

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
The Business of the Church
March 27, 2011

Prelude

Chalice Lighting

We light this candle

For the light of truth and reason

For the warmth of love and friendship

For the flame of strength and action

And for the vision of tolerance and justice.

Opening Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able in our opening hymn No. 1059 and hymn of the month “May Your Life be as a Song”

Announcements

John Pepper

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here. (Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, please pick up one of our application forms also located on the table and put it in the offering plate or look it over and turn it in when you feel ready.

Next week I'll be back and we will honor the UUSC's Justice Sunday and the following week Bob Peake will speak on the Gnostic Gospels.

Our special collection this month is for the Friends of the Huntsville Public Library.

Today is potluck Sunday, so please plan to stay if you can.

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

Opening Words

John Pepper

Come in from the cold:

Make yourself a religious home, if only for these brief moments – in spite of time, which shall soon bear us away from one another.

Make this a family.

Treat us as your own:

Make us a religious family – if only in this space, which we make sacred by our connections here and beyond.

Come on in.

Make yourself a home.

Sing and love life.

Rejoice Together, p2, Andrew Backus

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Hymn

John Pepper

Please join me standing as you are able singing hymn No. 113 “Where is Our Holy Church.”

Joys and Concerns

John Pepper

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

Offertory Statement

Offertory Music

Story for All Ages – “Heaven and Hell” a tale from China

Readings

“Our Responsibility in Society” by James Luther Adams

We of the Free Church tradition should never forget, or permit our contemporaries to forget, that the decisive resistance to authoritarianism in both church and state, and the beginning of modern democracy, appeared first in the church and not in the political order.

The churches of the left wing of the Reformation held that the churches of the right wing had effected only half a reformation. They gave to Pentecost a new and extended meaning. They demanded a church in which every member, under the power of the Spirit, would have the privilege and the responsibility of interpreting the Gospel and also of assisting to determine the policy of the church. The new church was to make way for a radical laity – that is, for the priesthood and the prophethood of all believers.

Out of this rediscovery of the doctrine of the Spirit came the principles of Independency: local autonomy, free discussion, the rejection of coercion and of the ideal of uniformity, the protection of minorities, and the separation of church and state.

Power and responsibility were to be dispersed.

In a fashion not unlike that of the primitive church, the doctrine of the Spirit became the sanction for a new kind of social organization and of social responsibility. A new church was born, and with it a new age.

“Theologies of Membership” from the *UUA Commission on Appraisal*

The emphasis of this text is on building a fellowship based on equality, unity, and mutuality. The church that Paul urges the Corinthians toward is one in which individual persons become part of something greater. It is not a place one would join simply in order to “find one’s self.” A family shopping for the church with the most benefits would not find this one to their liking.

As Bernard Jones put it, “It is clear that the church was not an organization that an individual went along to join as he might make an application to join a golf club. It was an ‘ecclesia’ – a group of people called...”

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A Calling implies the expectation of a serious and transforming relationship. People called to membership take that membership seriously.

A church built on equality, unity, and mutuality will appeal to those who are looking for a repository for their particular gifts and talents, who are looking for a place to grow beyond their own particular perspectives. It is also a church that will appeal to people who are looking for a way to live out their faith in the larger community.

It is a church that celebrates the whole that is so much more than the sum of the parts that welcomes and encourages all comers to be part of an organic entity that stretches well beyond the vision or intent of any one individual leader. It is a church where “I can take care of myself” is replaced by “We can and will take care of each other.”

Prayer

John Pepper

Please join me now in a time of quiet reflection. Close your eyes, look out the window, center yourself in whatever way feels right for you. (Pause)

In this familiar place, listen: to the sounds of breathing, creaking chairs, shuffling feet, clearing throats, and sighing all around.

Know that each breath, movement, the glance meant for you or intercepted holds a life within it. These are signs that we choose to be in this company, have things to say to each other, things not yet said but in each other's presence, still trembling behind our hearts' doors, these doors closed but unlocked, each silent thing waiting on the threshold between unknowing and knowing, between being hidden and being known.

Find the silence among these people and listen to it all – breathing, sighs, movement, holding back – hear the tears that have not yet reached their eyes, perhaps they are your own, hear also the laughter building deep where joy abides despite everything.

Listen: rejoice. (Pause) And say Amen and Namaste!

Welcome: A UU Primer, p16-7, Barbara Pescan

Sermon – *The Business of the Church*

This sermon has been brewing for quite some time. Over the years, I have been a member of several churches and an active volunteer in several non-profit organizations. On many occasions within those organizations, there were instances where internal discussions led to statements of how best to run the organization. A common refrain has been that they needed to “run like a business.”

For a variety of reasons, most of which I will share with you, that statement has always irritated me. Generally, however, I have kept my thoughts and feelings to myself – at least up until now.

Yes, in some obvious ways a church must share some familiar practices with the business world. A church needs to balance its books, spend its resources prudently, and be accountable to its members. However, after these and a few other common sense practices, the real similarities to a business, mostly end, or at least they do for me. Conrad Wright clearly articulates the situation where he says:

“In actuality, our local religious communities function in two spheres, operating out of two different value systems, which may be in tension one with the other. One of these is the sphere of the church, made up of a covenanted body of worshippers. The other is the sphere of the corporation established by law, with power to hold property for religious, educational, and philanthropic purposes. The two are not the same

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thing, even though the same persons may participate in both, and no formal distinction is made between subscribing to the covenant of the church and signing the bylaws of the legal body corporate.”

In my mind, our challenge as part of a religious community is to understand and respect the tensions mentioned by Wright and that exist between both systems. However, we must undertake this challenge while remaining true to the larger purpose that brings us together, and that purpose, rather simplistically stated, is to form a covenant community. Exactly what that “covenant” means, is left up to you.

For me, the tensions are obvious, especially on the business side of the equation. In fact, I have several biases on the subject of business and in all honesty, you could describe me as a business cynic or critic.

I worked in private industry as an engineer and manager for twenty-two years. During that time, I went through one attempted hostile takeover, two corporate mergers, one corporate spin-off, numerous early retirement events, countless downsizings, outsourcings and outright layoffs, a couple of environmental catastrophes, and sadly a few safety disasters that led to both death and injury. The last layoff I was involved in led me to voluntarily jump ship and head to the dark side, or at least that is what my friends in industry call it. You see I now work for the federal regulator with delegated safety authority over the industry I left.

Based on my experiences, I sincerely doubt churches should adopt any of the common business practices I just mentioned. It’s hard for me to imagine outsourcing our Religious Education programs, undertaking a hostile takeover of First UU downtown, or promoting early retirement practices. That does not make sense for us.

Quite simply the purpose of the business world is to make money – theoretically for the stockholders, but primarily for management. Similarly, the purpose of the federal agency I now work for is to help ensure pipeline safety for the public.

Both have very different missions and both operate with some theoretically similar underlying principles, but my agency is not run like a business and in my opinion, where it is, we have compromised safety.

Ultimately, every organization wants to be a success but the definition of success varies from organization to organization. Generally, in the business world success comes down to the amount of profit generated. Sometimes success is masked by other metrics such as selling the most widgets or being the biggest company doing what you do. But at the end of the day, it does not matter if you sell the most widgets or if you are the biggest widget maker, what matters is that you make the most money per widget and sometimes the way that is accomplished may not be very ethical.

Success in a church means something entirely different. Success often depends on your form of governance. In that case, success could be defined by a hierarchy above you and the messages they communicate to you. Success could be defined by how you implement your Mission or your purpose as a church. Finally, you as a covenanted body of people with individual and group needs could determine your own definition of success.

The three rather broad areas I have just mentioned, Church Governance, Mission, and Member Needs are all intimately related one with each other. Each affects the other and success, however that is ultimately defined, depends on how all of these components work together.

So let’s briefly look at each of these three broad areas of church life.

Success is often determined by the church structure, or to get back in line with my business theme, the business model. For churches, the controlling structure or governance of the church ultimately drives the business model. So in general, what are the different controlling structures of churches? If we are not

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aware of the differences from church to church, when we look around and try to assess ourselves, and even our success, against others in our community, we may be comparing apples to oranges.

In general, there are only three basic forms of church governance. Each form has a very different affect on the potential missions for each of their individual churches and the potential for meeting the needs of the people within those churches.

The Episcopal form of governance has a hierarchy that controls every parish or district. The puritans actually rebelled against this form of church governance because it resembled monarchical control with a centralized authority. The three main representatives of this form of governance are the Catholic, Episcopal, and Methodist Churches. This particular grouping of churches is not surprising given that the Episcopal Church split off from the Catholic Church and the Methodist Church came out of the Episcopal Church. In this system, the approved beliefs and many activities are controlled from the authoritarian structure above and the actual members of the church have little input.

Another major issue with the Episcopal form of governance is that the larger church typically owns all of the individual church properties. The reality of this aspect of their form of governance is playing out right now in the news. In the Episcopal Church U.S.A, the hierarchy decided for everyone that ordaining gays and lesbians was acceptable.

Those who disagree essentially have no option but to accept the situation or leave the church, but leaving can have rather grave consequences.

If a single church wants to pull away from the larger church, they can leave but they cannot take their church building and properties with them. The properties belong to the larger church system and not to the people. Over the last two centuries, there have been several legal challenges regarding church property that have gone all the way to the Supreme Court, and consistently the Court has ruled in favor of the larger church body that holds the deeds to the properties, and against the people who wanted the property.

With regard to a similar issue in the United Methodist Church, their governing body has ruled that churches cannot perform holy unions for gays and lesbians. Individual churches have few rights of appeal and members can either accept the situation or leave the United Methodist Church.

The second form of governance is known as Presbyterian and the Presbyterians are naturally the most visible member of the churches within this particular grouping. For them, the controlling authority is made up of Deacons and Ministers and they direct much of what goes on in individual churches. For instance, individual churches cannot hire just anyone they choose as their pastor. After a local church makes a ministerial hiring decision, the final approval is left up to the local Presbyter.

Recently a friend of mine at a Presbyterian church in Houston worked tirelessly on her ministerial search committee looking for a new minister. They interviewed several candidates, listened to many sermons, wined and dined the final candidates, and ultimately made a decision on one individual. The request for approval was submitted to the Presbyter and it rejected their selection. My friend and her committee had no choice but to go through the whole process over again.

The third form of governance is known as congregational and it is truly a democratic form of church governance. Congregational churches are autonomous controlling whom they ordain, whom they hire as ministers, and how they spend their money.

UU churches are congregational churches just as are the Baptist churches and many other independent churches. Congregational churches govern themselves, and the specific church governance is left up to the congregation.

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Common beliefs are generally shared by the members of the congregation and affiliations with associations are left up to the individual churches. For instance, UU churches do not have to agree with the positions or policies of the UUA,

just as Southern Baptist Churches do not have to agree with the positions or the policies of the Southern Baptist Convention. The Southern Baptist Convention may chastise an affiliate church for a perceived infraction, but they have no actual power over that affiliate church. The UUA can beg affiliate churches to become Welcoming Congregations, but they cannot make one go through the process.

The examples I have been providing reinforce the fact that UU churches function democratically. Even our statement of Principles and Purposes reinforces this practice within our churches where we affirm, “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

In my first reading this morning, written by James Luther Adams, one of the UU world’s icons of the 20th century, Adams reminded us of our heritage with regard to the history and practice of the democratic process. Free Churches helped initiate that democratic process. Although we as a country push the democratic process, obviously not all churches within the country practice that concept and I know of no businesses that do.

The tension is just too great for businesses to practice democratic processes and businesses and most societal institutions default to other types of governance.

Given all of this information, there is no doubt that our system of church governance is more in line with my own personal beliefs, as opposed to the other two forms of church governance. I like the democratic process and I believe it is a wonderful means of implementing a shared mission.

When I entered the UU world, the thing that initially caught my attention was the statement of principles. Those principles are not a creed. They are statements that help us form the basis of a belief system that we can stand upon and use to anchor our specific missions, and yes I said missions, plural.

We typically do not have only one mission, there are numerous missions or tasks we give to ourselves that are constantly morphing and changing, both growing and contracting, as our collective energies are devoted to and withdrawn from the tasks we deem of value within our individual churches. That is as it should be. We do not live in a static world so why would we expect our churches to be static?

So, in my perfect world, our missions are an outgrowth of our shared beliefs and needs. This is where we differ greatly from other churches and religions.

Their missions are often defined for them by their hierarchies and their creeds, while our missions are defined both individually and collectively within our congregations. Regardless of what our missions are, they are vastly removed from the world of business.

Once again, the business world operates to make a profit. They may have Mission Statements but their overriding goal is simply to make money. One measure of their success is often determined by their Return on Investment. Many companies will not enter into new business ventures unless their return on investment is above 10, 15, even 20 percent of their initial investment.

How could we possibly measure a return on investment if there was a specific and required metric? Would we only participate in OWL, our sex education program for kids and teens, if we could guarantee a 20% reduction in sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancies? The fact is we will never know or be able to measure the true benefits achieved by this very valuable program.

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Would we only participate in Guest at Your Table if we could quantify the benefits achieved by the beneficiaries of those monies? Would we only support a choir that generates sufficient income through supplemental concerts? The answers to all of these rather silly questions are “of course not.”

We simply cannot measure most of the activities or missions we undertake. Our Mission Statements, if we choose to have one, should truly reflect who we are and how we intend to express that belief.

Out of mission comes the third and final area I will explore with you this morning and that area relates specifically to member needs.

But before we explore our own UU needs, let’s backtrack and reflect a little on other religious systems and their stated needs. In my opinion the defining need of most Christian religions, is the personal salvation Christ offers to the community of members gathered to celebrate his life and his presence. All other needs and missions are secondary to the primary purpose of salvation. The Universalist component of our tradition abolished the need for any worry related to salvation.

Thus, we UUs are left with the obligation to define our own needs and out of those needs, we determine exactly where we will use our missional energies. In this one particular area, I do believe the business world offers some wonderful tools to help us define our collective needs.

For example, architects employ specific guidelines that help them define space requirements for the buildings and spaces they design for their customers. Emerson UU Church recently went through a process with architects when developing the design of the new addition to the current facility.

The process that helped define the building needs could be a major component of a more expansive process that helps define the broad range of member needs and the actions that grow out of those needs. Those needs often include an awareness of the youngest members of our communities, the infants, and an awareness of the variety of needs from the remaining members of the community.

Those needs include both internal ones, like physical comfort and education, and extend outward from the church to include social action needs of both the immediate community and the world at large.

And member needs change, but the expectation that we will attempt to honor those needs does not change. Our challenge is to meet as many needs as possible. Another challenge, however, is to avoid placing too much focus on any one group within the church and their particular wants and desires.

We must rise above the tired old axiom, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease,” and instead pay attention to all the wheels. We simply cannot focus all of our energies on any one group to the exclusion of all others. Balance and understanding are absolutely essential if we hope to work together as a covenant community.

The UUA has written materials that articulate the situation much better than I and they say:

“Covenant is the central unifying promise or commitment that binds a religious community together in voluntary loyalty. It grows from an affirmation of shared needs, values, purposes, and principles.

As such it is rooted in the past, in the tradition of the congregation, and reflects the embodiment of the promise through history. It is a promise made in the present, with implications for the future.”

James Luther Adams did an even better job of describing the situation. He provides the heart of my concluding thoughts and they come from the same essay I read from earlier. He wrote these words in 1953, when the UU world was very different. Please keep that in mind as you listen. He says:

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“It is just here, then, that we encounter our peculiar responsibility in society, the responsibility to offer a church in which there is an explicit faith in the community-forming power of God, a practice of the disciplines of liberty, an eliciting of the participation of our own membership in creative fellowship.

From such a fellowship, concerned to extend the community in which all persons may be encouraged to make their own contribution, our members can meet their social responsibilities by expressing in the other areas of life – in the state, the family, the school, the voluntary association, and industry – the response to the love that will not let us go. This movement of the patterns of responsibility from the church to these other areas of life, as we have seen, has taken place since the very beginning of our Free Christianity.

It is our social responsibility to maintain and extend this movement in face of human needs for health and shelter and for a world that crosses the lines of race and class and nation so that all may enjoy their God-given dignity and responsibility in a world in which everyone can make a contribution. If we do not participate in groups that work deliberately for these ends, we are ourselves irresponsible; we are dominated underlings.

Here, then, is the vocation placed upon us by the promise of old, “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.” For us who bear the heritage of Free Christianity, the promise draws and binds us together. The promise is ultimately not one that we make to ourselves. It is one that we receive in faith. Yet it is also a promise whose fulfillment is contingent upon our response in responsibility.

In our time of troubles, the problems are vast in their dimensions. But they were vast also in the birth period of the primitive church and in the birth period of our Free Churches. To cringe in despair of ourselves is to despair of the divine promise.

It is to forget that responsibility is response to a Spirit that is given to us – to the light that has shone and that still shines in the darkness.”

So in conclusion, we are not a business; we are something much much more. We should take the best from the business world and employ it where appropriate, all the while recognizing the inherent tensions between the business and religious worlds. We are the direct descendents of the original religious democratic processes that came to life out of the Reformation and you now voluntarily come together for some larger purpose. In the final analysis, we are part of a covenant community.

It is up to us to define and implement that covenant, one with another, and with the community and world within which we live and love.

My hope and my prayer for our community and our church, is that we will thoughtfully establish, articulate, and implement our covenant, one with another, and that we will always remember and honor that covenant as we live and share our lives together in this beautiful community we call home.

Namaste!

Sermon Response

Closing Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 108 “My Life Flows On” and remain standing for our Benediction.

Benediction

John Pepper

I say ours is a story of faith and hope and love. I say it is our need for one another that binds us together, that brings us limping and laughing into relationships and keeps us at it when we otherwise might despair at

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the fix we are in. I say it is the holy we need, the eternal beyond our comprehension, and one place we can find it is here, working and worshipping together. And I say there is a transcendent value worthy of our loyalty, upon which we may set our hearts, and its divine manifestation is love.

Rejoice Together, p126, Elizabeth Tarbox

Extinguish the Chalice

Postlude