

Service
Sunday, April 6, 2008
Third Unitarian Church

Opening Words

Our great forebears and martyrs have said the church should never be like a bidder at an auction for popularity and profit. To heck with that! Just for *one* day, we put aside our scruples to support our ministries. The cost of becoming a minister: in the tens of thousands; the cost of a robe: hundreds; the chance to tell people what you think of them from the pulpit: priceless. Today I'll tell all of you some of what I know about the liberal faith—and I hope you'll buy it.

Opening Hymn #311, *Let It Be a Dance*

The Covenant

Love is the spirit of this Church, and service is its law.
This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace,
to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

Musical Response

From all that dwell below the skies, let words of love and
peace arise. Let songs of joy and praise be sung, through
every land, by every tongue.

“Time for All Ages” with **Stina Leone**

Singing the Children to the Classrooms

Go now in peace, go now in peace,
May the spirit of love surround you,
Everywhere, everywhere, you may go.

Reading

The following is a poem written for a Unitarian worship service by a ministerial colleague, the Reverend Charles Stephan. It's entitled, "Some Wishes For You."

"I wish for you a troubled heart at times
As woes of world and friend come close beside
And keep you sleepless.
I wish for you the thrill of knowing
Who you are,
Where you stand,
And why.
Especially why.
Not prosperity, but dreams I wish for you;
Not riches, but a sense of your own worth I wish
For you.
Not even long life, however proud we'd be to have it so.
But life that is crammed with living,
Hour by hour.
And love I wish for you;
May you give it frequently.
I wish for you solitude in the midst of company,
And a mind full of company within your quiet times.
Full today's I wish for you, and full tomorrows."

Spoken Meditation

Perhaps, if the minister who wrote this was being completely honest, he would have said, “and take of my time and counsel when you are in sorrow, or in crisis, but not *too much* of that time, for there are others I must see and you don’t want to be a burden now, do you?”

But otherwise, I agree with Charles Stephan: a life engaged with tension is a life more fully lived. A forester friend in Montana is busy keeping poachers and other villains out of a national park. She wrote in an e-mail last week, “I fear from my daughter in the Peace Corps, in Central Africa, and my grandson in Iraq. The walls of my cabin cannot contain my fears at night. But I have the consoling silence of the mountains here, and the meadow flowers that convert sunlight into purple and red.”

Emile Zola once said, “I’m not very concerned with beauty or perfection. . . . All I care about is life, struggle, intensity.” At times how I wish that were true—to be caught up with action and achievement, and to not whether the result is perfect. The perfect can be the enemy of the good!

Except some humans are not made that way. This is extreme, but Brahms threw out whole compositions, piano concertos, because they weren't in his eyes good enough. Progressive thought and principles are the result of action and reflection, of science applied to the human condition. And progressive religion is no less so, constantly evolving in a creative tension between thought and feeling, words and music, action and silence.

And may our church always stay, and ever evolve, in that creative tension. "I wish for you a troubled heart at times/ As woes of world and friend come close beside." The needs of the people we love change, and we are changed by them.

April 4th is a grim day in our history, and we have to remind generations that come after use what happened on that hotel balcony in 1968. Dr. King, before his martyrdom, marching with Memphis garbage workers, was a proponent of this creative tension: because he saw what activism could do to awaken the conscience of a quiet, quiescent nation. His "I've been to the mountaintop" sermon was, in my opinion, the 20th Century version of the sermon given at the Last Supper. King seemed eerily aware of his impending violent death.

And there is so much more it could yet do before his death is any way redeemed. We should be as unafraid to see it as we are to say it.

But for this moment, Emerson is right when he said, “I like the silent church, better than any preaching.” Right now, I wish you solitude in the midst of company, but not, like the poet says, not a solitude thinking of others. Let this be a moment free of tension and demands. Free of what others want from us, and from what we have to do heal the world. So many of us are either full of care, of constant motion. Do you remember “who you are, where you stand, and why?” Let this be a time of refreshment that gives not the weariness of living, but gives us life.

Musical Meditation: *I Remember You*

Offering Thoughts

Joyous vernal greetings to all of you, on a day when it’s finally pleasant enough, and the lion and the lamb don’t need to huddle together for warmth. Special greetings to our newcomers and guests! If you feel moved to do so, I invite you to introduce yourselves as you’d like so that we can greet you more warmly after the service.

But not to mix biblical metaphors too much, not only would we refrain from throwing the moneychangers out of the temple, we invite them to *stay* for the Talent Auction so they can raise the bidding! And so if you are new to TUC, come on downstairs to partake in the hidden treasures collected by our members.

Let's avoid what happened to a minister friend in Michigan last year. Only two people in his church of 250 bid on a sermon topic. In some bitterness a year later, He entitled the piece, "I Wouldn't Give Ten Cents For This Sermon—and Neither Did You."

Let's share our resources for the support of our ministries together, and notice how we take our collection *before* the sermon!

Offering: *I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter*

Sermon Hymn #103, For All the Saints

Reading

A pericope from the Scriptures, wherein the Gospel says of the Lord, "[He] will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left."³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me...drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?"

³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, ^{*} you did it to me.” ⁴¹

Sermon: “Knowing Some, Telling All”

Those of you who are long in Unitarian tenure—raise your hands! Do you remember how UU ministers used to give, annually or semi-annually, the “Question Box” sermon? This was, and is, a play on the reality that in Unitarians have more questions than answers about religion—and if you can’t see a lead up to a Unitarian joke sequence, you are in the wrong place!

For it is in the “Question Box” sermons you’d see the UU jokes, most of them stale: the old classics like, “What do you bring to the UU Bible Study class? A Bible and a pair of scissors,” or “How many UU’s does it take to change a light bulb? A committee with a quorum, and even then, the light bulb has to be asked if it *wants* to be changed.”

The “Question Box” sermons are not *always* tacky. Quite a few I’ve seen in the archives over at Meadville-Lombard, our seminary in Hyde Park, or at churches back East, are really quite good, to my eye. The best of them have a central theme, such as ‘the nature of God,’ or ‘are good and evil ever absolute?’

In my view, what UU *wouldn't* want to hear a thoughtful answer to questions like these—if only to argue during the sermon talk back.

Some of the questions in this sermon are mine. Some are yours, with my paraphrase. Why am I doing this now, you ask. I have been here almost five years. [For a Humanist, that's like 15.] It's close the start of my sabbatical leave from Third Church, which will start on August 1st and end the first week of December 2008. In spending time with you, I've picked up on your deepest concerns, like politics, your philosophies of life, your worries—and did I mention politics?

And so it is a good time to take stock, look at where we've been together, and where we can be in the near and even distant future.

Here's the first question: “Hey Brian,” someone asked last month, “What's the most important things you've learned since you've been at Third Church?” The answer: “We've only got twenty minutes.” A minister friend of long tenure here in Chicago asked me last week, “*Now* do you understand?” Only now can I answer the question asked of me at my installation here, which was like a wedding vow—when I said, “I do!”

There are astounding personal stories in every congregation, even from folks who look otherwise unremarkable. Every church is unique in its own way.

This is what I have learned: what distinguishes Third from other churches I've seen are in two areas: first, the extent to which some of us have risked personal safety in fighting for a principle, for a more just world as they imagined it, and where so many folks really *want* cross-cultural understanding.

Black-white relations are a big part of it, certainly, but that's not all. A precious reality is that as imperfect as our efforts are, and as I am, there is sincere interest to understand other cultures and peoples so as not to oppress them.

Few places are as well positioned as Third to make interracial inroads on social injustice. This is our great legacy; it remains a great opportunity. It is the single most important challenge of my lifetime in the ministry. But more on that later.

Question two: "That hymn we just sang—why do you use it so much?" It's not for nothing Andrene Kaufman and E.T. Buehrer called what's on our walls the "Saints of Liberalism." Our newcomers don't know them, but I think of Peg Sering, Harry Gaynor, Keith Gregg, Ken Wilz—longtime members, activists in their own way, now gone from this earthly pale—of Rownena Mann and Ed Wilson, my predecessors, and also of those we know who are near the end of their lives of how, any time we sing this great anthem, how we will remember them. I can't help but tear up every time we sing it. This is why.

Next question: “You like baseball, and you use poems in the service. But do you have a poem that combines baseball and religion?” I finally found one I like, and it goes,

“And on the ninth day, God
In His infinite playfulness
Grass green grass, sky blue sky,
Separated the infield from the outfield,
Formed a skin of clay,
Assigned bases of safety
On cardinal points of the compass
Circling the mountain of deliverance,
Fashioned a wandering moon
From a horse, a string and a gum tree,
Tempered weapons of ash,
Made gloves from the golden skin of sacrificial bulls,
Set stars alight in the Milky Way,
Divided the descendants of Cain and Abel into contenders,
Declared time out, time in, stepped back,
And thundered over all of creation:

"Play ball!"

It's by Phillip Burnham

I think we all need a metaphor to describe how to understand belief, and non-belief, in God. You have yours, mine was baseball. Listen up, Cub fans! Lou Pinella came out of the dugout at Wrigley this week and saw his shadow, which means another year without a pennant.

Bart Giamatti, former president of Yale and baseball commissioner made it clear for me when we wrote that the game was designed to break our hearts. “Of course,” he writes, “there are those who learn after the first few times. They grow out of sports. And there are others who were born with the wisdom to know that nothing lasts. These are the truly tough among us, the ones who can live without illusion, or without even the hope of illusion. I am not that grown-up or up-to-date. I am a simpler creature, tied to more primitive patterns and cycles. I need to think something lasts forever, and it might as well be that state of being that is a game; it might as well be that, in a green field, in the sun.”

I would so like to believe, but why, God, if you can hear this, why? We’re human, not miniature divines; on our own to make reality more bearable to save our selves from ruin.

Question three: “Can we save ourselves from this ruin?”
Yes, we can. I agree with the ancient Hasidic rabbi who said, “If we can’t improve, than what is tomorrow for?”

For the longer version of this answer, please attend our “Celebrations of Life” in the future. To disagree with those answers, visit my new blog on the church Web site, and I’ll be happy to tell you, lovingly, where you’re wrong.

Question four: “What’s up with your hair, or lack thereof?” If you really don’t like it short, all I can say is that with an opening bid of fifty dollars, all proceeds to the church, I don’t *have* to look like a drill sergeant--for a year!

Five: “Can I send you things to read, in case you missed them?” Certainly! There’s a long history here of congregants sending clippings or books to the minister. I love looking in our archives! One letter I saw last week was from 1955. A woman sent Dr. Buehrer a clipping about a conference in Sweden about women elected to high office. She said, “Imagine! We won’t see a woman President in this country until Hell freezes over,” and Dr. Buehrer replied, “Well, it just might happen before I die, and in case we do, I’m saving my earmuffs.”

A lot of you send me reading material. Our Minister Emeritus said a few years ago at a memorial service that the artist and actor Rolf Sandberg just about wrote his sermons for him. I thought afterwards that this did two things: one, saved the minister from research, and two, he could blame Rolf if the sermons weren’t any good!

But I love it when you send me things to read! This cuts down the distance from pulpit to pew, and lets me know what you think matters!

Just this week, two people sent me snippets—the first, of NPR did on April 1, 1992: they said Richard Nixon was running for president again. It came on *Talk of the Nation* and included excerpts of Nixon's speech announcing his candidacy, in which he said, "I didn't do anything wrong, and I won't do it again." It also had analysis from real political experts.

In the second half of the show, they said it was a practical joke, and that Rich Little had impersonated Nixon. The network was deluged with calls. Some were happy that Nixon, at age 79, was running again.

Last month, someone else sent me a piece from Anderson Cooper's new book. In it, he talks about how his father, near death at the hospital, told the nurses he was a Unitarian on the admittance sheet under "faith preferences." Why, his son asked. "Because," this lifelong Baptist said, "no one knows what the hell a Unitarian is, and then they don't send a minister to your bed."

This week, someone sent me this about a young man who went into the Marines in 1961, and then re-upped for a stint in the Navy. He was valedictorian in corpsman school, became a cardiopulmonary technician.

He worked at Bethesda Naval Hospital, presumably when it was well-staffed, and clean, and helped care for Lyndon Johnson after his 1966 surgery. When he left in 1967, the White House awarded him three letters of commendation. What's more, he got this high not long after the Marines and Navy began to become integrated.

He did this not long before the current Vice President used deferments to stay out of Vietnam, and the current President was in the Alabama Air National Guard, helping on political campaigns on his off-weekends.

Who's the man? The supposed 'America hater' Jeremiah Wright of Trinity Church. Speaking of which: what's the super patriot Bill O'Reilly's military service look like? Can anyone send me *that* story?

Next to last question: "You have a newcomers class starting tomorrow night. What are you going to do with them?" One thing, and one thing only: to have Tim and Kit order pizza, because I'll be on the run all day and starving when I get there! After that, we'll review some UU history, listen to their religious stories, and get their ideas on where they are theologically.

That's fine, and then I'll tell them what I'm about to tell you: that if they want to be committed members, they should expect to get their hands dirty doing the work of the church; that it is their responsibility to attend to their spiritual and philosophical growth, and they should demand of us that we help them. And if we don't, there are other places to be.

That being a member here requires a financial commitment, and that it isn't a light one, because people vote with their wallets. But they should never confuse money with the phrase, "getting my way all the time." If so, they should be here on Sunday mornings. That if they disagree with somebody here disagreeably, they will be called on it. Lastly, that growth isn't another 25 people that look *exactly* like them. ***We're going to grow here—got it: going to grow here:*** for we are not a small social club with a lecture series. We're a religious institution, and *they* exist to inspire and comfort, and to fight the causes that the mediocre, the distracted and the bored overlook: to prove just as Paul Robeson sang: that this **is** a land of wealth and beauty, with enough for all to share!

Next: what do I want for our newbies?

The thrill of knowing

Who they are,

Where they stand,

And why.

Especially why.

A life that is crammed with living,

Hour by hour.

And love I wish for them;

May they give it frequently.

And if they have that, may they share that love and vision with me, because I need as much as anyone else!

The last question: “When you think of ministry, what’s the phrase you think of? “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me...drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,^{*} you did it to me.” The reading this morning, from the Gospels. I am not saying I’m in any way perfect, or that I do this all the time. But this is what I’m aiming for. And when we see each other through the vicissitudes of life, and become better able to be a real force for good in Austin, it’s a cause worth living for to the point of death, the most of us, the least of us.

There: I said it: we’ll get bigger only to become better. That’s only some of what I know, but I told all of you. What’s tomorrow for? To tell you, again, and again, even in hard times, for love is a repetitive, caressing language: tension is creative, but so is love. And that’s all—for now.

Closing Hymn #288, *All Are Architects*

Closing Words

Zola said, “I don’t know about you, but I am here to live out loud.” If it makes this world better, why not!

Postlude: *Pennsylvania 6-5000*