

“ALoud!”

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

On October 28, 2007

This is Bring-a-Friend Sunday here at First Parish. This is not something we have done for a while, although it is not uncommon in churches of every sort.

I don't know about others, but I don't think of it as just a chance to proselytize, to get people here so we can convert them – although if you came for the first time to see if maybe this is a place you would like to become associated with, I will be delighted if you find that to be true.

So I will state a few of the basics of our way of doing things, so you can see if they are what you would like. Or maybe you have come just to see if the neighbor or friend who invited you is involved in some crazy cult, or maybe some stodgy old traditional religion, and some basics will be reassuring, or maybe not.

But eventually I will offer a short version of the kind of sermon that happens here on most Sundays, with messages that I hope that anyone here will appreciate hearing, old-timer or guest. In fact, I think that is what distinguishes Bring-a-Friend Sunday: not to pressure friends to join – as much as we would be happy if they did – but to insure that this is not the Sunday that as a member you bring your neighbor and she or he encounters something really unusual. Hey, it could happen. But not today.

First, for our guests, let me say, this is what we usually do on Sunday morning: a worship service with much in common with the Protestant Christian tradition that we were part of when this old congregation was gathered centuries ago – in 1640, to be exact. Since then, like most of the original town churches around us, we have become ever more liberal religiously, ever more inclusive of diverse theological outlooks, ever more averse to notions like original sin, the devil, and eternal damnation.

Instead, ours is a religion that – in the words of Universalist pioneer John Murray over two hundred years ago – seeks to give its believers “not hell, but hope and courage....” There have been times over the years when both the Universalists and the Unitarians – two traditions from about that time that finally merged in 1961 – have been accused of being naive about human nature and overoptimistic about human possibility, and maybe at times that has been somewhat true. But mostly we have been sensitive to the realities of human finitude, frailty, and failure, while persevering in the hope of our doing well, as individuals, and as communities of faith, and in the larger world.

It is a heritage from the earliest days of Unitarianism movement well back into the nineteenth century in the United States – a focus not on the world hereafter – in which many of us in fact do not even believe, though many of us do, in a plethora of variations – but a focus on how we conduct ourselves in our lives here on earth, on the achievement not of eternal salvation but of practical goodness here and now.

So when it comes to stating our basic religious agreements, those things most commonly believed among us as the center of our common faith, we talk about “the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our

congregations; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of conscience and the use of democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

You may have noticed that we have no creedal position on God, Jesus, the Bible, eternal life, and many other points of doctrine which are agreed upon in other traditions. Instead, UUs (as we often call ourselves) are free to find their own answers. This is not the easy way, or the way most people prefer their religion, it would seem. We are few in number – about 160,000 adult members and about 60,000 children and youth in the whole country, and far fewer anywhere else. By the way, when Americans are asked to state their religion, more than five times that number say they are Unitarian Universalists. And then there are others who would say so if they knew we existed. So it’s not quite as obscure an outlook as our membership numbers purport, but still, we are few in number.

But for many, if not most, maybe even all of us who are UUs, this is a form of religious fellowship we treasure, and wouldn’t have it any other way. It is our place to come for the community, for the beauty of the music and the building, for religious education for the children, and to be inspired to live lives that matter, to live life fully, to be encouraged and nurtured in the life of the mind, in the life of the spirit, in the life of the heart, in the life of the conscience, in the life of love.

And that is the point of my sermon to everyone, whether you identify yourself as a member of this congregation and Unitarian Universalism or not – in our way of thinking, religion is not about doctrine or creed but about how the faith you have, the religion you hold to, the beliefs to which you ascribe, how they inform your behavior, how they invigorate your life, how they give you a sense of grounding and meaning and purpose and joy.

This is not to say that those beliefs we are so free to find for ourselves are themselves of little moment. For most people at least some of the time, questions loom about the nature and meaning of life itself and our places in the universe. For most people, church is the place to be told the answers. For us, church is a place where we take the questions seriously, ponder them from the pulpit and in discussions, formulate our best attempts at personal theologies, knowing that they are incomplete and probably still in process. We honor here the life of the mind.

And the life of the spirit, the life of the soul in its search for peace and contentment, a life of perspective and balance, sometimes of solace and sometimes of humor, a life of stillness and self-care. We honor here the life of the mind and the spirit, too. But religion needs to be more than that, more than our own inner harmony and wisdom – it needs to matter in the people we are, in the things that we do.

I saw a great cartoon this summer in the New Yorker magazine, by one “A. Weldon.” There are seven people in a room, seated on simple chairs, facing a man sitting in a nice padded chair. The man is reading an open book. Over his head is a sign, saying “Author Reading Today 3 pm.” The seven people who have shown up look decidedly unhappy, though, and one woman, in obvious annoyance, holding one hand to her mouth to be sure to be heard, shouts “Aloud!”

Religion needs to be something aloud, something that reaches others, and not alone in the words we may say. And so here we honor the life of the heart and the life of the conscience. By the life of the heart, I mean all those good deeds and kindnesses we do

for others, for members of the family, of the congregation, for co-workers, for strangers, for those who benefit from our contributions of time and money, for everyone touched by the words and actions that flow from the compassionate and caring heart when it is acting “aloud,” and not just in words, but in them, too, as when we offer others the encouraging or consoling or admiring or loving remark.

We honor here the life of the heart and of the conscience, too, and again, especially when the conscience is not just provoked but acts, speaks out, expresses itself aloud, whether spoken or in print, whether to a congressperson or to someone at work who makes an offensive remark or engages in unscrupulous behavior. I have been moved time and again over the years by the stories I hear from or about members of this congregation who have taken dramatic, sometimes personally painful or self-sacrificial steps that they took as a conscious expression of their religious faith

And finally we honor the life of love and try to live more in its spirit, as it can under gird everything else we do. Earlier I read the seven principles we currently espouse. Well, they are accompanied by six sources our “living tradition ... draws from.” The fourth one is “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” That is the love the life of which we would hope to have here: the love that Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians famously said is patient and kind, envying no one, never boastful or conceited, selfish or rude, slow to take offense. “Love does not gloat over the sins of others but delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, hope, and endurance.... Put love first.”

For those who are here hoping to learn more about the religion practiced here, I might say a couple things about that last paragraph: There are a few UU churches that always use the Bible for readings, and some that never would. We are somewhere in between, although over toward the almost never side until the second half of December. And when I cited that fourth source, it is relevant both that UUs draw upon the religions most traditional among us, and that there are five other sources, which is one of our most distinguishing characteristics.

We also expect to draw on “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, that moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life; words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love; wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life; humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit; and spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

Which we think is great, having that richness of resources on which to draw (though when I typed in this sentence, I hit m instead of n and wrote of a richness of resources, which I suppose is how it may seem to some at times).

What we try to do here – and succeed at much of the time, by the grace of God, or as luck would have it, or by dint of hard work, or some combination of those factors and other beyond our knowing and certainly beyond our ken – is to nurture the lives of people trying to live lives that matter, to live their lives fully in the life of the mind, the life of

the spirit, the life of the heart, the life of the conscience, and the life of love, with perspective, balance, encouragement, happiness, and hope.

We find that quest goes best in community, and if any visitors or guests agree, we will be glad to welcome you. If you would rather pursue that endeavor elsewhere or on your own, our good luck and blessings go with you. We have been here for 367 years, and will still be here should you ever choose to return.