

Sermon, Jan 4, 15

*“To Seek; To Savor; To Serve”*

Well, this is an auspicious moment in the ever unfolding story of this religious community. There have been many auspicious moments up in the past twenty one or so years since this congregation was formed by a group of UUs who were weary of enduring the hazards of route 49 to be part of the Auburn church, and who thought that there was sufficient critical mass to start something here. It began with small meetings in private homes, then it graduated to renting space, and then renting this space, a former funeral parlour. And then to purchasing it, the congregation's first real home. Meanwhile, what started life as an entirely lay-led fellowship had grown enough to recognise that it needed some ministerial leadership. It dipped its toes in with some visiting consulting ministry, then nine years ago took the plunge and called its first settled minister, Rev Meghan Cefalu, who moved on to pastures new a year ago after eight mutually happy and growthful years.

All of this has happened, and all of it in a spirit of unending harmony and cohesion, without a single cross word, without any moment of tension, or cross-purposes, or differences of opinion. All of it with everyone at all times all in their places with bright shiny faces. Right?

And now we come to this morning, the first Sunday at which the congregation has gone to two services because it had simply become too crowded on Sunday mornings. I mean, we are friendly and all that, but having to sit on each other's laps is perhaps taking it a bit too far. This is a growth point, and growth points are never without a frisson of anxiety. I know I went to bed last night, wondering... Why didn't I keep my big mouth shut? I was perfectly comfortable – and two services is just going to mean more work for me. What would it be like? What totally obvious thing have I completely overlooked in preparation?

It is an auspicious morning also because it is the first Sunday of a new year, a year in which much awaits us. The process to find your next settled minister will begin later this month when Bob Meiss, the District's consultant on these matters, will visit to explain how the process works. And part of that process is for the congregation to clarify its purpose. Why is it here? What is it hoping to

do? What difference does it make, to the lives of the people who come here and to the world, whether or not it is here. What is the mission of this church?

The twentieth century German theologian, Emil Brunner, wrote that the church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning. Now, I know that the word “mission” causes some Unitarian Universalists to break out in hives, either because it sounds too much like corporate-speak, or because it sounds too evangelical, as if we are about to go out, glassy-eyed, knocking on doors. But if we can get over those reservations, the word simply means, what are we hoping to achieve here? Where are we hoping to go?

*“What road do I take?” asked Alice.*

*The cat asked, “Where do you want to go?”*

*“I don’t know,” Alice answered.*

*“Then,” said the cat, “It really doesn’t matter, does it?”*

This church does currently have a Mission Statement. I bet you all know it off by heart. No? Well, you can read it on the back page of your service bulletin. Let’s read it aloud together:

*“The purpose of our Community is to foster liberal religious living through worship, study, service, and fellowship. We seek the enjoyment of religion, founded upon devotion to individual freedom of belief. Relying upon reason as our guide, and upon freedom as our method, we seek to grow in understanding of ourselves and of our world, to promote and serve the universal family.”*

Now, I don’t know when exactly that statement was adopted, and who of you was part of the adoption process, so I don’t know who I might be offending when I say that, admirable as those sentiments are, as a Mission Statement it is too wordy. To be effective, a mission statement should be short and sweet, the shorter the sweeter, easy to grasp and easy to memorise, and which grounds and justifies everything that we do.

So, what I offer is this. What is the mission of this UU community? It is to seek, to savor, and to serve.

To seek?

In 1620, when the Rev. John Robinson gathered his bold yet fearful congregation on the dockside of Delftshaven port in The Netherlands, he

preached a sermon for the particular benefit of those in his flock who were about to embark for England, and thence to the new world of America aboard the two ships they had chartered – the Speedwell and the Mayflower. Unfortunately, one of those ships sprang a leak and never made it across the Atlantic. After twelve years in religious exile, these pilgrims wanted to start afresh. Again. And in that sermon, Robinson famously told his huddled congregation that “The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word”.

Those stirring words resonate for us to this day. We do not subscribe to the notion that revelation is a once-and-forever phenomenon, that God has been revealed and neatly encapsulated in a single body of knowledge, a scripture, to a single people at a single time, and that we need ever only refer back to that ancient source. For us, a restless curiosity is fundamental to faith. The conviction that there is always more we might learn, might discover, might have revealed to us, has been a bedrock which has beckoned us on.

But the search is for more than an intellectual truth. As John Clifford, a Unitarian ministerial colleague of mine in England, writes, *“The UU raison d’etre is broader than the search for truth.”*

*It includes:*

- *The search for a deeper sense of personal integrity*
- *The search for a richer sense of a just community*
- *The search for a greater sensitivity to the aesthetic qualities of life*
- *The search in community for a healing power that leads to wholeness.*

I was genuinely stunned, one Sunday morning very early in my time here, when I asked who of you had been born and raised a Unitarian Universalist, and none of you had. I was the only one. All of you had come from somewhere else. Some of you had been raised in another religious tradition which for whatever reason had ceased to satisfy, and you had set out on a deliberate search for that which would answer your particular spiritual needs. And some of you had stumbled into this place from the religious wilderness, not sure what you were looking for but feeling the need for somewhere to shelter from the stormy sea of secularism. But all of you, seeking for something - for meaning; for identity, for a context and a community within which to continue the quest for your own spiritual authenticity.

For us, there is real truth to the adage that it is less the case of “Seek, and ye shall find”, but rather, “Find, and ye shall seek.” Finding this place is not the end of the search for meaning, it is only the beginning. The good news is, you

need not search alone.

So yes, part of the mission of this community is to seek; to be honest about the fact that we do not yet know it all, and not to be discouraged by the fact that we never will know it all. To have open minds, but not empty heads. To be glad and grateful for truth whencesoever it comes.

However, I don't know about you, but when as a child I played Hide and Seek and I was It, it was no fun never to find. The fun was in the finding. Always to be seeking gets wearisome and frustrating after a while. I like to find things too, and when I have found them, I like to savour them.

We are here not only to seek, but also to savour. We are here to give thanks, to celebrate this wonderful, miraculous mystery which is life, to which we have been granted a passing window. To take time to appreciate all the blessings of life - the extraordinarily complex beauty of nature; the creativity of the human spirit which brings forth works of word and music and art; to immerse ourselves in the fullness of relationships, with all of their pleasure and their pain; to ponder with grace the ultimate mystery of death to which we all must finally surrender. All of these things demand that we give of our time and our attention, again and again and again. We need to return repeatedly to awareness, to remind ourselves to stand in awe and reverence and wonder, lest we grow insensitive to the majesty which is all around us and within.

When we gather week by week to worship, we do so to seek for that which yet eludes us, yes, but also to savour that which we have already found. To be glad of the truths and beliefs which have become the firm foundations of our faith. What are your truths and beliefs? What is it to which you cling with stubborn grit that guides you through your moments of rapture, or rupture.

Here are four beliefs which I have found and to which I am grateful for the way they have held me close through whatever trial or triumph I might have encountered in life.

*I believe that my life is much the richer through being open to the promptings of the divine. I am not able neatly to define what the divine is, but I know that I experience it and, when I do, I am deeply blessed, I am given strength and hope and gentle reassurance.*

*I believe that I am defined by the choices I make. I am what I have chosen through my words, my actions, my thoughts.*

*I believe that I know too little about the mysteries of life to make any*

*final dogmatic declarations about how it came about, and for what purpose. I believe that my faith, whatever it is, is to help me be a better person; it is not to impose on others to make them better persons.*

So yes, we come here to seek for truth and wisdom and meaning; and we come to savour life in all its charms and chastenings. And, thirdly, we come to serve. It can never be that this community exists only for the benefit of those already within its doors. It can never be that we come here as a retreat from the world, congratulating ourselves on our good fortune while blocking our ears to the cries of the hungry, the homeless, the helpless. If we exclaim that we look to deeds, not creeds, for our salvation, then what are our deeds? If this town, this county, this state, this country, this world are, in some way, not better because of what we do, inspired by our having been here together, then what value our being here together? If you are looking for no more than a congenial group of folk with whom to hang out with on a Sunday morning, there are lots of other places you can go. The golf club. The coffee shop. There's no shortage of alternatives. If you want just to dabble in interesting ideas, then you can watch a TED talk or read the New York Times. Take an evening class.

I certainly hope we are a congenial group of folk. I hope we do explore interesting and challenging ideas. But more, I hope we here make a difference in the world. I hope YOU are making a difference in the world. I hope you give something of your time, your talent and your treasure directly for the benefit of others, in ways more than just being a "nice" person. I hope you are an active agent for loving kindness, for generosity, for effective social change to bring comfort and hope to others. How do you take your Unitarian Universalist values and make them real in the world? How do you live your faith?

It is an essential part of a religious community that it must be drawn to something beyond itself, beyond its own immediate comfort. Yes, it would have been more comfortable for me if we had stuck to having only one service. I could have slept in an extra half hour, been home again sooner. But my comfort is not the point. Your comfort is not the point, either. We must be drawn to what is more than us, here and now. To be a true religious community we must make room in our hearts, as well as in our seating arrangements, for those who have yet to walk through our doors for the first time, even as we walk out through those same doors, taking the principles and values of liberal, generous-hearted religion into the world. Principles and values which, I firmly believe, the world rather desperately needs more of.

We are here to seek; we are here to savour, and we are here to serve. We can't always do all three at once.

E. B White wrote: *"It's hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenge. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day."*

As we at UUCM plan the day, plan the year ahead, how will we do so such that we are making time to do all three – to seek, to savour, and to serve? How will we, together, create the community of our hopes and dreams? Well, there are 361 days left in 2015. I think it is going to be kind of fun finding out. Want to find out with me?