

OUR LIVING TRADITION
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS (#171 *Lifting Our Voices*) ~ Mark Belletini

Ah, it's true.

When our ancestors spoke of heaven, they were speaking of this morning.

When they went on about nirvana they imagined a time like this.

When they sang of paradise, it was this morning they imagined.

A time when all the mysteries of life and death are blended in a community of praise,

When the bones of ancient lovers are given flesh again in our own bodies,

Teachers of long ago speaking of love and truth once more in lives so ordinary they are extraordinary.

Blest is our breath, in and out, quiet,

Blest is our sitting, our fidgeting, our movement,

Blest is our heartbeat echoing the pounding alleluias of the distant stars,

Blest is the silence that is presence, not absence.

Indeed. Blessed is our gathering. Let us worship together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Bringing the Farmhouse Home* ~ Gloria Whelan

(After her grandmother's death, a young girl travels with her parents to the family farm where all of old belongings are being divided up.)

READING *Congregational Polity & the Myth of Congregational Autonomy*¹ (excerpt)

~ Sue Phillips

Rev. Sue Phillips serves as a district executive for the New England Region in the United States. She writes:

My favorite congregation, which I can't name because, well, as Regional Lead I'm not supposed to have favorites, is so wise. Good lord they are smart and soulful. Everything their church does and is about making Love manifest in this time and place. They know in their bones that how they are says everything about who they are.

Somehow they've learned that people of all ages need help to live faithful, growth-ful lives, and that it is the congregation's collective job to be that help. In their written materials they address this whole spiritual-but-not-religious thing head-on just in case any newcomers are confused. "[One person" alone, they say, "is incapable of being a church"]. Right there, front and center in their founding document. I love it! They know that they are united in covenant with each other so that they can help each other increase the sum of Love in the world.

¹ <http://www.newenglanduua.org/sites/default/files/documents/CongregationalPolityMythAutonomy.pdf>

This community doesn't do "membership." They do "covenant," and that covenant is so strong that each covenant partner accepts responsibility for reaching out in Love to those who wander from the covenant by word or deed. They do this not because they want to punish each other but because they believe no one should ever "be cut off from the privileges of the covenant." ...

They have a lovely process for being with each other in times of conflict, encouraging people to talk first directly to the person they're having trouble with, and if that doesn't work ask another person to help them reconcile. If the conflict becomes intractable, this community recognizes that someone might need to leave, since the peace and wellbeing of the whole is more important than that of any single individual. But they also promise one another that they won't just leave ... on a whim. They specifically say that being mad at another member is not reason enough to leave. They liken people leaving to pulling pieces of timber from a building or limbs from a whole person. ...

They promise to look out for their neighbors' welfare, and consult with them when they ask for help. They promise to tell hard truths if they see folks acting in ways that are unhealthy. They promise to worship and celebrate together, to share resources, and to work together to expand their faith in the world.

This, my friends, is a community ... where independence and covenant alchemize into precious religious life.

Where is this congregation? It is here, in each of us, in our DNA as Unitarians, Universalists and Unitarian Universalists, for the congregations whose story I just told came together in Cambridge (Massachusetts) in 1648. These are our ancestors, yours and mine, the authors of the "congregational way". ... Just a few years before they had escaped persecution and oppression of religious and secular authorities, coming to the new world to create a new way. ...

Our ancestors were religious radicals, no mistake about it. But they were not, as many believe, theological radicals. Their theology was virtually indistinguishable from the churches they left behind in Europe. They were radical because of their polity, which ... was a new idea in 1648, that members of a community could freely gather according to their will and mutual consent and together exercise a stake in the collective mission of the body. ...

The call to covenant is there at the heart of our faith, an echo from our collective past.

MESSAGE

Our Living Tradition

Have you ever been to a farm auction? When I was in high school, I used to clerk for an auctioneer, Charlie. He would pick me up early on Saturday mornings, and off we'd go...traveling miles to some country location, where we'd arrive to find a farmyard littered with tables, overflowing with all the contents of the house and buildings, and all the farm implements lined up for inspection. Browsers who had arrived before us would be sorting through boxes, and rubbing their hands over furniture, and kicking at the tires of tractors and

combines. Sometimes these were places that had been owned and tended by successful and fastidious farmers...the furniture was of high quality, and the farm equipment gleamed with care. These sales were attended by crowds who somehow knew that there would be 'good stuff'; the prices went higher and higher as bidders competed for what they wanted.

More auctions, the majority really, were at sad, broken-down farms, where lots had been assembled, like the piles told of in this morning's story, forcing people to take junk along with the best of what remained. Charlie and his partner had to work hard, at length, to beg people to bid for what no one wanted. And of the few people present, none were able to make eye-contact with the family who were hanging about at the edges, hoping against hope that they would come away from the sale with something, anything, with which to start a new life.

And as those sales came to a close, as the tables and farmyard emptied, loaded down trucks and trailers would wind out the long driveway, carrying off what they had found to be of value there... carrying it forward to a new life and purpose.

Many of my possessions, like yours I suspect, had a different life before they came into my life. For a few things, it really matters to me WHERE they came from, who handed them on to me, and what they represent. Other things I have simply because they please me, or they serve me, both of which are valid and compelling reasons...that is, to give joy or to be of use...and I'd be hard pressed to say where they have come FROM. I cannot trace their origins.

I've long been taken with William Stafford's poem, **The Way it Is**.

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

This morning we're exploring Our Living Tradition...a tradition handed down through generations, a tradition which embraces an ongoing process of ever-evolving beliefs and practices...a process by which we accumulate, use, sort through, replace, discard and keep. This is an important and distinguishing feature of this faith; our tradition, Unitarian Universalism, evolves and changes, being modified and changed with each new generation. And yet, there is a thread, multiple threads really, that we follow...roots that we can trace back in time. These are the things that we have chosen to hold onto, like beloved heirlooms,

because in some way they define us; they capture our hearts and minds, and they continue to be of both pleasure and great use.

What are these things? Certainly an insistence on the power of Love is one of those threads. More accurately, love is the very warp of our cloth. Woven through that warp, is an unswerving commitment to religious freedom and a dogged assertion that each person is worthy, has the duty of conscience, and has the capacity for self-determination. Alongside those threads is one that embraces us in an ever-deepening understanding of the critical role that diversity plays in the flourishing of life. And, let's not forget that counterintuitive thread that is our reliance on doubt and questioning as a source of wisdom.

If love is the warp of our cloth of tradition, then community is the weft. A bit more than two years ago, I preached a sermon with nearly the same title as today's (you can find it on our website, from June 2013.) Then, my focus was on the ways in which this tradition has evolved and adapted to changing times. This morning, while still speaking of our LIVING Tradition, I speak about what does not change...or at least, could not be taken away, without substantially changing who we are. And that is why I chose the reading that Sheena shared earlier; I believe that covenant...intentional community...is a piece of our Living Tradition that, along with love, is central to this faith.

I resonate with how Sue Phillips speaks of that long ago congregation in Massachusetts as residing in our DNA. DNA is a curious thing, isn't it? I am not my mother, not my grandmother or great grandmother. I am not my father, or my grandfather, or my great grandfather. I certainly look a bit like them, I certainly share some characteristics...and in truth, because of who they were, I know who I am and this gives meaning and shape to my life. Their DNA is a traceable part of who I am, and I could not be a 'biological' Stoneberg without it.

Still, as I read Phillips' paper (which I encourage you to read by going to the link listed in the order of service,) I found myself wondering if, since the Cambridge Platform was born out of the pilgrim and revolutionary spirit of the early colonies, if this commitment to covenant was more American than Canadian. I wondered if my Unitarian DNA might not be shared by Canadians. And so I posted a question to my Canadian colleagues, wondering about how Unitarianism, in Canada, is connected to the idea of covenant. I received three lengthy responses from the esteemed historians among us, who confirmed what I suspected, that this Unitarian thread of interdependence based in community is one that has existed since long before the Cambridge Platform, and therefore a thread that all of us follow.

How far back shall we go? We could simply say that being social beings imbedded in an interconnected web of all that is has always been central to what it means to be human. And yet, this focus, putting covenant and community at the center of our identity, is part of what makes us Unitarian Universalists.

The people who created the Cambridge Platform were not, as Sheena read, radical in their theology, but rather in their claim that a community, a congregation, is created by the voluntary consent and participation of its members. They believed that the task of a FREE church was to love God and one another so well that they might learn, together, the ways of justice, and peace, and reasonable law. They organized, not around beliefs, but around loving one another with full trust in the wisdom of the whole.

And they got this from their experience of religious persecution within the context of an English civil war that pitted king against parliament, which is to say, dictatorship against democracy. They were extreme protestants, whose concern was more for their ability to think and govern for themselves in religious matters than it was for their particular beliefs. And to my former point, Unitarianism was, in large part, brought to Canada from the British Isles, and therefore carried here, though nearly 200 years later, by people who shared roots with those who wrote, and aspired to live, the Cambridge Platform.

Of course, the struggle between monarchs and the people was not limited to British soil. The thread that we follow winds back to Transylvania in the 16th century, where religious debates attempted to make peace among ethnic groups as well as a multiplicity of religions, all vying for governmental sanction. As a result of such debates, King Sigismund became a Unitarian, and declared an Edict of Religious Tolerance, stating that ‘no one shall be reviled for his religion by any one, for faith is a gift of God.’ His edict, though short lived, essentially gave each congregation the right to make its own choices, not dictated by the ruling government.

And our thread also has roots in Poland, where the followers of Faustus Socinus formed a commune to live together according to the teachings of Jesus as they understood them. Socinus was key in our history; his ideas clarified a liberal Christian theology that was expressed more as a way of living than as a set of beliefs. Again, the idea of community, and shared support, was central.

If we could do a blood test on Unitarian Universalism, we would find covenant in its DNA. Covenant expresses our core theological assumptions about human nature and authority. Covenant in our DNA is the precursor to the one of the current hallmarks of our principles, interconnection, which here in Peterborough is included in our purpose statement, shown on our banner.

So, covenant is the thread that we SAY we follow. But why is it important for us today? Why should we keep this thread of community and covenant alive?

For one reason, it is simply what holds us together. Our theology, our beliefs, are so broad, that without some vital center around which to gather, we will not hold.² To really live the values of diversity and mutual support, we must be more than spiritual co-habitators who eat

² <http://www.newenglanduua.org/sites/default/files/documents/CongregationalPolityMythAutonomy.pdf>, p. 11-12

under one big tent but who sit at different tables. Covenant is what binds us together and compels us to share meals with one another across difference.

Further, covenant is what keeps us focused on care for the whole. This is SO Canadian...this concern for the common good...and in these times of rampant individualism and the creeping Americanization of Canadian culture, I believe we can provide a place that uplifts and upholds the value of true interdependence, a place where we are called to remember the good to which we are collectively called. Here we can put down our swords of individual demands and needs, and instead, create ploughshares that are in the best interest of all. (The Cambridge Platform actually says that attendees at church meetings may not “oppose or contradict the judgement of the elders without sufficient and weighty cause because such practices ... tend to confusion.”³ This is not quite the same kind of democracy that we practice today, is it?)

Finally, I truly believe that the spirit of covenant is what is needed to heal our world. At the heart of community... beloved community...is connection and belonging, yet there is a pervasive and nearly heart-breaking absence of ‘belonging’ in today’s world. I fear that this all-too-common and damaging absence is perpetuated by two things...one, a fear of asking too much of one another, and two, a reluctance to be claimed by one another, that is, to take on the responsibility that a covenant requires of us. To fully live into our interconnection with one another, and to rest in the truth of our belonging, is to live in covenant, a practice of which must be activated intentionally. Covenant requires us to step up and into it.

Imagine what might emerge if we truly and daily practiced the covenantal thread that runs through, and lives on, in this tradition. Imagine if we promised to listen for, and feel, the pulse of our collective lives and willingly placed ourselves within that stream. Imagine if we all could know that we have a place, a secure place, within the whole that is beloved community, and that we would respond out of that knowledge with a care for all that is. Imagine, hundreds of us, thousands of us, acting as if who we are, and what we do, matters to the whole. For indeed, that is the way it is.

In my living room, I have an old rocker that I bought at one of those farm auctions long ago. It was built by human hands, and is not perfect...it ‘travels’ when rocked until it bumps against the table. It has been refinished and recovered more than once. It doesn’t match my other furniture in style or scale. And yet, I hold onto that rocker. When I sit in it, I hear it whispering, “Be still, and listen. Know that you are the result of the love of thousands.”

The thread of covenant that we follow is the result of the care and love of thousands upon thousands of ancestors who gave their lives to its call...the call to live in a community of mutuality, walking together in the ways of truth and love.

So may it always be. Amen.

³ <http://www.newenglanduua.org/sites/default/files/documents/CongregationalPolityMythAutonomy.pdf>, p. 8

READING(#175 *Lifting Our Voices*)~ *Alice Walker*

To acknowledge our ancestors means
we are aware that we did not make ourselves,
that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps, to God; or
to Gods. We remember them because it
is an easy thing to forget: that we
are not the first to suffer, rebel,
fight, love, and die. The grace with
which we embrace life, in spite of
the pain, the sorrows, is always a
measure of what has gone before.

CLOSING WORDS(#181 *Lifting Our Voices*)~ *Judith Meyer*

In the aftermath of the terror in Paris, and will awareness of all the suffering in the world, may we search deep inside ourselves for the best we have to offer. In the face of horrible acts that show the worst humans can be, may we have the courage to find in ourselves the best WE can be.

This is what we do with our faith:

Live in this world knowing that we will lose each other,
Loving despite the hard bargain it demands of us,
Doing what we can so that truth may be safely lived,
Measuring our faith by the difference we have made,
Building up faith communities to continue after we are gone.

Go, at peace...aware of where we have been and open to where our journey may take us.
Blessed be. Amen.