

# «Why We Worship (or do we?)»

Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, July 5, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Why do we come together on Sunday morning? What *is* it we do here together? I suspect there are at least a handful of you that thought about doing something different this morning. Maybe getting in a game of golf before the heat of the day; having a more leisurely cup of coffee over the Sunday papers; a late breakfast in bed. But you chose to be here with us instead. To all of you, I say, thank you, because I know that Sunday mornings are precious. Why are we here?

The incentive for my message this morning grew out of conversations I've had with some of you about why we don't call what we do together on Sunday mornings "worship". We have an Order of Service, but it doesn't mention the word "worship." Our brochure talks about Sunday morning services and programs, but it doesn't mention "worship." Our services are coordinated by our Programs Committee, not a Worship Committee. I have to assume that the word "worship" has been intentionally left out of these documents. My guess is that for many of the members of this congregation the word "worship" had so many negative connotations that it was decided to leave it behind. Am I right?

This summer I want to focus some of my sermons on what we do here on Sunday mornings. This morning I want to focus specifically on this word, "worship" – why many Unitarian Universalists stopped using the word – and why we might consider reclaiming the word for ourselves. I hope to keep my comments brief this morning because I'd like for us to have time for a discussion about this when I'm finished.

In 1992 the Rev. Virginia Knowles wrote a paper addressing what she calls the "five ghosts" of Unitarian Universalism that have led us to believe that "worship" is incompatible with our faith tradition. The **first ghost** is the sense that we do not have an object *to* worship. Who do we send our prayers to? God the Father seems a bit outmoded and "to whom it may concern" doesn't pack much of a punch. In fact, the word "worship" comes from the ancient word *woerscippan*, which can be translated as "considering things of worth." The purpose of worship, then, is to lift up or reflect on the highest and holiest of human values, in a way that links us to our past, reminds us of who we are, and points us to a future in which those values become manifest. The problem for Unitarian Universalists is that somewhere along the line, the word "worship" became associated with a supernatural being, and so it seemed less pertinent to our modern, rational lives. But if we think of worship as lifting up values rather than deities, this ghost begins to dissipate.

The **second ghost** Knowles identifies is the fear of the action-minded, problem-solving member that worship doesn't really *produce* anything, and a congregation that does it well needs to put significant energy into making it happen. So there is a fear that in putting our time and energy into creating the experience of worshipping together, of escaping to LaLa Land for an hour

each week, there will be less energy and attention for the real work of the community: planning church activities, participating in social justice forums, or helping with the next canvas. For many Unitarian Universalists, Sunday morning is a time for a little educational stimulation before having a chance to check in with other committee members or recruit people for tasks that need to be accomplished. But worship, if done well, can have a synthesizing effect on the community, providing the motivation, through the power of transformation, to take on those tasks. When we open ourselves up on a weekly basis to being touched by and reminded of our highest aspirations, we are in fact sometimes led to follow through with action in response to those ideals.

The **third ghost** Knowles write about is our fear of dependency and idealization. To “worship” is often associated with a childlike dependency on *what* we worship, that idealized *someone* who can save us from ourselves. Our liberal doctrine of human nature – the one that suggests that human beings have the capacity to transcend our problems all on our own – has its downside. It has become a matter of reproach if we become helpless or dependent. But in truth, helplessness is as much a part of human nature as self-sufficiency, and it is nothing to be feared. In fact, it is often through acknowledging our weaknesses and our limitations that true transformation can begin in our lives. Anyone having gone through the spiritual discipline of a 12-step program knows that this is most certainly true.

The **fourth ghost** grows out of our respect for reason and the scientific method. We have a history of having broken with more orthodox faith traditions when their belief and creedal statements could not be aligned with scientific fact. There is a fear that in using old terminology like “worship” we may somehow betray scientific knowledge. I believe we can respect science and reason without idolizing them. By that I mean we can respect their value while recognizing their limitations; respect science and reason while realizing they are not the only lenses through which we experience the world. We will always have experiences that we can’t explain through science *yet*. We should be able to celebrate those experiences through worship, as long as we’re not *assaulting* science.

The **fifth ghost** is the fear of emotionalism. You may not have realized this but we are *not* a charismatic group! Our fear of emotionalism is tied to the other four, because to be emotional, especially here on Sunday mornings, is to be irrational, out of control, dependent, physically drained. Heaven forbid! We are *most* like our Puritan forebears in this regard. They *stripped* their churches of anything that might engage the senses and bring emotions to the surface. They got rid of the sculptures, artwork, candles, incense, clerical vestments, even music, freeing their church meetings of all emotion. They had witnessed the power of emotions in European churches, where it was used to manipulate the people and incite violence; where it led to smugness among the leadership. But in freeing themselves from these things, they lost their ability to be powerfully *moved* by their senses during their services. It is often the synthesis of reason and emotion that creates the situation most conducive to a creative, spirit-centered life. Emotions can be intellectually respectable.

Speaking of using our senses on Sunday mornings, an essay on the website of the Unitarian Universalist Association claims that worship is to a congregation what sex is to a committed

relationship. We come together to celebrate the relationships we've already formed in this community. And like the sexuality of a partnership, worship can never stand alone as the only activity we do together or it will have no real life and depth of meaning. It is meant to enliven our lives together; it softens the rough edges of those other sides of our congregational life. We bring to worship our whole person – our intellect, our aesthetic sense, our physical and our emotional selves.

Worship centers us as a Sunday Program cannot. It is the work of the people. To say that we worship together is to say that for one hour, one day a week, we gather as a community to collectively *hold up* that which is most *significant* in our lives. To say that we worship holds us accountable, to pay attention and be deliberate about how that hour is constructed, how and whether it speak to those values and our mission as a people of faith. Each element of the service represents a way in which the Holy has touched our lives that week – the music that has been lovingly prepared for us; the joys and sorrows that are shared; the children's story that says that our children and their spiritual growth has great value to us; the silent reflection that allows us – finally! – to reflect on the week just past and catch our breath for the week ahead.

Each week we create this space together in order to understand and remember that which is most important in life. A significant part of my call is a desire to help create that space. I welcome your comments now about what makes this space meaningful for you.