

“So Love May Thrive in the World”

Ken Sawyer’s Homily on Celebration Sunday
At the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.
On March 18, 2007

The church exists to be a loving community, a place where we come to meet our own needs and those of each other, a place of friendship and peace and beauty and learning. It can be all those things, and here at First Parish, I think that we have been such a place and that we go on being such a place.

But the church is more – it is also a force in the life of the world outside these sheltering walls. This is true in part because of the causes we support -- our organized efforts at social service like our feeding programs, our prison ministry, and we dearly hope before long the Interfaith Housing Network; work on the side of social justice, like marriage equality, and of the environment and peace; the organizations we belong to like the UU Urban Ministry, which runs programs for youth and a shelter for families in crisis, both in Boston, and the UU Service Committee, which provides aid to worthy projects around the world; our partner churches in Transylvania and in the Khasi Hills of India. These are all efforts so that love may thrive in the world, taking love in its most expansive sense as all that is kind and fair and compassionate and healing.

We belong to, we contribute to, we work on behalf of efforts to spread that love as widely and freely as possible. We do that as a congregation in a variety of ways. But I want to raise up the way I think is most powerful – the love we spread in the world as individual UUs, as members of this First Parish religious community, between times when we are together, in no small part because of that time we spend together, and how we spend it.

This is a great congregation, and you enjoy being together in many ways, for instance being parts of those committees we heard from earlier and others – plus coffee hour and other social settings, etc. But the central activity of a congregation is its services of worship. That has been true forever, long, long before 1640. The church is a place where people come together to worship together, to be a worshipping congregation, the name by which churches are sometimes known.

I know this point can be overdone. I know there are people who are active members of First Parish who never come to our Sunday services. Some teach in the Sunday school and only that, or they participate in one of our social service efforts, and only that, or they are not able to be here when we gather because of distance or health. Bless them all; we love it that they are part of our church community.

But the church would not exist at all if it were not a place where people come to worship, at times of joy like a wedding or a child dedication, at times of loss and sorrow and the celebration of a life at a memorial service, and week in and week out, for one hour to be apart from and together with, to be alone in good company, to experience the peace and beauty and ideas and human warmth of the surroundings, and those same things inside oneself.

And the hope behind it all is that every one of us is inspired to return to the world renewed in spirit, in energy, in hope, in determination, and in commitment to those values and ideals that we worship. In case you have not heard me or other clergy say so,

probably only too often for many of you, worship derives from the word for worth; it is the act of recognizing that some things are dearly valuable – and in our tradition, those things include open-mindedness, justice, peace, tolerance, freedom, and in that broadest of senses, love, love of neighbor, of stranger, of the earth and its creatures.

I know, we do not have a monopoly on those high ideals. Others hold them, too, some in a blend with a lot more theological doctrine than we have, which pleases them. Others hold them and act on them just fine without the encouragement of religious community and worship.

But I love knowing that because this church is here, because we support it and keep it healthy and well, hundreds of First Parish people are out in the world acting on behalf of those ideals. And I know, maybe not every minute of every day. Someone once said, really, “You can’t expect a person to be a Unitarian Universalist all the time.”

But over and over people express thanks for this community for empowering our better selves, for reminding us of the values that we mean to embody, whether at work, in our allocation of time and money, in our extended families (as best we can), and, as Erin said so well, here in First Parish itself.