

“Turn Before Last Verse”

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

On March 26, 2006

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

This building was erected in 1814, and dedicated in January, 1815, at the same time the congregation installed John Burt Wight as minister. There are about a thousand UU congregations in North America, with about 160,000 adult members and about 60,000 registered children and youth. The largest concentrations of Unitarians abroad are in Romania, India, Great Britain, and the Philippines.

You may have questions of your own about this religious movement of ours, its history in Wayland, and its current condition. Please know that I am always ready to try to answer such queries. But in fact, the question that I get most is, Why do we turn to the back of the room for the final verse of the final hymn?

Which you do, with coaxing in the order of service. Even if you're new, even if the order of service neglects to suggest it, it's hard not to notice, everyone turns to face the rear of the room before that last verse.

The tale is told that at our church in Wellesley Hills, a prominent member of the Boston Celtics, when they were still a dominant team and their players well known, attended services one Sunday – but being famous and, at his height, conspicuous, he arrived barely on time and slipped into the back pew on the aisle, ready to make a discrete departure before the congregation made a fuss over his presence.

You can see where this is going. The minister announces the final hymn, the organist begins, the congregation rises and begins to sing, and then just before our 6' 8" protagonist has a chance to slip away unnoticed, the hymn nearly over, the entire congregation wheels around to see him. As the story is told, he never returned, although there could be a number of reasons for that, if it's so.

In any case, we learn that we are not alone in this odd custom. But how is it that we do such a thing? The answer is two-part. Part one: In the early eighties, the minister here at First Parish had stayed long enough that he had exhausted the obvious subjects for the occasional sermon about the church's history. So he seized upon the idea of preaching every now and then about his predecessors, of whom there were 27, one of whom served twice.

He did several ministers at a time on average, and for many services he would reinstitute practices of the former time – for instance, having women and men sit on opposite sides, or having the hymns sung line by line in response to the leader. Eventually he got to the 1880s, and in his research chanced upon the fact that back then, the congregation – a much smaller congregation, by the way -- turned to face the back of the room before the last verse of the final hymn and the benediction, given by the preacher of the day from back there.

So that's what we did on that Sunday twenty years ago. But then comes part two of the explanation for our continuing the practice to this very day: people liked it. And no one hated it. How often does that happen? So hey, that settled that.

So that is how the practice came to be, but why did people like it? I like it because it gets me out of the pulpit and to the back doors so I can exchange greetings

with people as they leave, and still not give the benediction to the backs of people's heads. I know a lot of you like it because you get to see the choir and Polly and watch them perform the choral response at the end of the service, unless you're sitting in the back.

My guess is, they liked that in the 1880s, too. But there is also a nice symbolism involved in the act, which I like to think was part of their understanding in the 1880s and I know some people think of it at services in our own time. In the Protestant tradition out of which we grew, the service is focused on the pulpit, from which the word is delivered, or at least in my own case, words are. We are all here in church, with you focused forward, within these sheltering walls, as of our favorite hymns puts it.

But then you all turn as if to symbolize the return you are about to make into the world beyond these walls, maybe after you've had some coffee, tea, and conversation downstairs. We make that transition as part of the service, so we don't finish the service still focused away from the doors but toward them, as if to say there is not for us a sharp break between our religious life together and the lives we live outside.

Having been together, having practiced our religion by worshipping together, now we go out to practice our religion by living it in the workplace, in the home, in our volunteer work, in our political action. We turn before the last verse, we turn to face the challenges to be faced and the accomplishments to be made on behalf of the values and beliefs we came together to be reminded of and strengthened in.

My colleague in Dallas, Laurel Hallman, has written a course on devotional practice, "Living By Heart," that we will use here before long. I heard her talk about it this week. She uses the heart metaphor to title all her chapters: The Attentive Heart, The Wise Heart, the Relational Heart, and one called the Just Heart, on taking action. Her focus throughout the course is on devotional or spiritual practice, on developing inner qualities, but for her those qualities need to manifest themselves, become embodied in action.

The whole course is based on the teachings of a UU minister, the late Harry Schofield. Schofield cites the words of Jesus, "You will know them by their fruits." And adds, "If awareness of our interconnectedness, our oneness with one another does not bear fruit in self-transformation and society-transformation, it is worthless." Laurel Hallman speaks of this as "living inside out." Living inside out – the inside projecting outside itself, from itself outward.

We do this as a religious movement, we exist to do more than provide spiritual nourishment to ourselves and our children. And so we undertake social action here at First Parish, as at UU churches (and other churches and temples as well, of course) across the continent. And so we have the UU Service Committee, which does good and important work around the world, sponsored by its members – 31 of whom belong to First Parish – and to fund-raising efforts like the Guest at Your Table program we ourselves do here every December.

The UUSC is not a huge operation, so it considers carefully where it can make a difference under the overall broad goal of advancing human rights. I encourage you to visit their website, www.uusc.org, where you can become a member and learn about the UUSC's history and its current projects in depth.

In short, they work in four areas: (1) Defending civil liberties and access to democratic processes, where their current focus is on ending torture worldwide through

the STOP effort, which stands for Stop Torture Permanently; (2) Promoting environmental justice, now focused on promoting and defending the right to water; (3) Responding to disasters, especially as they affect oppressed or marginalized people; and (4) Advancing Economic Justice by defending workers' rights and supporting the living wage campaign. More about that in a minute.

Critical to nearly all the work of the Service Committee are its Economic Justice Partnerships. These partnerships with local groups and other aid agencies enable the UUSC to put the money we contribute to effective use. For example, following the tsunami disaster, the UUSC supported an indigenous agency that enabled fishers to buy boats to reestablish local economies. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the UUSC is "supporting groups working in marginalized communities as they rebuild their lives and livelihoods," including work on behalf of immigrants in Mississippi and Vietnamese immigrants; and reconstruction efforts in East Biloxi, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans.

Another partnership, one in which the UUSC is an active participant as well as supporter, is Let Justice Roll, "an interfaith coalition that educates and actively mobilizes faith communities around living and minimum wage campaigns" in the United States nationally and on the state and county levels.

It is part of the UUSC commitment to economic justice, and is the focus of church services on this day in many UU congregations across the country, on what is called Justice Sunday, an annual occasion for calling attention to the UUSC and some aspect of its work.

Part of the UUSC's work in economic justice is support for Fair Trade products that "help ensure a sustainable livelihood for farmers and workers." We are part of the effort with the sale during social time on Sundays of Fair Trade coffee, tea, and chocolate. It always worries me to mention names because I know I'll leave someone out, and I know how many people put in time to help with the sales, but I don't see how I can get through a whole sermon on the UUSC without citing Bobby Robinson and Larry Shafer for their enormous effort over the years here at First Parish and beyond on behalf of the Service Committee.

But back to Let Justice Roll and the drive to up the minimum wage, which has not budged nationally since 1997. It is still \$5.15 an hour. A person working full time for \$5.15 an hour is making \$10,712 a year, over \$4,000 below the government's poverty level. Some wags at that point note that during that same period, "Congress has raised the pay for its own members by \$31,000."

UUSC literature notes that "While the minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour has stayed the same, its value has dropped precipitously, keeping many workers well below the poverty line established according to the federal government's standards. UUSC is supporting living wage campaigns in many states...."

States, counties and municipalities are all free to set higher minimum wage standards than the federal level, and the higher rate prevails, thanks to an executive order by Bill Clinton. Eighteen states have done so, including Massachusetts, where the minimum wage is \$6.75 an hour. As you might imagine, none of these states are in the south except Florida, or the central or lower Midwest, the upper prairies or the mountain states. It's sort of a blue state thing. Three states (though not Massachusetts) have laws that automatically increase the minimum wage each year for inflation – a provision known as COLA: the Cost of Living Adjustment.

The most generous minimum wage is coming into being in one of my favorite homes away from home, Santa Fe, New Mexico, where the number goes from \$8.50 an hour to \$9.50 this year, and in 2008 to \$10.50. Mind you, this is still far below what a person would need to make to support a family, working fulltime; that number is about \$14 an hour. In Massachusetts we require \$6.75. Nationally, \$5.15.

As you can tell, I have been a busy boy on the internet this week, along with perusing a fair number of actual printed pages. I know that most economists believe that a minimum wage is a bad idea, as it interferes with market forces of supply and demand and has deleterious side effects, like causing low-paid workers to lose their jobs. And I know that in fact, these results seldom occur, however impressive the theory may be. Reality is that usually – not always, but usually – concern about people losing jobs because workers must be paid less terribly than usual is needless.

Efforts are being made to increase the minimum wage, both nationally and in Massachusetts. I believe they deserve support. They have mine. And that is as much as I can say, in our faith tradition. I rarely get to expect your agreement with me on any issue. That reality is a hallmark of our tradition.

But I do get to direct you to actions that will implement what I take to be the right and moral course. You could write or email our senators and representatives in Washington that you support the Fair Minimum Wage Act, which would increase the amount to \$7.25 over the next two years. Imagine: there is resistance to paying a person \$290 a week. Those opponents would have you picture a teen happy to have so much money. But most people making minimum wage are over twenty, three to one. Most are women, and a third of them have kids.

Someone once observed that no one comes to church to hear statistics. In fact, that's in the book that I co-wrote about preaching myself! But hey, in our country, yours and mine, over two and a half million people live in poverty even though they are working fulltime, twice as many as twenty-five years ago. The right to a living wage is in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which our country is a signature. Numbers may be boring, but we're talking about people, hard-working people, who have no hopes of making ends meet without giving up basic human needs.

Having suggested you visit the UUSC site, let me say before closing that there is also advice there on how to try to end the genocide in Darfur – by telling our representatives to support the Darfur Peace and Accountability Act and a supplementary appropriation of \$500 million for support of the peace-keeping troops of the African Union and for humanitarian relief.

There is so much more that could be said to encourage support of good work in the world being done by groups like the Service Committee, but it's time for the final hymn. I said there were 31 UUSC members in this congregation. On average, one in four UUs is a member, and we now have fewer than one in ten. But if you count people who give, but less than the \$40 a year that qualifies as a membership, as well as those who have belonged but lapsed, we have exactly 100, well over a quarter. So we could easily be more involved. If you are already a member, or if you are going to go home and join, there are little stickers for you to wear this morning, available on the table on the landing or downstairs.

Of course, there are other ways of engaging with the problems, oppression, suffering, and want in this world in which so many of us here live such favored lives.

There is no one right way of responding. But in the many ways we may choose, may we all find ways of fostering justice, on this Sunday and always.

Please rise for the final hymn and, as always, turn before the last verse to begin our return to a world that (just as much as in 1880) needs and deserves our love and care.