

Sermon for Candidate Week

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, February 28, 2010, Rev. Patty Hanneman

Reading 594: *Principles and Purposes*

Sermon

Several weeks ago, before I knew this was to be my candidating sermon, Jean-Michel asked me if I would preach about the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, as a way of introducing the class he's going to be teaching on Tuesday nights starting in March. That is what's printed in your order of service, but I'm going to shift my focus this morning. Because later today, during the Committee of the Whole meeting, you'll be asked to vote whether to call me as your settled minister. Several weeks ago I preached a sermon about the meaning of called ministry, and one of the points I made was that it is critical, when you call a minister, to know what that minister's vision of ministry is, and whether that vision is a good match for your particular congregation. I decided that before you vote, I owe you all a chance to listen to my vision, so that will be my focus this morning. You will find later on that I offer my thoughts on the Seven Principles and covenants in general as they relate to my vision of ministry. So I will be fulfilling Jean-Michel's request in a sort of backhanded way.

Central to a minister's sense of how she sees her ministry taking shape are two big ideas. The first is her philosophy of the human condition and the other is her sense of God or the transcendent, or the lack thereof. Ministry, really, has a lot to do with negotiating the space between those two big ideas. When I interviewed with the Ministerial Search Committee, they were very careful about asking me questions about my theology and my ideas on human nature. In the document I provided for them, for instance, I used the terms "soul" and "spirit" to describe human nature and said things like ministers should encourage "soulful living" and they asked me what that would look like. The terms soul and spirit are central to my view of the human condition, so let me begin here.

The emotional complaints of our time, complaints that therapists and ministers tend to hear most often are things such as:

- Emptiness
- Vague depression
- Disillusionment about marriage, family, relationships
- Yearning for personal fulfillment
- A hunger for a deeper spirituality

All of these symptoms reflect a loss of soul and tell us what the soul craves. But what is soul?

An author who has taught me much about the human condition is the Jungian analyst, Thomas Moore, and one of his first books was this one: Care of the Soul: a Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life. Moore writes that the soul is that aspect of our psyche that is fundamentally oriented toward life. It manifests itself as a tendency toward attachment to places, to people, and things, for relatedness, for staying embedded in life, even when it becomes complicated, or painful. The soul is nourished through intimacy, through the senses, through play, and through grief. Through the soul the experience of life is deepened, though not necessarily explained. A soulful life is one in which we learn to appreciate and cherish those things we are attached to. We also appreciate the depth of damage that unhealthy attachments can cause. We try to foster healthy, nurturing attachments that are life-giving in order to live more soulfully.

On the other hand, spirit, Moore says, is that quest for a higher consciousness, a search for meaning, a need to transcend the messy conditions of life to a more blissful place, a purer relationship with our Higher Power perhaps, or a re-connection with Mystery, God, or our True Essence that supposedly exists outside all our messy relationships. It is the perfect “holding environment”. When we talk about “spiritual practices” this is what we often think of.

I've talked with theologians who tell me it's a mistake to separate these two aspects of our nature, that indeed the most powerful spiritual practices are those we perform in relationships. This is true, yet I find it helpful to begin with this artificial separation for two reasons. First, I believe soul and spirit are two aspects of our nature that remain in tension, even though sacred literature teaches us that both soulful living and spirituality are as necessary as the air we breathe. But also, I believe that as Unitarian Universalists, we live too much in our heads, believing that somehow non-attachment is somehow a more spiritual, holier place. But we are meant to be both soulful and spiritual creatures, and I find that the really transforming moments in our lives take place in those spaces that exist between soul and spirit. When we've adequately grieved the loss of a loved one, for instance, and have finally let go. It is in this place that we so often feel God at work.

There's that "G" word! Yes, the flip side of human nature is theology. So let me explain what I mean by God.

I call myself a post-Christian, feminist, process-theologian, and what in the world does that mean? Feminist, because I have worked hard to remove gender from my image of the holy. Post-Christian, because while I still feel the power of the Scriptures I grew up with, I do not believe in atonement theory, the belief that Jesus died in order that I might be saved, and most Christians will tell you this means I'm not a Christian. Process-theologian? That takes a little more explaining.

The concepts of process thought were first developed by a mathematician named Alfred North Whitehead who, in 1924, was recruited to Harvard to teach philosophy. Many of his students were from the Divinity School, and they began incorporating his ideas into their theology papers. Whitehead theorized that reality is fundamentally made up of creativity or process, that the final real things of the universe are not protons or neutrons or electrons, but wavelike units of process that are always changing into something else. We perceive this change as time. This book, Whitehead would say, is nothing more than knots in the web of a process going on.

In process theology, God is *imbedded* in the process, exerting an influence in the processes, creating an urge, a lure, toward ever-greater intensity, adventure, play, beauty, creativity, and diversity. In other words, God is the urge toward more soulful living.

To experience real joy, Whitehead says, we must discover, notice and appreciate the complexities of life. To experience peace, we must strive to integrate all these diverse processes, with all their baggage, into a unified, meaningful whole that brings us into right relationship with our environment. A process theologian will remind you that faith is not a matter of belief; it is a matter of sensitivity. It is a deepening of the human spirit, and a deepening of the human soul; faith is appreciative awareness; paying attention; keeping your senses open. A life of faith is one in which we commit ourselves to being sensitive to and aligning ourselves with the divine urge toward a richer, more sensitive, more appreciative life. In this life of faith we begin to notice the interplay of soul – a deepening sensitivity to this world – and spirit – a deepening sensitivity to the divine urge.

And this brings me to the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism and the importance of covenants in general for our religious movement. Ours is a covenantal faith tradition, not a credal tradition. We have kept this tradition from our Puritan forefathers and mothers who took the idea from Abraham's covenant in the Old Testament that creeds are unnecessary as long as the community strived to walk together in love. Covenants are guides for our thoughts and actions. Covenants are designed to show us the way to be in relationship with one another. So while creeds may provide answers about theology and spirit, covenants are documents for the soul. If you look at our mission/covenant statement for this congregation, printed on the back of your order of service, you'll notice there is nothing that states, this is what we believe. No. We accept, we support, we create, we build, we serve. These are action words, that place us in alignment with the divine urge. And our Seven Principles: we affirm and promote. Some will argue that our Principles are pretty bland. Who would not believe in the inherent worth and dignity of individuals? But it doesn't say we believe this; it says we affirm this and we promote this. If we were serious about our covenants, we might read them before every committee meeting to see if we're promoting them; we might ask members to provide testimonials of times in their lives when they faced a difficult decision and a principle guided their actions. We might confess that we haven't lived up to them as we should. Well, ok, maybe confession is going a little far, but you get the idea.

History has shown that when a faith community begins to deviate from a model of covenant to a statement of belief, it is usually because their covenants have become weak and forgotten, and the community begins to feel fearful because of a loss of identity, they begin to look for something to replace it, and the results are often divisive and ugly. When the Hebrews deviated from their covenanted faith they began to fear the Gods of the Canaanites and we know the outcome of that. I believe the heated debates we've had in recent years over issues of theology in the UUA have been because we are fearful we don't know how to explain ourselves because our covenants have become weak and we are looking for something else.

Creeds divide. Covenants create community. They create holding environments where voices can be heard and respect can be shown. They create the conditions under which relationships can be shaped. My vision of ministry is to help create communities of faith where people can have both their souls and spirits fed as we gather, grow together and give back to our communities, families, and friends, and covenants are critical to that vision.

Why here, you may ask. Why do I see my ministry taking shape in the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough? Because small churches – and by small I mean those congregations with fewer than 100 in attendance on Sunday mornings – small churches have special qualities that make them ideal for growing souls and spirits through relationships. Many of these qualities were named last week in our talking circle. Small churches are just the right size to be a nursery for the newborn, a haven for the searcher, an oasis for the hurting, and a contact group for the change agent. When church size is measured by human relationships, small churches are the largest expression of Beloved Community. We look very much like the churches our Puritan fathers and mothers had in mind when they created covenants and congregational polity.

In the small church, the leadership is more horizontal and spread out than vertical. This too is consistent with my theology, which, when I'm at my best, drives my style of ministry. Process theology, and the urge toward greater diversity, and paying attention to the relationships that develop in the process of getting work done, works best with horizontal leadership. But I'll be honest, most of us ministers have a bit of a messiah complex and we wish we could have more control over the churches we serve. It is often hard to balance that impulse with the recognition that there are leaders here who have kept this place going without ministerial leadership, between the gaps in ministerial leadership, and at times when denominational leadership ignored you with benign neglect. Some of you may well be here long after I'm gone, so you are the true stakeholders in this enterprise and a wise minister knows when to get out of your way.

That being said, ministers are taught and expected to lead congregations. We are asked to have a vision for ministry, what Beloved Community looks like for us, and have a sense of how to get there. Small churches are not all goodness and light. They have their shadow side too - that could be an entire sermon on its own - and ministers are expected to help break down the barriers that shadow side creates. This is where most conflict happens, and where trust becomes most important. Beyond that, creating Beloved Community is not all that complicated, really. It simply requires creating the space for our souls and spirits to blossom in ways they may not be allowed to in other areas of our lives. It means taking seriously the covenants we make with one another and creating spaces for us to gather, celebrate and play together, grow in faith together, and give back to the world. My Masters of Divinity degree does not make me any more divine than anyone here, but it does commit me to strive, as well as I can, to meet the divine in you with the divine in me, to make this vision real. May it be so. Namaste, and blessed be.

Closing Words

On the day of my ordination, a friend of mine handed me a slip of paper with what she felt should be my mission in life and my vision for ministry. I offer it to you as a suggestion for all of us, with a slight modification to make it palatable for public consumption:

Live your life in such a way that when your feet hit the floor in the morning, Satan shudders and says, "Oh, shoot... she's awake!"