

What Are We Here For?"

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

On September 20, 2009

What are we here for?, the sermon title wonders. It was even announced in the town paper, and for any of you who are here looking forward to my answer to the meaning of life, I have to apologize. When I ask, what are we here for, I mean specifically here, in this room, at this service, and then another, and another, as part of this worshiping congregation, of this religious community.

No doubt you all have your own reasons, and I don't mean to presume to speak for everyone. But as the new church year begins, I do want to offer an answer, a three-part answer, one that is not radical or even novel but important to state, it seems to me.

First, we come here for ourselves, each of us. This is not a popular observation in books and articles that serve the ecclesiastical market. You may find that surprising since so many other books and articles these days urge you to seek and indulge in your own personal spiritual fulfillment. But these are rarely books that suggest you should be spending more time in church or temple or mosque, when you could be exploring your spirituality at a retreat center or in personal spiritual practice.

But books and articles in the camps of organized religion, perhaps in reaction, often disparage personal fulfillment as a goal. Religion is said to exist to draw you out of yourself and into the work of God or goodness or whatever you call it in serving the needs of society and the world

And I am not immune to that argument. But still, I say it is okay that we are here for ourselves, for our own needs, to tend our spirits, to calm our anxieties, to rekindle our hopes, to comfort us in our sorrows, to accept and encourage us in our fumblingness (a word of my own I use to translate Jesus' talk about sin). And to delight in our successes and whatever big blessings may come our way.

It's for us. It's for you, every one of you. I have said from this pulpit before, if you fall asleep during the service, that is absolutely fine with me (although I may be disconcerted if you all fall asleep at the same time – which is not a dream I have had, although I have had the dream that when I look up from my sermon text, the congregation has all gone to coffee hour -- twice). But if what you need is rest, please take it, or the joy of an hour away from the office and cell phone and maybe the children, much as you love them, even if every word of my carefully-crafted, heart-felt sentences goes right by.

As I need hardly note, this is especially true when you have burdensome, worrying, tragic, or frightful thoughts on your mind. You don't have to laugh at my jokes,

or hide the tears during the prayer. Preachers learn that not everyone who looks like they would rather be anywhere but in the pews is disliking the sermon. Only some. We had a parishioner here who came every week with her husband, though it looked like nothing I said did not displease her. I felt bad she was enduring such displeasure, presumably for the sake of her husband. But when she was ready, she thanked me for the services, which had meant a lot to her during the time that her brother was dying.

This hour, this community, is for you, every one of you, with your particular sorrows, joys, concerns, and passions.

But we also come here for each other, both for the pleasure and comfort of being part of the community, a fact we speak of often, but also to be there for each other. The lay ministry and helping hands programs are obvious and visible expressions of that care and support, but it extends so widely I can barely begin to describe it. The realization at coffee hour that someone is standing alone and a readiness to engage them in greeting; teaching in the Sunday school, or helping in one of our programs for youth; the music – my goodness, that our fellow members work with Polly to provide such beauty for the rest of us in our services; the work day or Hospitality Network organizers and volunteers; the people who organize or do the summer services or pot lucks and those who attend them; the front hall artists; those who tend our building and grounds; our Trustees, Board members, and so many people on various committees; and the people who have every reason to be irked that in that listing, their enormous contributions to the community were not specifically cited.

Yes, we are here for ourselves, and at some times only that, and that is okay. But we are also here for each other, just to enjoy the community but also to pitch in at times. I have a quote that everyone I have shared it with has greeted with delight, and I'll get to it before long. It comes from Robin Meyers, a Congregational minister in Oklahoma City, and author of a book I read this summer, *Saving Jesus from the Church*. It is a good book, with recommendations from the likes of Desmond Tutu and Bill Moyers, and also a surprising one, in that he basically takes many of the theological stands I might take as a Unitarian Universalist. But while he believes that Jesus was human and the Bible is full of fantasy, he also believes that the man and the book both embody an empowering message of radical love and social justice worth centering on one's life on.

So the answer to the Prologue, called "A Preacher's Nightmare: Am I a Christian?," comes in the Epilogue, "A Preacher's Dream: Faith as Following Jesus" – not worshipping him, nor having the right theology regarding him, but following his basic messages and model. So he has chapters like, "Jesus the Teacher, Not the Savior"; "Faith as Being, Not Belief"; "The Cross as Futility, Not Forgiveness"; "Original Blessing, Not Original Sin"; and "Religion as Relationship, Not Righteousness."

So here is the little quote I spoke of: "...We should tell anyone who joins a church that they have just entered into a strange and bewildering covenant of blessed inconvenience." [159] I thought of making that the sermon title, it is so nicely phrased. It

could be put over the doors to the vestry; not, in Dante's words, "Abandon all hope, all ye who enter here," but "Welcome to the covenant of blessed inconvenience."

Meyers goes on, "We are all, of course, too busy to sit on another committee. They meet at inconvenient times.... Yet time and again we come home feeling that it was worth it, that we are better for having shared time with friends in the work of something more important than ourselves.

"To be honest, we almost always try to think of reasons not to do something collective and 'other-oriented.' But invariably we come home from those experiences believing that we have done a good thing.... We look one another in the eye, ask about our children, laugh, and toss a small stone of hope in the ocean of misery that is the world. Someone has to take minutes, of course, because 'they also serve' who sit and take minutes."¹

Or make the coffee, which is an inconvenience of a sort on Sunday mornings and we sometimes have trouble lining up the volunteers. But it is a blessed inconvenience, because it contributes to a ritual we have, the weekly community gathering downstairs.

The late David Foster Wallace gave a graduation address that has been published as *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*. In it he says, "The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day." We come to give each other that care.

In good UU fashion, the first two of my three points disagree with each other. We agree to disagree, we say, and our clergy disagree with themselves. We come here for ourselves, and we come here for each other. UUs are famously individualists, making up our own minds, but necessarily institutionalists, too; as Hugh Hecló wrote, "institutionalists see themselves as debtors who owe something, not creditors to whom something is owed."²

But then third, we come here for something beyond ourselves -- we come here for the community, the society, the world we hope to influence for the good. We are committed not just to our own spiritual wellbeing, not just to the wellbeing of our religious community and its members, but to all those beyond these sheltering walls, and to the planet.

We might start with our own neighbors and the greeting we have to extend them. The new president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Rev. Peter Morales, wrote, "Our congregations are surrounded by the spiritually hungry and the religiously homeless. Growing our movement is the moral equivalent of feeding the hungry and

¹ Robin R. Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009) 159

² Hugh Hecló, "On Thinking Institutionally," quoted by David Brooks, "What life asks of Us," *The New York Times*, 1/27/2009, A29

housing the homeless. Growth is not something that is merely organizationally desirable, growth is a moral and religious imperative.”

Our governing board, called the Parish Committee, met eight days ago for its annual retreat. It selected three priorities for the coming church year. Growth was at the top of the list. The long-range plan the congregation adopted sets 15% as a goal, which means almost fifty new members net, after whatever losses will inevitably occur.

It won't happen right away or all at once, although there was a UU church, smaller than ours, not far away, that produced a brochure and mailed it to everyone who had bought a house in one of three towns in the last few years, and on the first Sunday, last week, 37 newcomers showed up.

It probably won't happen that suddenly here, even though we're about to make a special effort on Bring a Friend Sunday, October 11. But if we maintain our most open-hearted, open-handed spirit, growth will happen; and that's a good thing, for ourselves, for those who join us, and for the values we hold dear.

Because we come for that, we come to engage in the effort to advance our values, to build a world more just and fair and peaceable, whether by housing and feeding the homeless, crusading for solutions to war, or all the other ways First Parish embodies our hopes and our efforts. There will be a Social Action Fair after church on Sunday, October 25, when many groups will offer the chance to find out more about their activities and to become involved yourselves.

But I also know how often people here embody our values when out on their own in the world, informed and emboldened, I am sometimes told, by what happens here, by what is said and done, by the sense that our religion should count for something in the world and that there are others who share in that faith, in the sometimes inconvenient, even strange and bewildering covenant we share, that brings us together, week after week, year after year, for what we can accomplish together in the world, what we can offer each other, and what tends our own spirits. And all that, as for the many generations before us, is what we are here for.