

Sermon: **"We Who Believe In Freedom Cannot Rest"**

By Reverend Gail R. Geisenhainer, serving as Minister with The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach, FL Sunday Morning Worship, UUA General Assembly 2006

I was forthrightly evangelized into Unitarian Universalism. I was 38 years old, living in Maine, driving a snow-plow for a living and feeling very sorry for myself when a friend invited me to his church. He said it was different. I rudely refused. I cursed his church. "All blank-ing churches are the same," I informed him, "they say they're open—but they don't want queer folk. To Heck with church!" My friend, persisted. He knew his church was different. He told me his church cared about people, embraced diverse families, and worked to make a better world. He assured me I could come and not have to hide any elements of who I was. So I went. Oh, I went alright.

And I dressed sooooo, carefully for my first Sunday visit. I spiked my short hair straight up into the air. I dug out my heaviest, oldest work boots, the ones with the chain saw cut that exposed the steel toe. I got my torn blue jeans and my leather jacket. There would be not a shred of ambiguity this Sunday morning. They would embrace me in my full Amazon glory, or they could fry ice. I carefully arranged my outfit so it would highlight the rock hard chip I carried on my shoulder, I bundled up every shred of pain and hurt and betrayal I had harbored from every other religious experience in my life, and I lumbered into that tiny meetinghouse on the coast of Maine.

Blue jeans and boots. Leather jacket, spiked hair and belligerent attitude. I accepted my friend's invitation and I went to his church. I expected the gray-haired ladies in the foyer to step back in fear. That would have been familiar. Instead, they stepped forward, offered me a bulletin, a newsletter and invited me to stay for coffee. It was so... odd! They never even flinched!

They called me "dear." But they pronounced it "dee-ah." "Stay for coffee, dear."

I stayed for coffee. I stayed for Unitarian Universalism. Over time, the good folks of that church loved up the scattered parts of me and guided me from shattered to whole; from outcast to beloved among many. And those folks listened to me. I and my life partner became their poster-children for the brand new Welcoming Congregation program. And they went on to provide important local pastoral and legislative ministries to gay folks in Down East Maine. We walked together and we helped each other to grow.

Please don't think the transition was smooth or swift. These were not imaginary super-heroes, these were human beings. And this was in the mid 1980's. During the worship service on my second or third Sunday, a woman stood during Joys and Concerns to announce that all

homosexuals had AIDS, all homosexuals were deviants who could not be trusted with children, public health or civil society. All homosexuals should be quarantined; packed off to work camps to provide useful labor for society and keep their filthy life style and deadly diseases to themselves.

As the member spoke I slowly sat upright from my customary slouch. I tucked in my arms, looked furtively around to see who might be glaring in my direction, and I tried to remember if I had parked my car facing in or out in the parking lot. In its journey of covenant, this congregation had just stumbled onto an important cross-road. But as Joys and Concerns unfolded not one person made reference to the call to quarantine all homosexuals. The pulpit that morning was ably filled by a student from the local seminary. At the end of the sharing, the seminarian made a brief comment to ensure us that not all the sentiments voiced this morning represented the whole congregation, and that was that!

Now I was at a cross-road. Sure thing I left that week right after service. But what about next Sunday? Would I go back? Why on earth would I go back? That would be, well, you fill in the word, going back would be what? , dangerous, stupid, fool hardy, looking for trouble, probably hurtful, but back I went. I was in the throes of learning my first lessons of being in covenant with a congregation. When we covenant to walk together through all that life brings, it means when things get ugly, we don't walk away. Oh, how we may want to walk away! But our covenants call us to abide and work things through.

The next week the regular minister was back. The service began as usual. I tensed up when Joys and Concerns were announced. Someone announced something like a birthday, I can't fully remember. But I vividly remember as one by one, folks of that congregation stood up and awkwardly announced that not everything said last week was right, or true, or representative of who we were as a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

The cross-road had been engaged. The direction the congregation would take was being chosen. This congregation would not be stuck in conflict, mired in name calling, or diverted from it's gentle, steady trek toward building the Beloved Community. Our aspirations were unfolding: one voice at a time.

That congregation had reached a cross road where one among them had begun the use of language that would depersonalize and endanger others. She tried to create a class of less-than-human persons toward whom violence would be acceptable. The congregation gently refused to follow. But, an even more extraordinary and wonderful thing happened. The congregation refused to depersonalize, refused to dehumanize the original speaker. The congregation stayed in what Martin Buber called an "I-Thou" relationship with her. They did not

start calling her names, "that homophobe! That gay-basher!" None of that happened. While the speaker tried to turn homosexuals into objects to be manipulated, the congregation never referred to the speaker in a way that was less than embracing and respectful of her full humanity.

Later, in that same church, I opened the hymnal to find the words attributed to the Buddha, "Never does hatred cease by hating in return." He taught, "Let us overcome violence by gentleness, only through love can hatred come to an end. Never does hatred cease by hating in return."

My friend was right. His church was different. He did forget to tell me that at his church, some Sundays, I could be in for a wild, wild ride. But he was right. His church really cared about making things right for everybody.

Over time, after attending General Assemblies, District Meetings and through working with various groups at the church, I began to experience the shift Anne Lamott described from the Peace March. I had walked into that meetinghouse as a bruised, belligerent, "I." I was fighting alone. But in time, the "I" turned into "we." Lamott wrote, In "the energy and signs and faces of the crowd were an intoxicating balm, and by some marvelous yogic stretch, we all stopped trying to figure out whom and what we agreed with, and who the bad elements were, you just had to let go, fascinatingly out of control, the sea of people, like a great heartbroken circus, wild living art, The "I" turned into "we," moving at the pace of the whole organization."

Pace! Oh, my word! I was frantic with the folks in Maine ! I would have welcomed a S.W.A.T. Team! I wanted that woman bodily lifted from the pews right that moment! I wanted a detailed denunciation of her ideas and a formal apology to all queer folk on the planet . But that's not how human change works. That's not the pace of human learning. Nor is it the pace of effective, world changing work for justice. When I heard that diatribe I was immediately slammed into a sharp, prickly, fully alert sensation of my differences. I was "other." So was the speaker. We were what Martin Buber called "I—It" and not "I—Thou."

At the time, what I remember most is the sensation of holding my breath as I hurried out during the postlude. I ducked my head, avoided eye contact, spoke to no one as though the shame were mine. There was a man in the foyer between me and the exit door. I quickly glanced up to his face, silently pleading for him to let me pass without more pain. He smiled, held the door open gently for me, speaking softly, he said, "See you next week?"

My head snapped up. "Excuse me," I muttered. Surely I had not heard him correctly? He gently repeated, "See you next week?"

Was he mad? Was he impaired? Had he not just heard what that woman said? "See you next week?" It was at once a question and an invitation. Surely, I thought as I scrambled to leave the parking lot, surely it was an invitation to madness, but for one thing. The man's voice, his soft smile, gentle words, direct eye contact, ours was an "I—Thou" encounter. The very thing I'd been seeking.

In the throes of awful moments, in the slap of insult, the breaking through realizations of injustice, disrespect, unkindness, hatred and worse, there is a way to detect if we are off course or on course. In these terrible moments all sense of movement stops. Instinctively, some of us begin to hold our breath. We become hyper alert to details, the sense of "other" and our sense of "apartness."

Conversation, of course, comes to an abrupt halt. The sense of movement stops. Our brains want to scream, "what did you say?" When the attack was made all motion in the room appeared to stop. I hurried from the building nearly holding my breath. Then the fellow at the door said, "See you next week?" At once a question and an invitation. At once an acceptance of the reality I might not come back. "See you next week?" I exhaled. The salvific power of breathing. My first lesson on the Beloved Community where we walk together, though all that life brings. Just enough to keep us in motion, to keep us in conversation.

Within our own religious communities, we have all too many breath stopping moments. Have you ever heard anyone ask, "Well, what do they want?" That's often where it begins. The quick, facile insertion of a prickly sounding "they" into a conversation of exploration and expansion. It stops the movement cold. In some congregations, I fear we have grown all too accustomed to this heavy artillery of meanness. And then we stay stuck in the conflict. We lose sight of our larger aspirations. We forget to include one another on the lists of folks to respect. Sometimes, we all too cavalierly toss around flippant comments that hit like nerve bombs. Have you ever heard someone complain, for instance, about "those cranky old humanists?" Or have you heard one of us whine about "those air-headed theists?"

When we depersonalize and demean one another, most anything that follows will be flawed in some way. When we catch ourselves out of rhythm with our values, we can stop and rebalance. We can back track, retreat to the last place on the path where we remember regarding one another with good will. This is a spiritual practice. What spiritual disciplines do you employ to get your self back to balance after you've been stopped cold by bigotry, meanness, or insult? The basic discipline, of course, is the salvific deep breath. Many of us use poetry, songs, words, to pull us back into balance. For my part, I began collecting a notebook of the words and texts that kept me in balance, guided me back to balance. Do you have such a collection?

In all the holy words I've collected, two themes remain strong, first, that movement from the "I to the we." And with it, the commitment to stay in motion, to stay the course, to be present until justice is present for all. One such guide on the journey "from I to we" is Marge Piercy. In her poem titled, "The Low Road" she chronicles how "alone, you can fight, but they roll over you. Two people can keep each other sane, three people are a delegation, with four you can play bridge, a dozen make a demonstration. A hundred fill a hall." Her poem concludes this way, "It goes on one at a time, it starts when you care to act, it starts when you do it again after they said no, it starts when you say We and you know who you mean, and each day you mean one more."

These themes, the movement from "I to we," and the commitment to stay in motion toward the goal, come together for me in "Ella's Song." The words of the very first verse and chorus focus my mind, motivate my heart, and direct my hands. For me, this is holy language. "Until the killing of black men, black mother's sons, is as important as the killing of white men, white mother's sons, We who believe in Freedom cannot rest"

Until we create this place of balance, until we build this culture of inclusion and compassion, until we bring down justice like waters, until the days of our lives are filled with the glory of losing sight of whom to hate, until we regard each other with compassion, until the inherent worth and dignity of each is named, celebrated, practiced and nurtured, until, until, until, (sing) Until the killing of black men, black mother's sons, is as important as the killing of white men, white mother's sons, (add choir) We who believe in Freedom cannot rest, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes."

(Choir hums note for "comes" with a break, repeat till the cue for "Until ")

I invite you to sing this with me. Let us sing to learn, sing to pray, sing to awaken our hearts, just this verse and the chorus, together, "Until the killing of black men, black mother's sons, is as important as the killing of white men, white mother's sons. We who believe in Freedom cannot rest, we who believe in Freedom cannot rest until it comes."

I've heard folks say they are reluctant to invite others to worship at their Unitarian Universalist church, society, congregation or fellowship. Reluctant because you just never know quite what might happen on a Sunday morning when we get rolling. Well, I can attest, even if one of us gets so far, far off course as to call for a quarantine of homosexuals, the heat of our core, our yearning for a compassionate justice, will still be palpable. So go ahead, take a risk, invite someone to your church. I urge us all, it is time to get the salvific message of our Unitarian Universalist faith out of our congregations, out of our isolated hearts, out past our hesitations, limitations, frustrations, complacency and consternations. We need to aid, assist, challenge and comfort our bruised and wounded world.

Burdette Backus, Unitarian minister and signer of the original Humanist manifesto, taught that we are "at once children of (the Beloved Community) and builders of the Beloved Community." No matter how we came to Unitarian Universalism, birth, invitation, accident or curiosity, we are here with common cause now.

We are here to practice this faith, with all it's rigorous demands. We are here to build this faith, expanding it's broad possibilities. We are here to celebrate living. We are here to make life better.

"See you next week?" It is at once a question we each must answer and an invitation we each must extend.

As we return to our local congregations, let us expand who we mean by "we." Each time meaning one more.

"See you next week?" Let us build Beloved Communities that revere the labors and aspirations of the past but "trust the dawning future more."

See you next week?

Be there!