

# “DOING WHAT WE CAN”

A Sermon Given at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts  
on October 6, 2002  
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer

Some of you come from religious traditions in which each sermon takes off from a text, invariably a short passage from the Bible. I have a text of my own this morning, although it comes not from Genesis or John but from the Bradford Era, a Pennsylvania newspaper. Like our own town papers, they publish an account of the activities of local law enforcement officers. The items are typically short, as in this two-sentence report:

“A woman on Chautauqua Place complained to the city police department Wednesday that someone had entered her car, took a half pack of chewing gum and threw the wrappers in the back seat of the car. Police did what they could.” [reported in *The New Yorker*]

My sermon is titled, “Doing What We Can.”

The police, for example, could comfort the woman, suggest she might lock her car in the future, apologize that they couldn’t assign officers to track the violator down, agree that we live in funny times, offer to send a patrol car down Chautauqua Place more often. Maybe that was plenty.

But sometimes it seems that there isn’t much we can do, and the stakes are hugely higher. Like the matter of possible military action against Iraq. I have the sense that American opinion is much more divided, with many more people having serious concerns about or objections to the President’s position than is being expressed. I know, I move in atypical circles, and maybe there isn’t the same level of quiet frustration in other places. But I sense a sort of helplessness, like things are beyond our affecting.

As everyone acknowledges, the situation is complicated, and strong arguments can be made on several sides. I don’t doubt that some of you are feeling frustrated that you can’t do more to speed the President into taking the action he threatens. And the whole discussion is the harder to have because of the lingering hurts from the internal struggles over our war in Vietnam.

The president of the UUA, the Rev. Bill Sinkford, reflects on that complexity in a pastoral letter to all UUs, released on September 20 and posted downstairs on the bulletin board. Mr. Sinkford ran for UUA president promising to pay special attention to what is now called “public witness,” a form of religious leadership that is broadly in greater favor these days, even though its impact still seems meager.

And so, after prayer and reflection, Sinkford decided to act on behalf of his own considered opinion. He did things like visiting the three UU members of Congress. He hopes we will “discuss these matters with your family and your congregants.” In the on-line version, he offers some links for further information. “I hope you will call or visit your elected representatives at the national level,” he writes, “to discuss your questions with them and to share your concerns. And I hope you will pray and reflect on what we can all do in the face of this conflict. Our role is not to advocate for a position – although many of us might wish to do so [individually] – but rather, to ask the difficult questions around the proposed conflict with Iraq and try ... to contribute to a richer imagination that can lead to peace....

“We will not all stand in the same place on this issue. But we can all stand in the same faith. Above all, it is my hope. In these troubling days and in all that lie ahead, my deepest prayer is that we stand in this faith with Universalist Olympia Brown, who wrote, over one hundred years ago, ‘Every nation must learn that people of all nations are children of god, and must share the wealth of the world. You say this is impractical, far away, can never be accomplished, but it is the work we are appointed to do. Sometime, somehow, somewhere, we must ever teach this great lesson.’”

Which is a stirring goal of the sort that religion exists in part to hold aloft and call us toward. Not that we shall reach it. But we can do what we can, as best we can figure that out.

For Sinkford, another part of what he could do was to put his signature on a list of 48 prominent religious leaders from a wide variety of denominations, who signed on to a letter to President Bush drafted by a group called Churches for Middle East Peace. Released on September 12, the letter urges the president not to take unilateral, preemptive military action against Iraq. It’s also posted downstairs.

Also posted there is Mr. Sinkford’s statement on Justice for Janitors, in which he notes that here “In Boston, Providence, and other New England communities, many janitors live in poverty, without adequate wages, health care insurance, or opportunities for advancement. These women and men struggle to find affordable housing and adequate transportation. In the midst of American prosperity, this situation is intolerable.” Anyone who has read Barbara Ehrenreich’s best-seller, *Nickel and Dimed*, knows – if they didn’t already -- how difficult it is to get by these days in America working at jobs that pay poorly, as so many do.

(Incidentally, some have asked, how well does the UUA treat its own janitors, and the answer turns out to be, well, with packages, including health care, much higher than what the commercial-service janitors are asking for.)

Sinkford notes things a person can actually do, like assisting janitors’ families during the current strike “with food and emergency services, as all of us, together, educate ourselves about the issues involved in the ‘Justice for Janitors’ campaign.” The Community Church in Boston, one of our downtown UU churches, has been very involved in channeling aid to the strikers’ families. The minister there, David Olson, appealed to us fellow UU ministers at our monthly meeting this past Wednesday and raised over \$1,000 on the spot. Information on how to donate is on the bottom of Sinkford’s Justice for Janitors statement downstairs.

We can’t make the world just, as skeptics and cynics observe. But we can do what we can. We can make it more just, more merciful, more fair. At least we can try.

This is sort of a sermon about goals, and not the first one I’ve given on the subject. Because I sense that this is an issue in our faith tradition, and probably in others, too, and in many a person’s heart and soul: How to harbor the highest hopes and yet persevere when results fall short, as they generally must.

The ever-growing number of you in your 30s and early 40s will have to tell me if this concern seems like some peculiar hangover after the optimism that characterized some social movements several decades ago. Or maybe it’s just a peculiarity of my own. It’s not that I don’t know how important vision is, and a sense of mission, in any institution. It helps to know what things would look like if everything were perfect.

But it never is. And in the meantime, what often matters most, it seems to me, is what a person can do, small as the impact may be. We can’t have perfection, only what can be achieved; not final triumph, but what can be done. It’s important to have goals, but then there are the tasks at hand.

Of course, this point can be taken way too far, until there are only tasks, with little residual sense of what their point may be. “Doing what we can” should have some hope of being “Doing what’s worth doing.”

Such thoughts come to mind in part because this time of year, ministers and their ilk are often considering their goals for the year, and the dreams they have for their congregations. And I have those things, but by many standards, they’re not very jazzy.

You could have a minister more optimistic and expansive than I am, and it might serve you well. I don’t dream as big as others in many ways. Palatial buildings and grounds, astronomical membership numbers, isn’t what I have in mind. I dream of something more mundane, but I think much more precious: a really good church, a congregation that cares for each other in respectful, supportive ways; that tries to address woes of the world and engages in its healing and improvement; that has an educational program that teaches and deepens and gladdens the minds of folks of every age; that has worship services that tend and strengthen the spirit of all who attend.

I have a minister friend who serves a large congregation in the south, where conservative Christian churches have 25,000 members or more. Mega-churches, they’re called. There was a time when she thought that she could create the first UU mega-church. I reminded her of that recently and she laughed. No, she hadn’t built a mega-church, and now the years of her remaining ministry were growing relatively few. But she was happy: the church had done well. It was fine.

Now I do have some more specific goals for us for the church year ahead, and they’re important and exciting to me. But they did not involve converting the town or saving the world. They involve our getting to know each other better, and then sticking with what we do.

Getting to know each other. A great thing has been happening here of late. Lots of new people have started coming, interesting people whom the longer-time members are going to have a great time getting to know. And you new people are in for an equal treat, because you’re going to discover what wonderful folks the longer-time folks are. (And you who have been here for three or four years or more, guess what: you’re now among those long-timers!)

And then there is my other excitement: more of the same! Just like before: Good music! Fun events! Social action! Interesting classes and helpful groups and friendliness abounding! What we do. And what you all do so well.

So much that is most important in life is not flashy, novel, experimental, or sexy but the regular activities. You’re lucky I don’t have time left to wander off on a completely extraneous but heart-felt attack on the too-many foundation grants that social agencies can receive but only for something new, not to maintain programs that already exist and work.

Of course, it’s true in our daily lives, too, where so much of the solidarity we seek beneath our days is maintained by minutia. We need some measure of mission, some sense that we’re pursuing courses that aim toward where we think we’d like to go. But then there’s doing what we can, the critical day-in day-out ways that we create our lives.

And so we’ll go downstairs after the service and maybe stay long enough to put our two cents in about Iraq, and try to respect the other viewpoints we hear. Or we’ll go home and maybe make the phone call we’ve been putting off for days or years. When the next church newsletter arrives, maybe we’ll see if there isn’t some way we’d like to get more involved, or maybe just come this Wednesday evening to start singing in the choir. Or maybe we’ll do all those things. No doubt we’ll do others.

We won’t make everything right.

We won't put an end to all war, injustice, and suffering.  
Together, we won't get around to doing all a church might hope to do.  
Personally, we won't be as good and alive and creative and kind as we would like, not every minutes of every day.  
But we'll do what we can. And with any luck, we'll be all right. We'll be fine.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Echoing one of the morning's readings.