

Albert Schweitzer, Honored Unitarian

Compiled by Harold Wood
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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Visalia

Today's sermon – chosen for its relevance to our annual Blessing of the Animals service - is taken completely from *Quest* for February 2004, the newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Larger Fellowship – our correspondence & online church.

What follows is a compilation of several articles from that special issue written by several different individuals, which I commend to your full reading:

<http://clf.uua.org/quest/2004-02.html>

It's hard to imagine how any European might end up as a doctor in Equatorial West Africa, treating people in the hot, wet, malaria-infested jungle. That, in 1913, a renowned theologian, philosopher and organist would defy his friends, mentors and family and travel to an inconceivably foreign land; that he would there serve as a medical missionary for a group with whom he had profound theological differences by establishing a hospital for people whose language and ways he knew not in the least, almost defies imagination. What could possess a man to do such a thing? The answer is as simple as it is hard to fathom. He did it because it seemed like the right thing to do.

Albert Schweitzer was born January 14th, 1875, in Alsace, the borderland between France and Germany.

In 1893 Schweitzer enrolled in the University of Strasbourg, where his main subjects were philosophy and theology. The work for his Doctor of Theology thesis led, in 1906, to the publication of Schweitzer's great theological work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Schweitzer went on to lecture in both theology and philosophy at the University, and his ground-breaking work in understanding the words of Jesus from a historical perspective brought him wide renown as a theologian. In the midst of this he served as one of three pastors at St. Nicolai's Church and toured as a virtuoso organist. With his teacher, the great French organist Charles-Marie Widor, he also edited the first five volumes of The Complete Organ Works of J.S. Bach. Apparently the man pretty much didn't sleep.

Religion was the great guiding force in his life, but it was a Christianity pared of dogma, subjected unflinchingly to the fires of thought, so that what eventually remained was a pure, unadulterated and irresistible nugget, the life and words of Jesus summed up in the imperative to love God and neighbor. What is remarkable about Schweitzer, in addition to the incredible seriousness with which he took this commandment to love, is the fact that he truly believed that the category of neighbor extends not only beyond the bounds of those we know and like, but also beyond the bounds of the human race itself, to encompass all living things. This sophisticated philosopher and theologian was to sum up the whole of ethics and morality in one simple phrase: "reverence for life." The simplicity of this phrase is made all the more remarkable by the complexity and variety of the life of the man who declared it. Albert, who had started playing piano at the age of five, and who first played the organ for his father's church at the age of nine, studied with a master organ teacher in addition to his full schedule of school, homework, chores

and piano. Albert was told that after his confirmation in the Lutheran church he would be allowed to take lessons on the beautiful organ at St. Stephen's Church. Highly motivated by the longing for the organ, and by his need to please his minister father by doing well in his confirmation examinations, Albert nonetheless was plagued with questions as to how the Bible could be literally true. He could not accept in his heart his instructor's assurances that these things must simply be taken on faith. Schweitzer writes, "I was convinced—and I am so still—that the fundamental principles of Christianity have to be proved true by reasoning, and by no other method. Reason, I said to myself, has been given us that we may bring everything within the range of its action, even the most exalted ideas of religion."

At thirty, Albert Schweitzer was famous. He was sought-after as a musician in all of the great capitals of Europe, he was a leading scholar and one of the world's great theologians and philosophers. One might think that he would have been satisfied. However, a deep spiritual unrest continued to gnaw at him. He enjoyed teaching and preaching, loved performing and scholarly research, but nothing truly gave him the depth of connection and meaning that he longed for. His unyielding adherence to reason left him out of place amongst a seminary faculty that were bent on teaching a more fundamentalist faith, and Schweitzer felt it would be unfair for him to lead students into confusion and turmoil by teaching his own rather heretical beliefs. Faced with this dilemma, he resolved to leave the seminary. "I decided," he later told his friend Norman Cousins, "that I would make my life my argument. I would advocate the things I believed in terms of the life I lived and what I did."

In the autumn of 1904 he happened to leaf through the monthly magazine of the Paris Missionary Society, and an article entitled "The Needs of the Congo Mission" caught his eye. The article was an emotional appeal for doctors to serve as missionaries amongst the people of the Upper Congo, who were devastated by disease, much of it introduced by colonizing Europeans, and who were without the aid of any modern medicine.

Schweitzer's course was determined. In January of 1905 he said in a sermon at St. Nicolai's: "When you speak about missions, let this be your message: We must make atonement for all the terrible crimes we read of in the newspapers. We must make atonement for the still worse ones which we do not read about in the papers, crimes that are shrouded in the silence of the jungle night. Then you preach Christianity and missionary work at the same time." The sermon that was Schweitzer's life and mission was not to convert "the savages," but rather to try to atone for what White folk had done to Black folk.

There isn't time to tell the full story of the *fifty* years that Albert Schweitzer spent in West Africa. That time is marked by years of grinding effort, not only treating the sick and injured, but also building by hand the hospital that was to house those patients. In addition to his work as doctor and as scholar, Schweitzer became not only building manager, but also fund-raiser and financial manager for the hospital, which survived for decades on the edge of financial doom. Indeed, by the end of the Second World War, it was only a \$4300 gift from the Unitarian Service Committee that kept the hospital from having to close its doors for good.

The later years, however, were marked by fame and world-wide admiration. In 1953, in honor of both his humanitarian work at the Schweitzer-Bresslau Hospital in Lambaréné and in recognition of his political action for peace, Schweitzer was awarded the Nobel Peace prize. The hospital which had started in a refitted chicken shed eventually grew to seventy-five buildings, where people found everything from treatment for sleeping sickness to a long-term residential colony for lepers.

Through it all, Schweitzer clung fiercely as always to his own sense of what was right and good and necessary. Much was stripped from him in his adherence to what he saw as true and moral: his academic career, his family, the comforts of Europe, even his faith in the church that was everything to him in his younger years. In 1962 Schweitzer told a group in Lambaréné: “From the days of my Confirmation classes, I was unhappy with the tendency of many Christians to evade the issues of the ethical application of the teachings of Jesus.... With the rise of Hitler I came to realize that the Church could not be counted upon to withstand the state or the culture in which it held a privileged position.... Something within me died, and I thought, ‘What is left?’ As I looked about me, I realized only a few small sects, like the Unitarians and the Quakers, were the only real hope—they and the new modern spirit of humanism which might rekindle the true spirit of Jesus.”

Rev. George Marshall, the minister of the Church of the Larger Fellowship (1960-1985), began corresponding with Albert Schweitzer in the 1950s. He raised money for Schweitzer’s hospital, and began to visit him in Africa.

Rev. Marshall recalls that when he visited Albert Schweitzer in Africa, and stayed on to join the construction gang, Schweitzer would often send for him to visit after supper. They would talk long into the night, sitting at the rough wooden writing table the doctor had built with his own hands, on stools without backs, while the insects buzzed about the single kerosene lamp with a green shade that lit the small room. Now and then the doctor would raise the shade to free a trapped insect. Rev. Marshall said: “He knew what ecology was all about decades before the rest of us,” “Ecology, the balance of nature, and the great chain of life of which we are all parts. He was more concerned about the natural order, and man’s place in it than any other person who ever lived, I believe. He called it Reverence for Life, and he made it the guiding principle for living.”

Rev. Marshall co-authored a book about his friend, *Schweitzer: A Biography*. In due course, Marshall invited Schweitzer to join the Church of the Larger Fellowship, and the great man accepted:

“I thank you cordially for your offer to make me an honoured member of the Unitarian Church. I accept with pleasure. Even as a student I worked on the problem and history of the Unitarian Church and developed sympathy for your affirmation of Christian freedom at a time when it resulted in persecution. Gradually I established closer contact with Unitarian communities and became familiar with their faith-in-action. Therefore I thank you that through you I have been made an honoured member of this church.”

Rev. Marshall was particularly concerned as to whether the key word in the original language of Schweitzer’s letter (written in French) was ‘honored’ or ‘honorary,’ and had been assured by the translator that Albert Schweitzer had specifically stated that he was pleased to be an ‘honored member’ of the CLF.”

This letter appeared on the cover of the CLF newsletter, and it caused a rumpus which spilled over into *Time* magazine. Had Schweitzer, who long felt constrained by traditional Christianity, turned his back on Lutheranism, the religion of his birth? It would not have been surprising, and it would have been news.

But Schweitzer made it clear that no, he was not breaking his relationship with the Lutheran Church, he said could remain on good terms with more than one religion. He clarified this

statement in *Time* magazine on the following December 8, 1961. Schweitzer stated in an interview with *Time*:

"For a long time now I have had connections with the Unitarian church. But there is no question of my breaking with the Lutheran Church. I am a Protestant, but above all I am a scientist, and as such I can be on good terms with all Protestant churches."

We also have anecdotal memories from Unitarians in far-flung places. Schweitzer visited the UUA headquarters on a visit in 1949, and held a press conference there, as our own Beacon Press published several of Schweitzer's books. The Rev. Donald Herrington writes from Transylvania, "I was with Vilma (The Rev. Vilma Harrington) meeting with him in his tiny hut at Lambaréné, when she asked him whether he was or was not a Unitarian. He replied, 'Yes, I am a Unitarian. I belong to the Church of the Larger Fellowship, and also the Unitarian Church in Capetown.' For someone of Schweitzer's broad mentality he could be a Unitarian without breaking away from the Lutheran Church of his childhood."

That truly expresses the beauty of our UU faith – we can be Christian, or Buddhist, or Taoist, Pantheist or humanist, and everything is just fine. What we do share in common is what Albert Schweitzer called "reverence for life."

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