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**“Rev. McDavitt's Memorial Day Sermon of 1931:  
Barack Obama and John McCain Aren't the Only Ones with a Rogue Reverend Problem”**

A Guest Homily Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Muncie, Indiana,  
Sunday, 25 May 2008

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**“Rev. Arthur McDavitt's Memorial Day Sermon of 25 May 1931:  
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**A Guest Homily Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Muncie, Indiana, 25 May 2008**

I want to begin today by thanking three members of our church's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary committee who are researching and writing the history of our congregation from the founding of the fellowship that became St. John's Universalist Church in 1859 to the present Unitarian Universalist Church of Muncie. We may well have the largest number of emeriti professors of history of any religious institution in town! One of them, Ray White, discovered the homily that I'm about to read while combing through the file of local newspapers on microfilm looking for articles about our congregation. Another, Sharon Seager, provided me with some background about its author, the Reverend Arthur W. McDavitt, who served our church as minister from 1924 to 1953. Finally, Bea Sousa, also of the Heritage Committee, recognized this homily as worthy of sharing with you today and asked me to read it and make a few remarks to provide some context for Rev. McDavitt's challenging sentiments.

Here is the text of a sermon he delivered on Memorial Day 1931, as excerpted and published in his weekly column that appeared in one of Muncie's daily newspapers the following morning:

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“This is a day for patriotic reflection. The best memorial to our soldier dead is expressed by the immortal Lincoln who said that ‘it is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.’

[...]

“Memorials are nothing new, for men in all ages have tried to leave evidence of their progress. They also have thought it worthwhile to remind posterity that progress is expensive and ought to be zealously guarded. But men have different ideas of conserving that which is best in past ages. Some would pile up a few stones and think the duty had been done for all time; while others [are] content that memorials ought to be living, and therefore lasting things.

“Some piles of stones mean everything while others are just piles of stones. A stone set to mark a place where some significant struggle for human betterment occurred is most valuable; while a pile of stones gathered up thousands of miles from the scene of action can have no meaning whatsoever. Every time I see those meaningless stones being piled up in Indianapolis I become indignant. There are not there to mark the place of a great patriotic struggle, but to satisfy the selfish pride of a mercenary citizenry. Five million dollars spent for nothing. So far as I am concerned, it is just a pile of stones. I am perfectly willing to pile up stones at Bunker Hill, or Concord, or Gettysburg or in Flanders fields. I would build more living memorials such as schools, churches, orphanages and colleges of scientific research. Those things help us to live in the deeds of our heroes.

“I would build a government that is strong and enduring. I would preserve it by righting social wrong and by preserving the noble principles upon which it was founded. I would make it

a place where each man has an opportunity to make an honest living and to have possession of a little cottage among the trees and flowers, a place he can proudly call home. Here is the proper antidote against any and all forms of radicalism.

“Every Memorial Day and every stone placed to remind us of the cost of progress ought to be a solemn challenge to us to keep the peace with our fellow men. No man desires war; we are only in disagreement as to the best methods of keeping the peace. No man is any the less a patriot because he believes our safety lies in our ability to keep on good terms with the rest of the world and to rely upon good will more and conflict less. There are extremists on both sides of the fence, but that need not make the rest of us lose our heads. It does seem to many of us that this business of slaughtering our young men every other generation ought to stop. We should attempt to create a state of mind that makes such blunders more and more impossible.”

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This is a complicated sermon for being so short! Its main theme asks how Americans should properly memorialize those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in defending this nation. He asserts that the age-old practice of erecting monuments in their honor is only a fitting tribute when these are situated in the place where our fallen warriors actually laid down their lives, as for example, on a blood-soaked former battlefield. Rev. McDavitt condemns the practice of “piling up stones” in places that are distant from these killing fields, implying that such secular shrines as the Indiana War Memorial, which was then under construction in the symbolic center of Indianapolis, constitute temples to the martial spirit, the gods of war, and thus, in his view, “can have no meaning whatsoever.” They are an expression of a false, or at best, a misplaced patriotism. Rev. McDavitt would prefer instead that we erect what he calls

“living memorials such as schools, churches, orphanages, and colleges of scientific research” so as to honor the fallen by dedicating ourselves to their unfinished work, to redeem the destructive act of war with the constructive acts of humanitarian and civilized institution building. In considering his advice, I couldn’t help but think of my own father, a Second World War veteran, who was wounded during the invasion of Germany, but who has dedicated the rest of his long life to raising a family, making an honest living, and serving his community in multiple ways. For him the only fitting monument to war is the act of forgetting it through peaceful pursuits.

Rev. McDavitt’s sentiments of 77 years ago today are worthy of revisiting, and entirely appropriate to this occasion. However, the full text of his homily contains a paragraph that I left out, which when reinserted, articulate a second, darker theme that might not sit so well with those who occupy this congregation’s auditorium today. This is how his Memorial Day sermon begins with the controversial paragraph restored to its pride of place:

“This is a day for patriotic reflection. The best memorial to our soldier dead is expressed by the immortal Lincoln who said that ‘it is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.’

“This does not mean that we should trust to luck to do this. It does not mean that we should set free every kind of fanatic who comes along and allow them full sway. In fact, we have been too easy on political agitators and economic parasites. Foreigners with radical leanings should never be allowed to land and those caught here should be immediately deported. I am tired of allowing the scum of Southern Europe to corrupt and intimidate the people of our cities. Let us have protection while we are trying to educate the human family to live decently

together. We are too easy on the grafter in office. Such conduct should be labeled as treason and dealt with accordingly.”

Here with a chilling ease of expression, Rev. McDavitt sets forth a position that seems at odds with his dissident form of patriotism that condemns misplaced “piles of stones.” His remarks are tainted by xenophobia (fear of foreigners) and red-baiting. And they indicate his sympathy for the nascent science of eugenics, a movement whose adherents believed that people’s character traits and habits were inheritable and hence they zealously urged the state’s intervention in regulating the human gene pool. To underscore the importance he attached to these sentiments, Rev. McDavitt placed them up front in the second paragraph, which is really his first substantive paragraph. His way of describing those whom he deplores is nothing short of inflammatory: “fanatic,” “parasites,” “radical,” and especially that zinger -- “the scum of Southern Europe.” As the maternal grandson of Guillermo Dorighi and Olive Anselmi, who immigrated to this country from Italy’s Tyrolean Alps a few short years before he delivered this sermon, I am relieved that Americans ultimately rejected his bombastic nativism.

Furthermore, when the good reverend states that “Such conduct should be labeled as treason and dealt with accordingly,” he alludes to language in the Constitution that defines treasonous acts as well as the U.S. Code of law, which allows the death penalty for treason. Thus he implies that not only “grafters” (office holders who accept bribes), but those who subscribe to socialist, communist, or anarchist doctrines and who resist deportation should summarily face capital punishment! Even if you were to excise this offending paragraph so as to focus on the rest of his homily, the specter of Bolshevism reappears three paragraphs later when Rev. McDavitt asserts that a peaceful society which promotes home ownership “is the proper

antidote against any and all forms of radicalism.” This sounds curiously like the kind of hooey the Tories used to hurl at those wild-eyed revolutionaries we today call our Founding Fathers!

Overall, the Rev. McDavitt’s remarks resemble less the rationalistic-scientific "racialist" appeals of his well-respected contemporaries than the kind of demagoguery Adolph Hitler would soon adopt in his quest to exterminate what he deemed undesirable peoples and build a super race of Aryans. Although perhaps anathema to us today, eugenics enjoyed a vogue among many leading authorities in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To name but a few, supporters included Margaret Sanger, the Progressive-era reformer who championed the cause of legal contraception and raised the funds that supported development of the birth control pill, and Dr. Arnold Gesell, the founder of the field of child psychology who served as his generation’s Dr. Benjamin Spock. In an essay entitled “A Plan for Peace,” which was published the year after Rev. McDavitt’s sermon, Sanger called for “A stern and rigid policy of sterilization and segregation to that grade of population whose progeny is already tainted or whose inheritance is such that objectionable traits may be transmitted to offspring.” Presaging these remarks, Gesell wrote in 1913: “Only the rankest pessimists and believers in noninterference will condone the increase in feeble-mindedness and insanity which is occurring everywhere in villages of the land. We need not wait for the perfection of the infant science of eugenics before proceeding upon a course of supervision and segregation which will prevent the horrible renewal of this defective protoplasm that is contaminating the stream of village life.” It is a mark of shame that in 1907, Indiana had enacted the nation’s first statute permitting the involuntary sterilization of “confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles, and rapists.” By the time of Rev. McDavitt’s sermon, some thirty states had followed suit. It wasn’t until 1974 that Indiana banned the forced

sterilization of certain offenders and others deemed congenitally inferior who were held in state custody.

I leave you, much like Rev. McDavitt's congregation of eight decades ago, to contemplate his homily's mixed message as a reflection of its author's complex point of view, which is at turns challenging, disturbing, exhortatory, and conflicted -- the very predicament of the thinking classes in the interwar years. And lest we think of our society as so much more enlightened than his, I would submit that our public rhetoric and actions are often every bit as incoherent during the present "Age of Terror," in which our policymakers profess that it is our mission to bring democracy to benighted peoples of the Middle East while tolerating racial profiling and persecution of Arab Americans and Muslims here at home. Beneath the monument of the Statue of Liberty, we celebrate our status as a melting-pot nation of immigrants while deporting undocumented workers en masse and erecting the Great Wall of America along our southern border. Historians are traditionally charged with levying "the judgment of history" on previous generations. It is a necessary and humbling thing to apply these same standards of judgment to ourselves. Perhaps that is an unintended lesson we can take away from the Rev. Arthur McDavitt, our very own outspoken, outrageous pastor, something very much worth remembering on this Memorial Day.