

«Call Waiting : Perspectives on Called Ministry»

Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, November 29, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Reading

A Mood of Expectancy – by Richard Gilbert

The earth has turned once more in its accustomed way.
And again our footsteps quicken,
Our voices are raised in familiar chorus;
The sights and sounds of Christmas
Greet our eyes and ears.
Almost as if we had never seen or heard them before.

There is a mood of expectancy,
What we are to expect, we do not know.
The least surprises are hidden beneath bright paper
And graceful ribbon.
The greatest surprises are the magic that happens
Whether we will it or not.

There is a mood of expectancy.
And the beauty is we do not know what to expect.
Tomorrow is an open door.
An untraveled journey.
An untouched feast.

Christmas is like that – it is a mood of expectancy.
For out of the birth of the humblest babe
May come one of the greatest prophets of the human spirit
And out of each of us, proud or humble,
May yet come truth and beauty and goodness we
Cannot now imagine.
Christmas is a mood of expectancy.

Advent, which means “coming”, is the season of anticipation and preparation, of waiting for the glorious festivals to begin. If there were not an Advent, we would need to invent it. We humans, in spite of all that has happened to us and been done by us, are still hopeful. Something new, something more vital perhaps, something promising is always coming, and we are always expecting, pregnant with possibility. Thus in Advent candles are lighted to mark the time of

preparation, and with each new light our anticipation grows – as it should. We are, after all, a hopeful people, and that hopefulness deserves to be celebrated.

There is a mood of expectancy here, in this congregation, because you are preparing yourselves for called ministry. You are indeed on the edge of something new. I want to be clear that by linking this topic of called ministry to the season of Advent, I am in no way suggesting that you are waiting for a messiah to come and save you from all your sins and put you right before God. I am only suggesting that the subject of “Call Waiting” seemed appropriate for this season of waiting and hopefulness.

What does “called ministry” mean? What does it mean to “call” a minister, or for a minister to be or feel “called”? How is it different from the work I have been doing here as your consulting minister? Your ministerial search committee has been working diligently – through conversations and surveys – to discern what kind of minister this community needs. Why all the fuss? The simple answer to the difference between consulting ministry and called ministry is that generally a consulting minister has a contract with the congregation to perform certain ministerial duties, which are negotiated between the governing body of the congregation and the minister. A “called” minister, on the other hand, enters into a more substantial covenantal agreement with the congregation which implies that the minister’s personal sense of call can take place within that particular parish setting, and this covenant is ongoing. This requires that there be a discernment process by both parties, and that a conclusion has been reached that the person I see myself being as a minister is a satisfactory match for who you see yourselves as a congregation. So the two most important questions become, who am I called to be as a minister? and what are you called to be as a congregation?

Let me say more about a minister’s sense of call, because that concept is important in considering whether a congregation should consider calling a particular minister. In a very real sense, every minister is a called minister. And that sense of call has little to do with what your contract says your responsibilities are. It is not about ministerial authority or whether or not you serve as your congregation’s chief of staff. A “call” – in any profession – means, in the long run, that you believe you can do nothing other than be true to that call. We are warned in seminary: ministry is hard work. If there is anything else you think you would enjoy, do that instead. My colleague Nancy Bowen describes the call more graphically: “Being a minister” she says, “is like throwing up. You only do it when you have to.”

In hearing the language of “call to ministry” Unitarian Universalists are almost always suspicious. What did it sound like, they ask? Are you hearing voices? A call is a complicated thing. Another colleague says that for most ministers there is a “soft call” where one has an immediate reaction that being a minister would somehow be groovy and neat, and then a “hard call” that comes through the actual ministerial formation process. During this “hard call” process, three critical questions should be considered by the would-be minister: Who does the calling? Whom do I serve? and who must I be in the midst of this call?

Who does the calling? Is it the congregation? A sense of personal ability, feeling that you might be good at this? A collection of values and principles? God? The Unitarian Universalist movement? Parish ministers, such as you are preparing to call, should have their calls rooted in the congregations and communities they serve. And yet, every congregation needs to understand that while serving the congregation, the person called to ministry should be serving something larger than the congregation. Most ministers will say that they serve their call to this “something larger” through their service to people in the congregation they serve. It is important for you to know what this “something larger” is for the minister. Because if the behavior or wishes or needs of the congregation come into conflict with the “something larger” that the minister serves, if the minister has any integrity about his sense of call, there will be some conflict. The minister will sometimes have to discern whether or not the congregation has pulled her so off course from her sense of call that it is no longer consistent with her call to ministry.

A difficult thing for many congregations to accept is that ministers are not in the satisfaction business. But neither should congregations be in the satisfaction business. Department stores and grocery stores are in the satisfaction business. Burger King is in the satisfaction business. We are not. Businesses often place customer satisfaction as their highest priority and therefore develop the policy that the customer is always right. Have it your way. Congregations do not have customers. Congregations have guests, members, and friends, but not customers. Therefore your minister cannot guarantee your satisfaction and you will not always be right. You will not always have it your way. Your behaviors will not always jive with the larger vision your minister has for you.

Your minister is also not a customer and will not always be right. Occasionally a minister’s ego gets in the way of that larger vision, and her behavior or reaction is not coming from a deep, thoughtful, visionary, “called” place. You may have to remind that minister, through loving reproach of course, that her ego has to get out of the way for the voice of the Holy to be heard again. The ministry of the congregation, which happens as a dance between the members and called minister, is a juggling act between the ever-changing aspects of our own interests and abilities, the needs of those being served, our own sense of personal wellbeing, the shifting landscape of the larger culture, and the deeper voice of those eternal values we attempt to embody as a community of faith.

The second question is, what are you called to be and do as a faith community? What is the purpose of this congregation? Living a call is not for the minister alone. It is also a congregational privilege and responsibility. The ministerial search committee should have a good idea of what living this call looks like before going into the search process. It is a time to be brutally honest with any potential candidate.

In seminary we were given a list of ten roles that a minister plays in the life of a congregation. They include preacher, teacher, pastor, officiant for rites of passage, program resource specialist, community leader and activist, church community builder, administrator, representative to the larger Unitarian Universalist community, and a spiritual leader who saves time for self-renewal. My colleague and mentor, Morris Hudgins, once said that when you are looking for a minister, you will do well to find someone who is proficient in six of the ten areas.

Of those six, the minister will have a particular passion for two or three. It is important to know where your prospective minister stands on these proficiencies, but it is even more important to know where you stand as a congregation. I would argue that all ten are important for a vibrant, healthy UU congregation. Where are you particularly strong? Where do you need and want help? What are the particular passions of your congregation that the minister **MUST** be on board with? Is it in providing consistently exceptional worship services? Being known in the community as the liberal voice the media looks to for opinions on controversial issues? Or is it providing religious education and faith-based life training for all ages in the congregation? What are your passions here? What do you want to be well known for in the Hillsborough community?

The work that goes into calling a new minister is a bit like pre-marital counseling. How will you handle finances? Deal with daily chores? Resolve conflicts? What do you expect of this relationship? Yes, I can see that he's a lovely person, but how does this serve your relationship? Are both parties being clear about what they bring and what they cannot offer to the partnership? These are the kinds of soul-searching questions that should go into searching for a new minister. It is a "big deal" because partners rarely change much after the wedding, as much as we sometimes want that to happen. Divorce between ministers and congregations, better known as the "negotiated resignation" is becoming more and more common in our Unitarian Universalist movement. Why is this? Part of it may be due to the fact that there was not adequate discernment in the beginning of the process, either on the part of the minister, the congregation, or both. Part of it is also due, I believe, to our cultural shift from a covenantal to a consumer-driven relationship between minister and congregation. We are reluctant to consider the cost of broken relationships. Negotiated resignations can lead to great stress on a congregation and hamper healthy growth for a long time. It can severely damage the career of a minister. Consider these things when calling a minister.

A consulting minister, like all ministers, will serve their call as they serve your congregation. They will strive to be with you fully and faithfully as they perform spiritual and ministerial functions that are mutually determined. They will seek to provide thoughtful sermons, and provide a listening ear and counsel to friends and members of the congregation. But they will always be clear that they are consultants to a congregation that belongs to you.

A called minister begins to consider the congregation "ours." The covenant that is written between minister and congregation echoes those first covenants written in the early Puritan churches of New England from whence we come, whose stated intent was to help the covenanted community walk together in the ways of love. It is this concept of "walking together" that shifts for a minister who is called by a congregation. It says I trust that I know enough about who you are called to be, and who I am called to be to believe we can do this work together. That we are moving in the same direction toward Beloved Community. In striving to grow this Beloved Community, congregations and ministers muster enough hope and courage to covenant with one another.

With the wisdom of our forebears to guide you, and the divine spark within each of you, and the perseverance those things bring, may you invite this newly called individual into shared ministry with you, with anticipation and with hope for your future together. May it be so.