

IN THE SPIRIT OF LOVE

Rev. William G. Sinkford
All Souls NYC, October 11, 2009

Prayer

Please enter with me now the space of silence and honesty which is known by many names. Will you pray with me.

Spirit of Life and of love. Dear God.

Your people have gathered once again in worship.

Our days are filled with busyness,

But here we take time to breathe;

A few moments of silence and peace;

A few moments in which we can open ourselves,

When we can let the stress in our bodies melt away.

A time when our hearts can be open,

A time for restoration and reconciliation,

A time to find peace.

The world we have made works to keep us apart, isolated.

But here we are together. Alone we know grief and disappointment and fear.

We know our shortcomings too well.

Help us forgive our shortcomings and the shortcomings of others.

Dear God, move within us and among us.

Help us to find hope and strength to move forward.

Help us make a place in our hearts for that love that has never broken faith

With us and never will.

So may it be.

Amen.

Sermon

In the Spirit of Love

It is good to be back at All Soul's, one of my favorite UU congregations. And, no, I don't say that to every congregation I visit.

Many people, a few among you here, have asked me what it is like to step down as UUA President. "How's that transition going for you, Bill?" Its been a huge step. I'm reminded of the story of the sargent addressing the young recruit about to make his first parachute jump. "Watch out for that first step. It's a doowsy." I do seem to be landing in tack, including my passion for our faith. I do confess that there are things I miss. Having a staff, for one. But also I find that I sometimes miss my large and beautiful office at 25 Beacon, overlooking the Boston Common. My transition is not complete, of course. I still call it "my office."

How many of you have made the pilgrimage to Boston and visited 25 Beacon St.? Its about as close to a Mecca as Unitarian Universalism is likely to get.

Just across Boston Common from the UUA offices, Emerson College has a quirky little radio station, WERS.¹ "Music for the independent mind" is their slogan, and they air an interesting hodge podge of music throughout the week: weekday mornings are independent artists and a few oldies, Saturday mornings are show tunes, and on Sundays it's all A Capella. You've gotta love the A Capella groups, with names like Rockapella, Five O'clock Shadow, and The Persuasions. They include a lot of college groups too. There are the Harvard Low Keys, and U Mass's Doo Wop Shop. Tufts University has the "Beelzebubs," and there is aothern whole sermon there, but I think the cool geek award has got to go to MIT's group, the Logarhythms. "Get it? Logarhythms? It's a math pun." Yes, it's *that* geeky.

¹ www.wers.org

If you haven't listened to any A Capella music lately, try it sometime. It seems to have gone a little out of fashion as far as the mainstream is concerned. But it would be impossible to hear those voices coming together into a sound that rings so much richer than the sum of its parts and not be moved. A Capella tends to be upbeat and positive—the groups are always refashioning eighties songs and barbershop melodies—it almost embodies a kind of...hope.

For many of us, it's a little hard to get to hope right now. Its been a very hard year. Perhaps that partly explains why we don't hear more A Capella on the radio. And for that same reason, I think liberal religious people can be hesitant to share their spirituality with others. UUs might be hesitant to assert that this faith offers hope and healing to our often cynical, often despairing, often fanatical world. To know what you believe and say it, and to have the gall to suggest it to others puts us at risk of being called idealistic, or worse, reminds us of those relentlessly self-righteous religious people I know we have all experienced in our lives.

But there is a difference. Those people tend to espouse a creed that pushes some people out, while we are called by our principles to invite everyone in. We say, come on in! Come on in and find your inherent worth and dignity is honored here. Come on in and search for truth and meaning. Come on in and—we are not afraid to tell you--our goal is nothing less than a world with peace, liberty and justice for every person in it. If you are here for the first time today, welcome, come on in. If you are here for the thousandth time today, welcome. Come on in, and welcome others.

In 1819, when William Ellery Channing stopped here, he was on his way to Baltimore to deliver a sermon at an installation. "Unitarian Christianity" was its title and it would make him famous and us infamous. You see, Channing and the other early American Unitarians were proclaiming what they believed was true Christianity. Today we often forget how our early roots were planted firmly in the Christian tradition.

We've travelled so far since those days. Today Unitarian Universalism pitches a big theological tent. It is not only accepted, but it is common in our congregations for a

liberal Christian to be sitting next to an atheist and across the aisle a pagan and a UU Buddhist share a pew. There are humanists, theists, Hindu's...I could go on. And we believe that this is a good thing. We believe that the differences in our religious journeys can be blessings rather than curses.

Looking from the outside, and even for some of us looking from the inside, it would be easy to understand our faith to be one where you can believe anything you want. But this is not a faith of disbelief. Quite the opposite. We ask you, and you, and you to believe that you are already holy. You were born out of and into the sacred spirit of life and of love that can sustain you all of your days.

Not only that. We ask you to treat each and every person here as if they were already holy as well. And to approach every person you meet outside this sanctuary as if they carried the spark of divinity within themselves, just as you do. Taken seriously, ours is not religion light, it is one of the most demanding faiths I know.

In this covenantal faith, when we worship and reach out together something sacred is stirred up in our midst.

Rev. Raymond Baughan was editor of the Universalist Leader, and then co-editor of the UU Register Leader, the ancestor of WORLD magazine. He talks about this:

We deceive ourselves if we think we can be grasped by life's meaning, or a sense of the holy, before we find and are found by our fellow human beings. There is no sense of the sacredness of life, no sense of the holiness of sheer existence that does not come first through another person. Human encounter is common: human acceptance is rare. Religious community is people reaching through all the facades people carefully place around them—people embracing people where they live and struggle...'

This is a pretty radical assertion. “There is no sense of the holiness of sheer existence that does not come first through another person.” I’ll bet there are some ruffled introverts and individualists in the room right now. Baughan’s words are challenging. But he goes even further:

*The most radical contribution religion can make to human living is that it enables people, to experience community as starkly as hunger... Where life has a chance, we are in caring and in mutual need.” When we are most alive, we are in the presence of someone or something intensely with us...Nothing is experienced except in relation. It is participation in a religious community that **stabs** our consciousness into this awareness in the midst of a society that knows nothing about it.*

Stabs! Baughan isn’t messing around here. He’s nailing something that goes right to the heart. It’s the vulnerability, the weakness, of humans in isolation. We’re better in loving community. “Wherever life has a chance, we are in caring and mutual need.” Which is to say, whenever we are not in caring and mutual need, life has no chance. This is true on the microcosm of individuals—even the most hermitic mountain man was once shaped by his village in the foothills. If he weren’t, how would he know who he is? From what foundation would his dreams take shape? And it is also true of whole communities. No community can thrive in isolation.

Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal tradition. Those who belong to denominations based on a creed of belief, rather than a covenant, often have a hard time understanding that. They ask, “What do you mean you have no creed? What makes it religion? What do you *talk* about on Sunday mornings

I explain “covenantal faith” this way: Instead of sharing a creed, we share a vision. We hold together a vision of the beloved community, toward which we want to move. Our mission is what we are called to do in order to move toward that vision. And our

covenant is nothing more—and nothing less— than what we promise one another about how we will walk together in that mission. Our covenant is our promise to one another.

The “Bond of Union” which you recite together every week is your covenant. The Bond of Union is your promise to walk together in the freedom of the truth and in the spirit of love.

This is not a faith that floats around up in the clouds. It is found and forged in the places where we “live and struggle.”

Perhaps one of those words hits closer to home for you today than the other—*live* and *struggle*. In this room there are folks in many different places in their hearts: there are those whose spirits are light today, and those who arrive bearing the sadness of the world. Some are on the edge of adventure, beaming with energy from a new job, a new loved one, new understanding, or a new peace. While others gaze toward the past, and wonder where they will find the strength for another step. Some come today for communion. This may mean connecting through the rituals of worship, or it may be found in a simple conversation over coffee. *It doesn't have to be complex*. And there are others this morning who arrive in need of forgiveness, and wonder whether anyone could *really see* them and still invite them in. To all these seekers we hold out a shared vision. We say, yes. Come on in, and know you are not alone. We will not judge you for who you are, or tell you what we want God to want you to do. We will join in your celebrations, and help you in holding your sorrows. We will urge you toward wholeness, and ask only that you regard the sacred in others as we recognize it in you. Join us, everyone, because stand on the side of love.

God is no remote entity but abides both within us and between us, the very spirit of life that moves us to reverence and humility, while at the same time requiring the honor not of one right creed but of beloved community: the way our lives speak, as we walk with one another. And this really is walking—as in a *path*, a spiritual discipline we have not perfected but which demands that each of us continue to ask, what are we called to do now? Who has been welcomed? And who has not? This is the task I lift up to you: to look

at the person next to you, and the people outside of the congregation and ask: who has been welcomed? Then, we must open the doors.

In recent years, we have already become a bit more visible around issues of social justice. That is one of the successes I'm happy to claim for my time as UUA President. But, at heart, our faith is not about particular stands on particular issues, as important as those stands may be. You see, the BIG news we have to offer is liberal religion. "I never thought I'd find a church like this." "I never thought I would find a church where I didn't have to leave my intellect at the door." I never thought I'd find a church where my children could learn about religion based of values I actually support." You've heard these stories from folks who have found this congregation. I'll bet some of these stories are yours.

My story began at the age of 14 when my single mother dragged me, almost kicking and screaming, to First Unitarian in Cincinnati, Ohio. She felt I (and we) needed a religious home. I was a shy, bright, Black young man who, at 14, had far more religious answers than questions. What I found was a bi-racial congregation (long active in issues of racial justice in that border town) who welcomed all of me that I could bring. It was not that everyone in the congregation agreed with me. Far from it. But they let me know that both my certainties and my questions were welcome. The enormity of that gift for me cannot be overstated.

There are so many "out there" who yearn for what we find every week in our sanctuaries. We need to let them know we are here.

This impulse is right there in your name. The Unitarian Church of All Souls. Not some souls, but all souls.

Let us support the right of conscience by entering public consciousness.

"The most radical contribution religion can make to human living is that it enables people, to experience community as starkly as hunger..." People are hungry. You, and I,

and everyone around us, but we don't always recognize the thing we are hungry for. This morning let us offer one another, in this sanctuary and other sanctuaries, and spilling out into the streets, something more nourishing.

We walk together in the spirit of love.

Let us offer one another a chance to be "in the presence of someone or something intensely with us." An experience of that Mystery in our midst, that speaks across time and abides in community, offering sustenance for today and for all our days. As we move forward, let us promise one another that we will stand on the side of love.

So may it be.

Amen.