

TAKING THE FIFTH: CLAIMING OUR DEMOCRATIC HERITAGE
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, May 15, 2005

When I was a first year student at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, I took a required class entitled "Ritual and Worship", which intended to make us aware of the many rituals used in Christian churches, from the Eucharist to Baptism and beyond. Needless to say, this was an informative exercise for the three of us UU students who were all taking it at the same time.

One of our assignments was to present a 10 minute worship service to the class. We formed small groups and each group led worship in the chapel at the beginning of each class session. Predictably, we three UUs formed our own group and designed a typical Unitarian Universalist worship service, complete with a responsive reading using our seven principles.

During the critique session for our presentation, there was enthusiasm for our choice of songs and the lighting of the chalice, but lots of people nodded in agreement when one man said, "Ummmm, your responsive reading.....ummmmm, I mean, those words are highminded and nice and all, but they seem so out of place in a worship service. They're not religious, more like a contract or something."

We were a bit taken aback by his comment.. We had no adequate words at that time to converse about it, so, we just said that these were sacred words to us, that this was how we chose to live and to structure our faith, and we were sorry he didn't get it.

Since that time, I've come to realize that what he and others may have missed was the specifically religious language of traditional faith and I can understand his position better, but that's a subject for another day!

Our service today is structured around our UU Fifth Principle: that we covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and society at large.

Though it seemed a mystery to my fellow student at Iliff, we Unitarian Universalists believe strongly that democracy is a religious issue, one which is based upon our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We believe that people should rule themselves, not be ruled by others without their permission, because none of us is privileged over others, none of us is more inherently worthy than another.

That means that each of us is equally responsible for the well-being of every other person. Therefore, all of us should participate in governance. We believe that every voice should be heard and considered in making decisions which represent the best interests of the community.

As for the right of conscience, conscience is the manifestation, the acting out of our personal worth and dignity, the way we respond at our most authentic level to the world around us. Conscience is our response to our responsibility for others' well being. Conscience is not necessarily the voice of conventional morality. Conscience is the voice of the divine and human spirit that lives within, which compels us toward the good.

Today, in the spirit of our Fifth Principle, we will spend time making decisions for this congregation for the coming year and beyond. We will probably disagree on some issues, agree on others. This is necessary for us to achieve our greatest truth. It can and will be normal healthy differences of opinion, normal healthy working out of the democratic process, for democracy is a messy business, even at its best.

Earl Holt tells this story in his essay about our Fifth Principle, included in Edward Frost's small book "With Principle and Purpose", which is about the Seven Principles and Purposes of UUism.

"A Revolutionary War soldier named Ames described the difference between monarchy and democracy in an analogy to a three-masted sailing ship and a raft. The one is beautiful and impressive on the high seas, he said, but in rough weather can be shattered and sunk against the shoals. The raft of democracy, on the other hand, is virtually unsinkable,... but you always have your feet wet." Unitarian Universalism is a religion in which, metaphorically speaking, we always have our feet wet.

The text of the affirmation we speak here each Sunday afternoon reads: "Love is the doctrine of this church and service is its practice. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another."

Let's think about those words for a moment. If Love commands our highest loyalty, it means that we must enter our deliberations with loving concern for each other's truth. It means that even in disagreement, we seek loving solutions, not vanquishment of an opponent.

A business meeting in a free congregation is a time for making decisions about our life together. We will elect our leadership for the new church year; we will formalize our budget; we will hear from the building committee and discuss other issues. During all of it, we will make sure that the ideals of Love and Conscience rule our use of the democratic process.

One extremely important facet of the democratic process is the selection of leadership. Today we will select leaders to represent us, to make decisions in our best interests, to guide us in the coming year.

Now, leadership is an inherently dangerous business. Whether you are a student who is the homeroom rep to student council, a college kid who volunteers to put up flyers announcing a political meeting, a department manager, or a committee chair for PTA, you're taking on some risk. You risk having your ideas rejected or laughed at -----or accepted so enthusiastically that you end up doing even more work than you originally volunteered for.

Church leadership is similarly risky. To lead a church group, even in the smallest of efforts, is to live dangerously, because when you lead people through change, you challenge what they hold dear---their daily habits, loyalties, and ways of thinking. And change is what church is all about. People push back when you disturb their equilibrium, when you throw them off balance. And people can be creative in the ways they resist; they can even make you want to get out of the leadership role.

So we are often hesitant when we consider accepting a call to leadership. The student council member wonders if her classmates will think she is a dork. The college activist wonders if someone will think he's an anarchist and call him names. The department manager wonders if people will talk behind her back and resist her authority. The PTA chair wonders if he will have to confront angry parents or teachers because of his decisions.

And the church leader---maybe especially if the congregation is something pretty independent, like Unitarian Universalist---is reminded of how hard it is to herd cats, particularly if the cats are mad at you. That goes for ministers, for board members and officers, for religious educators, choir directors and committee chairs. It's really hard when the cats get mad at you. Their claws and teeth can be pretty sharp.

But leadership is a sacred role to play in a faith community. Successful leaders emerge from a strong sense of religious identity, a perceived call to action, and a desire to help the community reach out in helpful ways.

You may remember that I have preached in the past about creating and nurturing the Beloved Community, here in this place. The concept of the Beloved Community was a theme of the work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who saw it as the true purpose of faithful human living.

My colleague the Rev. Tom Owen-Towle of San Diego has suggested that there are specific traits to a Beloved Community. Think about these traits as they relate to the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island.

The Beloved Community faces hard times together;
the Beloved Community blooms where it's planted, working together
on some higher cause;
the Beloved Community is vigilant against selfish interests and
unkind actions;
the Beloved Community is respectful of all, even when it disagrees;
the Beloved Community is welcoming to all;
the Beloved Community cares for its members, celebrating and
grieving together;
the Beloved Community deals with conflict openly and honestly;
the Beloved Community offers justice and joy;
the Beloved Community is constantly reborn, forming and reforming
as people come and go;
and, like love, the Beloved Community is eternal.

This Beloved Community is nurtured and supported by love
unfailing. That love prevails throughout the hard times, governs our
behavior toward each other, holds us accountable, and stretches us into
new understandings.

What does this have to do with our commitment to the right of
conscience and the use of the democratic process in our congregations
and in society at large?

Well, sometimes we won't like what our congregational leaders do. We have a right to tell them so directly; we have a right to vote them out of office and to hold them accountable. But in accordance with our belief in their inherent worth and dignity and our commitment to nurturing the Beloved Community, we do not have a right to gossip or malign them to others, nor to be disrespectful in word or deed. This is hard but essential. Disrespectful and unkind actions and remarks do not shape the Beloved Community in helpful ways. And building the Beloved Community democratically is what we are all about.

Religious leaders get critique and feedback in many forms, some positive, some not so positive. How those folks respond to this criticism is important to the Beloved Community, whether they are the minister, the president, a board member, a committee chair or member, or a volunteer who helps out in some way-----a worship experience, refreshments, music, building plans, or religious education.

Whether elected or volunteer, religious leaders (and you yourself are one, just because you are part of this community) have a responsibility to the Beloved Community to respond to criticism with compassion, an open heart, a listening ear, and a hopeful spirit, pledging to correct mistakes when necessary, yet always mindful that it isn't possible to please the whole crowd.

And whether active or inactive, members and friends in a religious community (and again that's all of us) have a responsibility to the Beloved Community to offer critical truth in love, with compassion, an open heart, a listening ear, and a hopeful spirit, remembering that words do hurt, that

email is a mixed blessing, and that it isn't reasonable to expect that things will be done "our way" all the time.

Before I came to this area to serve the UUs of Whidbey and Vashon Islands, I had had a pretty rough experience in a former congregation. As a rookie minister in my first church, I goofed up with some regularity, didn't always heed my own good advice and finally found myself on the wrong side of several people in that congregation, especially as finances were shaky and we were experiencing the growing pains of moving from being a layled congregation to being a minister-led congregation.

I was in pain and they were in pain. It was awful.

Now, members of a faith community have committed to being in loving relationship with each other. And when we are in a loving relationship, we have responsibilities. We are grateful for the good stuff that happens in congregational life---the compliments, the praise and appreciation, the fun times, the friendships-----but we also have to be grateful for the hard stuff, the criticism, the unwelcome truths, the input we'd just as soon not hear, the people who upset us-----because this conflict, this difference of opinion is what helps us grow, as human beings and as a faith community.

But it's hard! Because to accomplish this essential growth, we have to conquer our natural human fear of saying and hearing the painful stuff, so that the good stuff increases, so that the good stuff is what permeates our congregational life together, so that our relationship in this Beloved Community becomes truly loving. And, equally important, we have to learn to offer criticism that is loving, not barbed, feedback that offers solutions

rather than condemnation and disapproval.

We need to learn to receive criticism and feedback with the trust and confidence that even when it is a little painful to hear, it is usually offered in love, that though the words used may feel sharp, the critic is usually doing his or her best to offer truth with love and does not intend to be deliberately hurtful.

A few years ago, not long before my Portland congregation and I were struggling with our issues, this congregation was also struggling with its own issues, many of them having to do with criticism and feedback, just as Wy'east and I were. It's not uncommon in a faith community for people to offer unkind evaluations of others and for critical and unloving words to multiply in number and thus divide the community.

During this painful period for me, I learned that I need to resist being so thinskinny and sensitive that I am wounded by every critique and that I also need to resist being so thickskinned and tough that I cannot hear that I need to change. I tend to forget sometimes and slip back into old patterns of behavior, just as we all do, but those painful learnings have helped me grow.

So every so often, we need to be reminded of our higher purpose in life. Church is not a social club, it is not a place where we get our own way all the time. Worship services, for example, direct our thoughts to new places; sometimes the method or words chosen aren't what we might have preferred, but if we can set aside our preferences temporarily and let ourselves experience something different, we will be giving a great gift to those who do find the method or words chosen to be just what they

hoped for.

A wise mentor of mine, the Rev. Barbara Hamilton-Holway of Berkeley, California, once said that in every worship service, we must be prepared to receive and to give, that worship is not only a place to be inspired and nurtured, it is also sometimes a place to sacrifice. Those of us who prefer a strictly spiritual experience sometimes must sacrifice that preference to those who crave a more intellectual experience, and vice versa. It's the democratic process at work, not only in our business meetings but in our entire life together as a faith community.

As we go from worship into our business meeting today , I call upon us to carry with us the ideals of the Beloved Community, remembering that each of us has a voice, each of us deserves respect, and each of us has the responsibility to create and nurture this Beloved Community.

Our leaders have taken on a sacred task. Let us give them our love and our support as we walk with them into the new church year.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #348, Guide My Feet.

BENEDICTION

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we are the Beloved Community, that our every interaction in this sacred space is holy and that we covenant to maintain our ideals and truths in the tender balance of democracy. May we be at peace with one another, even as we speak and listen to our diversity of opinions in the coming hours. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.