

“A Shared World”

Rev. Stephanie May, ThD

May 4, 2014

The First Parish in Wayland

READING

Rebecca Ann Parker , “Life Together” in *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the 21st Century*, by John Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker

There is no life apart from life together. In many Buddhist traditions, taking refuge in the sangha (the spiritual community) is necessary for enlightenment. “There is no salvation outside the Church,” said third-century Christian bishop Cyprian of Carthage. These may be startling claims if you have been steeped in the dominant U.S. culture of individualism, which suggests that looking out for number one is the only way to survive. But life is relational through and through.

Everything exists in interaction and interdependence with everything else. The question is not *whether* we are social, interconnected beings. That is a given. The question is *how* we shape our modes of being with one another and with the sources that uphold and sustain life.

SERMON

When I was 4 years old, I nearly died. After complaining of an intense stomachache, my mom brought me to the doctor who sent us immediately to the Emergency Room. My painful stomach turned out to be a ruptured appendix. As I arrived at the hospital for emergency surgery, poisons were flooding my young, very sick body.

For nearly two weeks, I stayed in the hospital recovering. Some of my first fuzzy memories are of this hospital stay. My family likes to tell me stories about this time as well. For example, my Grandma May, a small, white-haired farm-wife from mid-Michigan, smiles and chuckles when she tells me how I began climbing down from the bed to use the bathroom. When she offered to help me, I turned and matter-of-factly told her, “No, I can do it by myself!”

The impulse to be independent can be strong. I suspect many of us sometimes act as if it were possible to solely sustain oneself...even at the age of 4 after a major illness. But, of course, the truth is that we need each another. This past week has certainly been an example of a lot of hands coming together to organize a whole series of events. Over the last week, I have met many of you and learned about the many, many ways that you work together to care for this community, to preserve this historic building, and to help those beyond these walls.

You're a busy bunch!

So why do you do all you do? The rummage sale? Sunday school classes? Youth groups? Work days? Gardening? What keeps you coming back . . . for choir practice? For sifting through the archives? For gathering here on Sunday morning?

Out of curiosity, how many of you have been in this church for a year? For five years? For 10 years? 20 years? 30 years? 40...50...60...70...80 years? That's impressive because being a part of a religious organization is not hugely popular in our culture! Indeed, [polls](#) suggest only 40% of Americans attend church or synagogue weekly. And others suggest that, well because people *lie* to pollsters, a more accurate number is probably closer to 20%.

Yet here you are. So why do you come? Why do you stay?

[pause]

On Tuesday night, a group gathered here to discuss "building community." To start the discussion, I asked people to write down a definition of community. In listening to the different definitions, I was struck by how many suggested that community needs a common purpose to link people together. This common purpose or shared goal helps to define the community—shaping who they are, why they gather, what they do.

So what is the common purpose, the shared goal of The First Parish in Wayland?

While in search, I tried to discover how you might answer this question. As you may know, one step for a congregation in the search process is to

complete a Congregational Record—which is a list of responses to questions posed by the Unitarian Universalist Association Transitions office. Similarly, ministers complete a Ministerial Record. Both the congregational and ministerial records appear online on what might be characterized as a kind of “on-line dating service” for minister’s and congregations.

So, reading your Congregational Record was one of the first ways I began to learn about you. One of the questions in this Record is: “Does the congregation have a mission – not a mission statement, but a glowing coal at its center – and if so, what is it?” In part, your response read: “If there is a ‘glowing coal’ at the center of congregational life, it is the recognition that we are all seeking truth, striving in our own ways to be our best selves and to act on our convictions, failing occasionally, carrying burdens often unseen, and in need of understanding and companionship through it all.”

Isn’t that a lovely description of what it means to be the First Parish in Wayland? “Seeking truth”... “striving to be our best selves” and needing “understanding and companionship” through all of the seeking and striving, spoken and unspoken burdens.

Although the Record asked about a mission, not a mission statement, The First Parish in Wayland *does* have a mission statement. Did you know that? It’s on the website and it’s actually printed on the back cover of the order of service:

“The mission of First Parish in Wayland is to provide a religious community that promotes values we hold to be important to the fulfillment of a meaningful life. Therefore we devote ourselves to:

- ~ Provide a place where freedom of religious thought can flourish.
- ~ Explore together ideas about values, ethics and morality.
- ~ Provide a firm foundation for our children upon which they can make ethical, caring decisions as they grow.
- ~ Be cognizant of the needs of the First Parish community and help meet these needs.
- ~ Act for the good of the larger community.”

Does this sound about right? Do these words capture why you come here? Your sense of why this place matters?

In trying to identify the common purpose of the First Parish in Wayland, I also went looking for the church covenant. In churches with congregational polity like First Parish, the church covenant is a freely chosen statement of shared purpose... the glue defining what binds the church together. A covenant is like a contract between people, but also carries with it a sense of connection with something beyond the people making the covenant. Historically, this something more was often understood as God, or I think we can also understand this 'something more' to be the community of Life—of a human connection that precedes and extends beyond any one life. By linking both persons and this sense of 'something more,' a church covenant seeks to name the shared purpose, the common ground that binds people to one another even across their differences.

In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we are *not* connected by shared theological beliefs or by creeds that set the boundaries of what to believe. Instead, we are encouraged to bring our questions, to *freely* seek our religious understanding. And so, rather than creed or belief connecting us, we are connected by covenants—statements that set forth the purpose, the common ground of a community.

Do you know where I found the covenant of First Parish? Like many UU congregations...it's in the bylaws. The first article of the bylaws is the Name of the congregation. And the second article is the covenant, which we read for our chalice lighting: *In the search for truth in freedom and in the spirit of love, we unite for worship, community, and service.*

The role of a covenant to bind together the church community is a *very* old idea. If you dig around the digital archives of early Sudbury (which of course also means Wayland before the town split), you can find an image of the 1640 covenant of this congregation. It's *much* longer than the current covenant and its language is rather antiquated.

Yet, in reading this nearly 375-year old document, I am struck by how much *has not* changed. Like the recent Congregational Record that admits occasional failure on living out one's convictions, the 1640 covenant starts with an admission that they are not a perfect group of people.

Yet, imperfect as they know they are, they still decide to give community a try and elect to sign the 1640 covenant establishing the church. The 1640 signers

describe that they are doing this because they were commanded by God to “gather together into a church” and because they were in need of the Love shown them through the rites of the church. Now this might seem *a lot* different than First Parish today, but I would challenge you to see the links by reframing this centuries old covenant in broad terms.

What I hear in this old covenant is the conviction that the ultimate nature of the universe calls us to be connected to others rather than to be always alone—to resist saying, as I did, “I can do it by myself.” As Rebecca Parker says in our reading, “there is no life apart from life together.” She says that it’s not a question that we are relational creatures. We simply are “social, interconnected beings.” I, too, believe that the very nature of who we are shapes this need to be together, to be in community.

After beginning with this need to gather, the 1640 covenant goes on to list out a number of more specific purposes of the gathered church, including: teaching, seeking an understanding of religious truth, and helping one another. Notably, it also mentions electing officers and managing the “worldly wealth” of the church. It all sounds rather familiar doesn’t it?

Admittedly, the 1640 covenant also talks about finding and reproofing, “all sin whether in the church [or] in any member.” I’m guessing that for many of you (as for me) that this language of sin can be difficult to stomach and to reframe. Yet, I wonder if their language of sin might start to make some sense if we approach it as an expression of the very real human experience of falling short of our ideals or of wrongly hurting one another. For doesn’t a church community often wrestle together with what is the right thing to do—as individuals or as a church body? Don’t we as individuals and as groups question which values we seek to espouse? Or, what ethical stance we wish to take on issues of social injustice?

As the First Parish mission statement says, part of what this community seeks to do is “explore together ideas about values, ethics and morality.” Being a church *does* mean grappling with both our aspirations to be good and with the human capacity to intentionally or unintentionally harm one another or the earth upon which we depend.

So why all this talk of covenant.... and the *1640* covenant at that!? I'm preaching on this because today is such an important day in the life of this congregation.

Since the first covenant of 1640 gathered together a group of people as a church, this congregation has been continuously meeting as generation after generation wrestled with what it means to be a church.

What I love about Unitarian Universalism, and about this congregation, is that the ongoing story is one that unfolds *together*. Listening to you this week, I heard a common ground of shared commitment to this community. And I heard differences of opinion on some topics as well as narratives that depicted how the life of the church has changed and might change again in the future.

As a nearly 375-year-old congregation, the gathered community of this church *has* changed. Who serves this congregation as minister has changed. Even the language of the covenant that states the purpose of this gathered community has changed.

But what has *never* changed is that you are gathered here to *be* a community, to gather together rather than go it alone.

None of us have a clear vision of the future and of what will happen if you vote to call me as your next minister. What I can tell you is that it would be my honor to dialogue with you all about what it means to be a church, and about what it means to live a good and meaningful life in this our shared world. I'd like to explore with you how you do understand your purpose for being together as a community—whether your current covenant reflects this purpose and, if so, how this covenant gets lived out in your lives as individuals and as a group.

Rebecca Parker says the real question is "*how* [do] we shape our modes of being with one another and with the sources that uphold and sustain life." *How* do you want to be together? What values are the glue that binds you? For what purpose or purposes do you gather?

I can't answer these questions by myself. I can't answer these questions for you. For generations this congregation has been wrestling together with these questions; they have written and rewritten their covenant; and they have

voted again and again whether to call a new minister to walk with them on their journey.

Should you vote to call me as your minister,

It would be my honor to walk with you
in *the search for truth in freedom*
and in *the spirit of love*

as we explore

how to be together, here, on Sunday morning;
how to build and rebuild community,
and *how* to reach out beyond these walls in service
as we seek to bring more love and justice
into our shared world.