

Everybody's Got a Hungry Heart

© Rev. Carolyn Price
Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula
Association Sunday
October 2007

What Saints?

A Story for Association Sunday

The song we just sang is called “For all the Saints”. Now some people think of saints as famous people, men or women who did amazing things, miracles and all, which made them incredibly well known. They were often people who were thought to be holy – or divine – touched by god in some special way. You might know about St. Christopher, the saint of safe journeys; or St. Francis, the patron saint of animals.

In the song we sang, *For All the Saints*, it wasn't famous people in our history we were singing about. It was ordinary men and women and youth, like you and me, and them. Those people made our religion and kept it alive and strong, even when it was dangerous. Some of our saints have their names on the windows of this church, because they committed themselves – they promised each other, and the people they knew would come to this valley to live, and who would want a Universalist church here, to build this beautiful building. And they did a really good job. That's why it's still here, almost 117 years later.

We owe those people our thanks. It's not like they did miracles – we're not too big on believing in miracles around here. But they did a really good job. And we do believe that together, people can do amazing things, and make the world a better place.

Today, all across America, UU churches are celebrating Unitarian Universalism. It's called Association Sunday and on this day we remember that there are over 1000 churches like ours – Unitarian Universalist. And we remember that the saints of our tradition – are those regular men and

women and children – like us – who helped to build this free religion. And we think about how, now we are the ones who need to make sure our church stays strong and alive. Now, we are the saints.

This church was Universalist before it was Unitarian Universalist – before the two groups merged. And what was important to the Universalists was love. They believed that god’s love was so big, and so great, that no one, *no one* would ever be left out of that love. It was a beautiful message. I think it still is. You might remember this sometimes when we sing you out, to your RE classes, and we say:

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

Before this morning’s sermon, I would like to do a reprise of the hymn we sang to begin this morning, *Come, Come Whoever You are*. Let’s sing it, remaining seated, once together quietly, a capella. . .

Do you remember when you first entered the doors of a Unitarian or a Universalist, or a Unitarian Universalist congregation?

Did you come as a wanderer, with a hungry heart? Did you come to worship, wanting to find and pay give homage to that which matters most, that which is most worthy of human awe and attention? Did you come because you were born here, into this community that celebrated god’s love for *all* people, and from the beginning, you knew that meant you, too?

Or did you come later, having left another church, the one you grew up in – and did you love that leaving? Were you a “lover of leaving” because that early religious experience was mostly *a caravan of despair* for you, a time of difficulty, perhaps due to doctrine and dogma?

Had you been hurt by organized religion? And, though it was later, much later, did you come here seeking and afraid? Even so, was your heart still hungry?

And, in the final line of the Rumi poem which inspired this song, because of your background or your life or the times, because of all this, or more, had you broken your vows 1000 times, and not lived as your best self ... not grown into who you'd hoped to become ... even as you heard them singing, still singing, from somewhere far away *Come, Come, whoever you are...*

Had you never been in a church in your whole life, or never into one that you thought you might want to belong to? Were you what they call "the un-churched", those without a religious past, not sure why you would want this, and yet with a yearning, a yearning for something to nurture your spirit, to feed your heart? Because in the quiet and in your dreams, you couldn't help but hear that singing, low and beating in the distance, *come, yet again come ...*

And when you came did you find a community for your whole self, a place where you could join that ancient religious calling, the one that has sounded since human life began, for *tikkun olam* – from the Judaic command - to *heal the world*. Is this why you came, though you couldn't have explained it; is this why the song would not be denied?

Most of all, do you remember how it felt to find this faith, so open and affirming, kind and welcoming, and to realize that it had a place for you, with all your difference, your despair, your doubt, and your desire?

Do you remember how the song seemed to come from far away and yet was as close as breathing, a calling that would not be stilled: *come, come...*

Do you remember being glad? Did your heart sing? Did fear fade into the music, and your loneliness slip away into the welcoming arms of this community?

Did you rejoice and give thanks?

Do you remembering thinking, like I did, *where has this religion been my whole life, and why didn't I know about it? Why didn't I know? ...*

I want you to remember some of this, even if you've never known it before. Because this week, in Time Magazine, the unprecedented occurred, in the form of a full page advertisement for the Unitarian Universalist faith. This is part of a long range plan of the Association of UU Congregations to grow our denomination, to make sure that everyone, everyone, hears our song, knows our voice of welcome - be they wanderer, worshipper, or lover of leaving. For a long time we thought people would just find us; after all, we did. And it was Time Magazine itself that not so many years ago did an article on religion and the baby boomers, and predicted that Unitarian Universalism was the faith tradition most poised to grow, to be the choice of so many of that vast population of boomers. This did not happen. In fact, our membership today is by and large the same as it was when the Universalists and the Unitarians merged in 1961. This is true even though, when asked, Unitarian Universalism is the third most named religion in the United States.

Further, as time goes by, and the climate of the world, especially in this country, grows increasingly hostile to open minded religions like ours, we have come to see that more of a welcome, more of a song is needed if people are to hear our message and to find their way to our doors, and to stay. And this - the staying - merits our strongest, most passionate voices. For it is one thing to walk in the door, and those of you who did that here - by far the majority of you - I ask you to remember how it felt to come in the first time. I ask you to remember your hesitation, your uncertainty, perhaps your fear. I ask you to remember what it was like to not know this group - to sort of, somehow, want to know them, but not yet to have that privilege.

One of the world's best teachers, and wisest rebels with a cause, Jesus of Nazareth taught that the spiritual practice of welcoming the stranger, and offering kindness and hospitality to him or her was more important than any belief, and outshone any doctrine or commandment.

The ads which will go in Time Magazine will be varied; I do not particularly like this first one, as it can too easily be interpreted to offend the traditionally religious. But I do like the slogan which runs across the

top of every ad, the tag-line that proclaims the mission of our faith: *Nurture Your Spirit. Help heal our world.* Nurture your spirit. Help heal our world.

How much our spirits need to be nurtured at a time like this. How much we need to remember that in a world rife with war and the destruction of the planet, that our song will not be stilled – the song of belonging, of community, of sanctuary and of hope. All religions sing of course – but this song – our song – is different. We honor all people as children of god. We know the way to find peace is to be peace, across divide, across difference. We know now, finally, that reason and compassion are not forces forever in conflict for power, but that both the rational and the emotional human endowments are needed to create a healthy life, and a better world for all. This is our song, and our best hope.

Listen to a story my friend and colleague told of a couple who found their way to his church. They were an older couple, both women, who had been together for a long time. But they had never belonged to any religion, as they feared the religions of their childhood would condemn them. Still, they found their way to a UU church, and the good people there gave them welcome. They invited them back and made a place for them in the life of that community. The couple went to the minister and spoke with him. They wanted, after all these years, they said, to be united in marriage – in a ceremony of union – and they wanted to do that in this church, they said, where they had found a home – where before they thought there would never be one. So they met with him over a period of several weeks to plan the ceremony, and they invited their friends and family.

And then one day, not long before the ceremony, one of the women took the minister aside after the service. “What you don’t know,” she told him, “is that my partner is dying of cancer.” Seeing the surprise and sadness on the minister’s face, she continued, “but at least”, she said, “she will die knowing that our relationship is sanctioned by a church. She will die knowing that we found this loving community, when we never before believed that we could find a religious home, and we were made welcome. And she will die knowing that we belong here, that her life, our life, is blessed.”

And it is blessed. We bless it, by being a part of the Unitarian Universalist movement, which affirms the goodness of every person, even as it emphasizes our interconnectedness to all life. We bless it by our presence, by the song we make together as a community of faith. But remember – for that couple, for each of those couples who find us, there are thousands more who need us. To reach them, we need to grow.

I think a question which lies before us at this very moment is do we want to grow this church? DO we want to do what it takes to bring people in, knowing that they need us, but also that in growing we will change. I know some of you want this – Jim Vernon and Doris have been paying for ads in the newspapers because they vehemently believe in growth. They want to make sure it is here another 117 years from now, for the people of this valley and across Ventura county who need such a home, who seek, in the open, rational and heartfelt faith of Unitarian Universalism – to nurture their spirits and to help heal our world.

I want to say a word here – I don't believe we need to grow, not for the numbers, not even for the sake of growth itself, or survival. We are, and I hesitate to put it this way, "well endowed". We are financially sound, in many senses. Probably, we could keep going at the rate we are for a long time. But is this what we want? What you want? Do you want to remain as you are, or do you want to raise your voices, to begin that song, singing out again and anew:

*Come, come, whoever you are ...
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving;
Ours is no caravan of despair,
Come, yet again come.
Though you've broken your vows 1000 times,
Come yet again come.*

Can you already hear yourself singing out to a world in need, singing of this faith, which has bid you welcome, has given you a home?

I am going to get personal for a minute . In order to become a minister I committed myself to intensive schooling and training. Much was asked of me during this time; more than I could have ever imagined. For

three and a half years I drove weekly, sometimes twice a week, to Claremont to earn a Master's of Divinity degree. I served a UU congregation for two years as their Intern Minister. For four months I worked for forty hours each week with mentally ill and addicted veterans at the VA Hospital in Loma Linda as a Chaplain, a spiritual helper to those broken men and women. Not content with the traditional bent of Claremont, I flew to Chicago to stay weeks at a time, half a dozen times, including in January when it is colder than any native Californian even has clothing for, to study theology and preaching and social action there, in that Unitarian Universalist Mecca of learning and practice called Meadville/Lombard.

I knew from the beginning that to follow this call to become a professional in our faith would not be easy. I began seminary the day after my twin sister's memorial service. Two weeks later, the horror of Sept. 11th broke open the heart of the world, and broke open again my grieving soul. The following year my long term marriage fell to bitter pieces. To achieve this schooling, I incurred a mountain of debt, most of which I still carry. I tell you this not to evoke your sympathy, but to make clear that my decision to devote the rest of my life to the professional ministry of our faith was forged not by simple, finite steps, but by fire and tears. I say this only, and I do mean only, to share with you the passion of my vision of Unitarian Universalism as a force for good in the world, as a *growing force* for good in the world. I say this, and most of you have sensed it, even without my telling, so that you know there is nothing, nothing I would not do for this faith, and for its people. This includes every single one of you. My calling to our ministry is my heartsong, my great, great privilege and my deepest joy. Listen to these words, which marked my ordination:

When you heard that voice and
knew finally it called for you
and what it was saying – where
were you? Were you in the shower
wet, and soapy, or chopping cabbage
late for dinner? Were you planting radish

seeds or seeking one lost sock? Maybe
wiping handprints off a window
or coaxing words into a sentence.
Or coming upon a hyacinth or one last No.
Where were you when you heard that ancient
Voice, and did Yes get born right then
And did you weep? Had it called you since
before you even *were* and when you knew that,
did your joy escape all holding?
Where were you when you heard that
calling voice, and how, in that moment,
did you mark it? How, ever after,
are you changed?

Tell us, please, all you can about that voice.
Teach us how to listen, how to hear.
Teach us all you can of saying Yes.

- Nancy Shaffer

I can only tell you about my yes. It was to you, to this congregation, but not only to you. It was to the life-song of Unitarian Universalism. My yes was to the more than 1000 congregations, and to the Unitarian Universalist Association. My yes was to all the saints who from their labors rest, knowing that they earned their rest, even as they trusted that people like me, and you, would remain to carry on. My yes was to add my voice to the passionate, rising song of growing our faith. To me, this begins here, in this church. To grow a church, to become a vibrant, healthy, growing church takes time, effort, money. But I believe that we – and here I mean ALL UU congregations, with no exceptions, exist for this purpose – to sing out our song of welcome, to sing it out loud and strong, to sing it and to grow, and to never stop until breath itself fails us.

This I believe: as much as we like one another, we do not exist to be a social club; as much as we enjoy deep and provocative discussions, we do not exist to be a debating forum; as much as we long to be people of

integrity, we do not exist to be a society for the practice of ethics. We do not even exist to be “a community of like-minded people” — though god knows we are grateful for the commonality that unites us. We exist, and this is central to my calling, to my “yes”: to be *a religious movement. We exist to nurture spiritual growth in our members, in our congregations and across our congregations. We exist to grow our selves, to journey toward wholeness, so that out of our spiritual depth, out of the power borne in a transformative religious community, we can give ourselves over to the most important work of all – to the call of the prophets both old and new, to the healing of our world, to the abiding vision of an earth grown fair again and all her people one.*

For this we need to be a growing church. There is no other way. There is no time for complacency; no time to wait. Each of us, and together as a congregational family, all of us need to be learning and growing, giving the songs of the spirit birth in us and among us. Our classes do this – and our small groups – like the newly reformed “Women at the Well” women’s group. And the soon to be formed, in stillness and with all the force of the quiet heart and mind, Meditation Group. And adult Religious Education classes. And all of you bringing your own best selves to the pulpit – seeking and speaking your deepest truths - as Doris did a few weeks ago, and as Jim will next week – as Jerry and Carol and Suzi and Marybeth and John Nichols have done. And more of you. All the aspects of congregational life need to be made strong here, to nurture our spirits, to make room for others to come in, and to bid them welcome. At this very time, a call sounds for each of us, as individuals and for all of us, as a faith community, to participate. And to be true to the promise of this liberal tradition each person here must discern that call, and become who we are meant to be.

There is a Hasidic tale, from the Jewish tradition, that speaks to the struggle of becoming our best selves. Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, told of it. He said to his students, to his beloved teachers: “My greatest fear is not that in the coming world, they will ask me “why were you not Moses?” My greatest fear is that they will ask me, “why were you not Zusya?”

Each of us has a call to fulfill, here in the daily life of this church and together, as a congregation, as part of the Association of Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Now, this may not be a secret, but I want you know that being a minister is not the world's easiest profession. And still I would not trade it. I love our movement. I love all of you. And as a minister, your minister, I want, I ache, for all of us to rise up singing, to rise aloft on that choir of voices calling, calling out to the world, and especially to those who need us, whose hearts are hungry and hurting – *come, come . . .*

I would do it for you, for all of us, if I could. But I cannot do it alone. All of us are needed to join this soul-song, which I believe is the imperative of being a real and living religious community. That song is our practice, our spiritual practice, the way to nurture the spirit and to help heal the world.

I know this may sound different to some of you, and new, and not what you expected. But, Listen. Can you hear a calling, here, this morning, and is it calling out to you? Is a new song about to begin here, to carry us together, beyond our first three years, into a great and growing future? Is Now the Time? Are you, the Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula, ready?

I am ready.

What part is yours in the song we are beginning? Are you being called to be a leading voice? Or to sing the chorus, to be part of the main, knowing that all the voices, all the parts are needed?

Or are you a person who can hear and sing in layers, who can understand new ways of putting things and sounds together – is your call to bring harmony to our song, to lend beauty and depth? Perhaps your voice is tired – perhaps you have been trying to raise this song for some time, and you've been singing mostly alone? You need to rest your voice, and just hum along, in support . . . until in the steady sound of that hum, almost like breathing, you find your voice again, and grow strong.

Are you new, just learning this song of hope and vows fulfilled? ... can you, will you listen, just listen, until this song becomes your own, and you can't help but sing too?

How are you being called to participate at this time, to sing this song of religious life and promise?

Remember, growth for growth's sake, is not our goal. Our goal is to provide a religious home, to feed the hungry heart, to grow the mind and nurture the soul. Our goal is to make a difference in people's lives, as many people as need us, and I think that is many. Our goal is to sing, to sing out loud and clear and beautiful – *Come, Come, Whoever You Are* - to sing out with the voice of reason and religious freedom that is our gift from our Unitarian forebears, and to sing out loud with the sweet, gracious melody of the Universalists – to sing of god's love for all, the love that the world can neither give nor take away, the love that heals all wounds, bridges all distance, puts to rest all fears, the love that lives even as the last note of the song fades away.

Let us sing together, now, in closing – a song of calling and a song of answering, a song of saints gone by and saints among us and saints waiting to be born.

Wake Now My Senses, #298.

Let us stand together for the benediction. Benediction, like so much of church language, comes from the Latin. It means "good words." And to you, on this day, at this time, I offer these words,

May the blessing of life be upon you. May it grant you peace, that you may in turn give peace to others. May your life be as a song, and grant comfort and hope to those who need its holy voice. And may the love and the strength of this community hold you and keep you, bless you and bless the world, until we meet again.

Amen, shalom, and Namaste.