Jennings Bryan, sent fundamentalists into cultural and political retreat. They separated themselves from this sinful society and formed their own Bible colleges, publishing houses and radio stations. Most were not registered to vote.

Then the 1960s happened. Evangelicals and fundamentalists were appalled by opposition to the Vietnam War, by the Civil Rights movement, the women’s movement, the pill and the Supreme Court rulings against school-sponsored religion. They felt that they were losing their country and that they must get involved in politics in order to save America from moral decline.

What really galvanized evangelicals and fundamentalists were two issues—abortion and homosexuality. In 1979, Jerry Falwell formed the Moral Majority. In one year, it organized in 47 states. The Religious Right helped elect Ronald Reagan to the White House in 1980, and almost overnight, what was once a fringe group was now at the center of the Republican Party and national politics.

Reagan gave lip service to a constitutional amendment banning abortion and instituting official prayer in school, but he spent no real political capital



Sermon Topics

October 5—Our annual **Blessing of the Animals**—Bring your animal companion (or a photograph) to church. Suzanne Perrey worship leader. *Multi-generational service; no children's RE classes today.*

October 12—Amy DeVries, lead organizer for CAJE, will speak on **Faith and Justice**. Tom Moor worship leader.

October 19—Sylvia Oster, member of Terre Haute UU, will speak on **Why I Became an Atheist**. Ed Howard worship leader.

October 26—Reverend Doddie Stone returns to preach. Her sermon is entitled **Altars, Shrines, Icons, and Memories**. Please bring personal sacred objects for this service. *Potluck following service*

Fortress of Freedom by Reverend Dr. Neal Jones continued

enforcing the Religious Right agenda. By the end of Reagan's second term, Falwell disbanded the Moral Majority, and the torch of the Religious Right was passed to Pat Robertson. He and Ralph Reed launched the Christian Coalition. In 2000, they helped elect George W. Bush—with a little help from the conservative majority on the Supreme Court.

But history repeated itself. Once again, their president largely paid lip service to the Religious Right agenda without actually pushing it. Plus, the country had changed since the 1980s. It is more culturally and religiously diverse, and it is growing weary of the Religious Right's arrogance and hostility toward women, gays and government. Even younger evangelicals have had enough, which is why they are leaving the church in droves.

Despite the fact that the political influence of the Religious Right has waned, it would be a mistake to begin writing its epitaph. In various overt and covert ways, on the national

level and in every state, especially in the South, activists continue their drive to transform our democracy and to dismantle the wall separating church and state.

One unfortunate area of mischief continues to be in our public schools. The Religious Right is dead-set against the teaching of evolution, and it continually tries to introduce the teaching of creationism in biology classes.

In 1987, the Supreme Court ruled in *Edwards v. Aguillard* that teaching creationism in public schools violates the separation of church and state because it is a religious dogma, not a scientific fact. Since then, the Religious Right has simply started calling creationism by other names. First, it was "the theory of abrupt appearance"; then "evidence against evolution"; now it's called "intelligent design."

Intelligent design asserts that human beings are so complex that they had to be created by a purposeful designer. They don't identify the designer as

God, and they claim that as long as they don't mention God, the idea is acceptable for public schools. In point of fact, we do have a scientific, factual explanation for the complexity of life, and it's called evolution. The creationists were called out in 2005, however, in the *Kitzmiller v. Dover* case, in which a federal judge said that intelligent design is fundamentally no different from creationism.

Now the creationists are trying a new strategy. In several states around the country, they are proposing that evolution be treated as an unproven theory and that students be allowed to analyze and critique the "strengths and weaknesses" of this theory. This new ploy, under the guise of "academic freedom," sounds benign, but its intent is to undermine confidence in mainstream science and open the door for teachers to introduce alternative explanations, namely their own religious teachings. Surveys indicate that as many as 13 percent of high school biology teachers are creationists, so it is likely

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that many high school students are being taught religion instead of science in their science classes.

Another way that the Religious Right meddles in public education is through its attempts to establish vouchers, tax-credits and educational savings accounts for private schools. By diverting desperately needed resources from public to private schools, these voucher programs and related schemes serve two purposes for the Religious Right: They fund their religious schools on the taxpayers' dime, and they help undermine public schools, which the Religious Right regards as propaganda centers for secular humanism.

Here's another quick history lesson: We Americans decided a long time ago that we would not allow status to determine who gets an education and who doesn't. We decided that education is not the luxury of a few but the right of all, regardless of one's income, religion or geography. We made a commitment to public education. This is not a commitment shared by the Religious Right or its fat cat fund-raisers.

Finally, I want to note a disturbing trend that we are seeing with the Supreme Court. The conservative majority on the court is giving "religious freedom" a peculiarly

expansive definition such that the religious beliefs of some are given preference over the basic civil rights of others.

A couple of months ago, the conservative majority of justices ruled in *Town of Greece v. Galloway* that the town of Greece, N.Y., could convene town council meetings with explicitly Christian prayers, despite the fact that the First Amendment explicitly states that government shall not create an establishment of religion. In that case, the beliefs of the religious majority trumped the right of all citizens to be represented by their elected government.

The following month, the conservative majority on the court handed down the *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores* decision, in which they ruled that "closely held" corporations may claim an exemption from a portion of the Affordable Care Act if the owners of that corporation object to certain forms of birth control on religious grounds. In this case, the religious beliefs of a corporation—as if corporations were people and could have religious beliefs—trumped the right of women to make their own health-care decisions based on their needs and convictions.

The Religious Right touts these rulings as a triumph of religious

freedom, but let us be clear: "Religious freedom" is the right to believe and practice your religion as your conscience dictates; it does not mean the right to impose your religious beliefs on others, even if you happen to employ them or even if you happen to be in the religious majority.

Our Constitution ensures not only the rule of the majority but also the rights of the minority. In fact, our Constitution preserves our individual freedoms by preventing oppression by the majority. The wall separating church and state is one of the Constitution's protections of our freedom, and it's a wall that needs continual protection itself. Or as the famous adage states, "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance."

I give today's final words to George Carlin, who said, "I'm completely in favor of the separation of church and state. My idea is that these two institutions screw us up enough on their own, so both of them together are certain death."

Neal Jones is the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia, S.C. He also serves on Americans United's Board of Trustees. These remarks are from a sermon Jones delivered on July 6, 2014.

93rd Annual West Side Nut Club Fall Festival

Join UUCE at the Fall Festival Monday, October 6 through Saturday, October 11. Look for Booth #13 on Franklin Street in between Wabash Avenue and 10th Avenue across from the rides.

On the menu: spicy black bean soup, gazpacho soup, bacon brownies, bottled water, and iced tea. Thanks for your support in making this a successful Fall Festival!

Halloween Party!

Attention, ghosts and goblins! The Congregational Life Committee will host a Halloween Party for all ages on Saturday, October 25 from 4 to 6pm at the church. Those attending--children and adults alike--are encouraged (but not required!) to come in costume. There will be costume judging as well as refreshments, games, activities, and music. If you would like to decorate or carve a pumpkin, please bring one with you. All ages are welcome, so please plan to join us for a spooktacular time!

Upcoming Events & Activities

Fri, Oct 3: 7pm Drum Circle	Atheist
Sun, Oct 5: 9am Adult Discussion Group	Mon, Oct 20: 6pm Down to Earth
Sun, Oct 5: 10am Blessing of the Animals	Mon, Oct 20: COMPASS submissions due
Mon, Oct 6 to Sat, Oct 11: Fall Festival on Franklin Street	Wed, Oct 22: 6:30pm Congregational Life Committee meeting
Mon, Oct 6: 6pm Down to Earth	Sat, Oct 25: 4pm Halloween Party
Sun, Oct 12: 10am Faith and Justice	Sun, Oct 26: 10am Altars, Shrines, Icons, and Memories; <i>potluck following service</i>
Mon, Oct 13: 6pm Down to Earth	Sun, Oct 26: 3pm Dances of Universal Peace
Mon, Oct 13: 7pm Board meeting	Mon, Oct 27: 6pm Down to Earth
Fri, Oct 17: 3:30pm Dinner at United Caring Shelter (sign-up in foyer)	Mon, Oct 27: 6pm CAJE Annual Assembly at Holy Redeemer Catholic Church
Fri, Oct 17: 7pm Crystal Drum Circle	Tues, Oct 28: 6:30pm Adult RE—Spirit of Life Workshop 2—Sing In My Heart: Celebrations and Rituals
Sat, Oct 18: 5pm Private function—church rental	Thurs, Oct 30: 11:30am Brown Bag Book Club— <i>The Invention of Wings</i> by Sue Monk Kidd
Sun, Oct 19: 9am Adult Discussion Group	
Sun, Oct 19: 10am Why I Became an	



Unitarian Universalist Church of Evansville

2910 East Morgan Avenue
Evansville, IN 47711
812-474-1704

Service on Sundays at 10:00am
Youth RE on Sundays at 10:30am



Coffee Order

Place your order for Equal Exchange Fair Trade chocolate, cocoa and coffee by the 15th of the month. Coffee prices average \$8-\$10 per 10oz package plus shipping. Your purchase supports the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Contact Chris Norrington for details cnorrington@hotmail.com.

Support Teams

UUCE now has support teams in place to assist those members who need assistance with activities of daily living, such as grocery shopping, lawn care, meal preparation, etc., due to illness, death in the family, or other circumstance. If you or someone else needs such help, please notify Sharon Dennis at 431-9148 or sdennis1.sd@gmail.com, Bev Tonso at 476-9235 or btonso44@att.net, or Teddye Thompson at 402-2744 or t.thompson@wowway.com

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