

LET US CELEBRATE SERVETUS

Sermon preached by the Rev. Lilia Cuervo
First Parish in Cambridge. 10-9-11

Five hundreds years ago, an amazing human being was born in Spain. His name was Miguel de Serveto, most commonly known as Michael Servetus. Today, I want us to unite with people across continents who are honoring the 500 hundred year of the birth of this true 16th Century renaissance Spaniard, scientist and theologian and, one of the most important figures of the Reformation. His profoundly revolutionary ideas for which he became a martyr are at the root of our religious freedom and paramount in our beliefs as Unitarians.

The first time I heard about Servetus was in 1979 during a lay-led service. After that, all I remembered about him was that he had been a physician. (After today, I hope you remember more than that about him.) Years later, in the seminary, I was feeling like a theological orphan without a Unitarian or Universalist family of origin, envying those who identified themselves as “cradle, or very long time UUs”.

Soon though, I was led to Professor Alicia MacNary Forsey. She invited me to learn about Servetus; it didn't take too long before I was totally immersed in and fascinated with the life and writings of my newly discovered Spanish theologian ancestor. I was surprised realizing that his complete works had never been translated into English. I was studying about Servetus in the only translation into Spanish of his *Christianismi Restitutio* or Restoration of Christianity, his major work. That is why Alicia asked me if I could translate for her and for the students, those passages that I found most important. It was exciting opening windows for others into Servetus writings.

Better yet, it was claiming as my legitimate ancestor this towering figure who has been hailed as *the greatest savant of his century* and as *one of the greatest mystics of all times*. Historians have called Servetus the founder of Comparative Geography and of the literary criticism of the Bible. He was a public lecturer on Geography, Math and Astronomy. Engaged in the practice of medicine, he cured many patients of grave illnesses and *showed great devotion to those ill of the plague in 1542*. He wrote the famous treatise on the use of Syrups in Medicine, became an anatomist and skillful dissector and discoverer of the small circulation of the blood. His persecution by both the Catholic and Protestant churches and political leaders in Geneva, has been called *The most celebrated case of Protestant persecution*.

Servetus, was born in Villanueva de Sijena, Spain, approximately September 29, 1511. No adequate data is available on his private life as a child or as an adult. What is known is that at the age of 14, he left his birthplace and never returned.

Born under the sign of the Archangel Michael, Servetus felt called to a spiritual fight, to defend the freedom of thought and conscience and to the restoration of the church to its original values. Unlike in our times in which religion is separated from science, during the Reformation, these two fields were totally intertwined. One can find all through Servetus' life the most interesting and peculiar instances of how science, religion and theology were mingled often in detriment of science.

When they commissioned Servetus to revise the important treatise Geography, written by Ptolomy, he included in his version some of the contributions contained in a former edition. One of these was the description of the area containing the Holy Land. Based on accounts made by travelers and merchants, Friese, a Dutchman editor had concluded that Palestine was a land that was uncultivated and sterile, and that *though 'a promised' land, it was a land of no promise*. These words were used later at the trial in Geneva to accuse Servetus of having *defamed Moses*.

Another instance of mingling science and religion occurred when Servetus was chosen to edit the Bible translated by Sante Pagnini, a brilliant intellectual Dominican monk. In the Preface, Servetus explains that what the Hebrew prophets said referred to the actual period in which they were living and not to the future. This contradicted the idea still prevalent even now, that the prophets were announcing the Messiah and predicting future facts in the life of Jesus. Throughout the Bible, Servetus added explanatory notes to aid the reader in the understanding that the aim of the scriptures was the glory of Christ. Servetus' work was well received and they considered Pagnini's Bible a superior work of scholarship. However, theologians at Louvain saw heresy in what Servetus had said about interpreting the words of the prophets as related to the past and not the future. Pagnini's Bible and Servetus' important contributions were condemned almost to oblivion.

The following is the most ironic and tragic circumstance in which Theology and the search for truth were at odds during Servetus' life. While Servetus was studying Jurisprudence in Toulouse, he was concerned about the problem of the Muslims and Jews in Spain. The Spanish Inquisition persecuted and put to death those who refused to convert to Christianity. Servetus knew that Jews and Muslims believed in one God and therefore, one major obstacle to their conversion was the acceptance of the dogma of the Trinity. Coincidentally, in Toulouse Servetus became acquainted with the Bible, through the evangelicals. With his knowledge of Hebrew and Greek he immersed himself in the teachings of the Bible. When he did not find the doctrine of the Trinity spelled anywhere in the Scriptures, with great relief he wrote his famous treatise On the Errors of the Trinity. He was twenty years old. Soon after its publication in 1531, they declared Servetus a major heretic, making him a victim of religious persecution.

For about 20 years he was in hiding and exile in several countries in Europe. He contemplated coming to America; but decided to stay, and rather than to escape persecution, to fight against the oppression inflicted by the church on those who did not accept its dogma. A delicious irony occurred while Servetus was hiding from the Inquisition, living in Vienne in the palace of the Bishop Palmier. While he was practicing medicine and behaving like a most faithful Catholic, he was taking voluminous notes for his definite work The Restoration of Christianity. In this work, he states that humans are free with certain limits. That *God never was driven by prejudice*

against anyone... He says, We must conclude that God has true justice and mercy with all his creatures. His is the law of the heart, the law of hope. He writes that everybody can reach salvation through deeds, and that in fact we can become divine by partaking of the body of Christ. He believed that Jesus, and the Holy Ghost were aspects of the Divinity but that they were not two persons parts of the Godhead from eternity as the orthodoxy wanted Christians to believe. He even went as far as to say that all those who believed in the Trinity of three equal but different persons were atheists since they did not really believed in the ONE true God.

The fifth book of Servetus famous Restoration of Christianity contains perhaps the most outstanding example of the mixing of theology with science. There he explains how the Holy Spirit infuses us with life and reaches our brains. This is how he described his discovery of the small circulation of the blood:

The living spirit, is produced by a mixture in the lungs of inspired air with blood which the right ventricle of the heart communicates to the left; however, this communication does not take place through the middle partition of the heart, as is commonly believed, but by a grand device the blood is driven from the right ventricle of the heart by a long course throughout the lungs.

Servetus was making a theological statement, using his knowledge of anatomy. Without intending it, with that clear and brief explanation, he marked a revolutionary step in the knowledge of the anatomy of the human body. Servetus' statement contains the following important discoveries: the middle portion of the heart is not permeable as formerly believed; the blood passes from one side of the heart to the other and through the lungs by the network of the pulmonary arteries and the pulmonary veins; the artery that carries the blood to the lungs is large enough for the entire blood stream and the change in color through aeration takes place in the lungs.

According to Alcalá, an erudite on Servetus, the most modern *Spanish doctors that have praised the importance of Servetus, as the discoverer of the pulmonary circulation of the blood, have shown surprise at the fact that such an important page in the history of medicine, appears in a strictly theological context.* Unfortunately, because of that fact, these discoveries did not circulate and received the recognition they deserved. This was so, because the church burned all the copies of the *Restoration of Christianity*, saved three, as the work of a heretic. The surviving copies are at Vienna, Paris and Edinburgh.

Servetus' doctrine of the Trinity, his aversion to infant baptism and his belief that humans could attain divinity through Christ, caused great uproar between Catholics and Protestants alike. Servetus' *picture of humans alienated Calvin even more than his view of Christ. The union of humanity and divinity was for Servetus an elevation of humanity, but for Calvin a degradation of divinity.* In the end it was Calvin who handed Servetus to the Council in Geneva, which condemned him as an Anabaptist and as anti-Trinitarian. These two charges carried the death penalty in the Justinian Code. He was burnt at the stake on October 27, 1553.

Fearful that he might recant and lose his soul while being burned, he asked the Council to

execute him by the sword. They not only denied his request but the wood that they used to burn him was green causing much more suffering. According to the records, William Farel, accompanied Servetus to the stake, advising him all the while to repent. Servetus was silent. He was bound to the stake with an iron chain, they attached his book to his arm and they wound a stout rope four or five times to his neck. From the flames they heard that he prayed: *O Jesus, thou Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me!* Farel said that if Servetus had said *O Jesus, thou Eternal Son of God*, they might have saved him.

As we honor Servetus' memory today, let us remember that we are the heirs of his doctrine of the *exclusively personal responsibility of each individual for his or her faith and salvation*. Let us honor with our deeds *his defense of universal freedom of conscience as the highest divine participation*. Like Don Quijote, the Man of La Mancha, who quested after an impossible dream, Servetus quest was to make it easier for Muslims and Jews to accept Christianity without the impediment of the dogma of the Trinity. He ended paying with his own life.

Let us honor Servetus by removing obstacles in the religious path of those who are longing for a faith like ours. Let us say to them, "ven, mi casa es tu casa" come, my home is your home, let us together search freely and responsibly for our own truths. Let us act on Servetus desire to include and bring together those of different cultures, languages and creeds. Let us continue here at First Parish learning about and accepting and including Palestinians and Jews and their supporters; as well as Latinos, Asian, African-American, and people of any other ethnicity that might want to be part of us.

Servetus at one point wanted to escape persecution by coming to America. However, he decided to stay and fight for his ideals. Like him, let us fight from within, let us stay with courage and conviction working to make things better, rather than abandoning that which we consider worthy of our efforts.

It seems that Servetus was the first to call God, father and mother. He wrote: *... Christ performs for us the role of father and mother. He is everything for us: father, mother, brother, husband, friend, lord, teacher, king, pontiff, all! In the kingdom of heavens he is all in all, and he "complements everything in us"*.

His amazing integrity exposing the error of the Trinity, and his valor and peacefulness facing death for his beliefs, is a gift to humanity and particularly to Unitarians. Whether persecuted, or how highly praised, Servetus the physician, cared for the terribly sick, during the time of the cholera epidemic. Let us extend our healing compassion to the sick and the suffering. Let us, like Servetus, live lives of conviction, integrity and spiritual fulfillment through a loving relationship with the Divine Light that dwells within and among us. Let that light shine on everyone we meet, so that our world may become a radiant, luminous place of abundant grace.

Amen. Blessed be.

