

If We Agree in Love
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

There is much that we don't share on this path of life...

But we do share this hour.

There is much that we don't share...

But we do share this place made sacred by the generations.

There is much that we don't share...

But we do share our sympathy one with another,

We do share a desire to be kind,

We do share love.

There is much that we don't share...

But we do share hopes...

For greater justice, for more peace.

In the spirit of all that we share at the core of our beings...

May the meditations of our hearts and the prayers of our spirits embrace those whose suffering or worries are weighing them down, whose anxiety or illness is wearing them down; may our meditations and prayers reach out a healing and hopeful embrace to all those who suffer, who are ill, who are homeless, who are caught in the crossfire of war. And may the meditations and prayers of our hearts become the work of our hands.

Reading – “This House” by Kenneth Patton

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature. It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle. It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person. It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinion. It is a house of truth-seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of searchers. It is a house of art, adorning its celebrations with melodies and handiworks. It is a house of prophecy, outrunning times past and times present in visions of growth and progress. This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

Sermon

As many of you know, last month I was fortunate enough to attend (with over 3,000 others) the annual National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C.. John and Judy Sneath attended as well, all of us graciously invited by John and Judy's neighbor here in Hingham, Jamie Bush.

While not an official government event, the National Prayer Breakfast is sponsored by members of Congress. The president is traditionally one of the speakers. So, President Obama spoke. Prime Minister Tony Blair spoke as well, delivering this year's keynote address. Several senators and representatives read passages of scripture.

And we had breakfast.

Fruit, bread, juice... and granola of all things!

(I guess granola is not just for liberals anymore. Who knew?)

Of course the point wasn't the breakfast. The point was the gathering, the point was the prayers for our leaders, the point was inspirational words. The point was reconciliation across boundaries of many kinds that too often divide us.

At the breakfast itself (there were other related events as well) we were seated somewhat randomly. I didn't know anyone at my table. I found myself seated across from a Finnish member of the European parliament, and next to a Republican congressman from Georgia, Paul Broun.

A very personable guy. Turns out he is a physician, and still maintains some of his home visiting practice as a family doc back home. I was mightily impressed; that's dedication.

When I returned home, out of curiosity I took a look at Congressman Broun's web site. Not at all to my surprise I discovered that his positions on just about all the big issues of our time are quite different from mine.

But we had had a pleasant breakfast – why not? – and I would like to think that even had we gotten into a conversation about gun control or abortion or the war in Iraq or global warming, we would still have appreciated one another's company and sincerity.

And this is one of the points of these prayer gatherings – not just the annual National Prayer Breakfast, but weekly prayer gatherings among a number of senators and congressmen: to communicate on a level that is deeper than issues, deeper certainly than party affiliation, to understand and experience that we can connect as human beings in substantial and even intimate ways without agreeing on one or another or even any political issues.

We can be in the same room. Not just tolerating one another, not just tolerating one another's ideas and opinions. But meeting and communicating on a deep and personal level.

The night before the breakfast we attended a dinner at which Democratic congressman Mike Doyle from Pittsburgh spoke. He spoke movingly of the abiding support he felt from a small prayer group of other members of congress – mostly Republicans – who have met every week for years for conversation not about "issues" but about the deeper currents of their lives. "The best hour of the week," Doyle called it. Members of the group share a Christian language, but I had the sense from the way he talked about it that the Christian language and in particular the example of Jesus' life and teaching was simply (and profoundly) a way into the deeper reaches of their lives, a way that enabled them to meet at significant levels of meaning in their lives – one way or another addressing a question we all eventually return to:

What really matters?

Which for Doyle and the others in his group leads to another question, inspired by Jesus' example of "walking around loving": How can we love better than we do? (And isn't *this* what really matters?)

Well, I'm not touting the prayer breakfast model as superior to our Unitarian Universalist ways. Because while the example of Jesus upon which the breakfast is based is powerful, the assumption, sometimes explicit sometimes implicit, that the model of Jesus is primary, if not exclusive... *can* be limiting. Even with the best of intentions to be inclusive (since that, after all, was Jesus' message – radical welcome! – and Jamie Bush surely manifested that welcome by inviting several Unitarian Universalists to the Prayer Breakfast, who knows maybe we were agnostics, maybe even atheists!)... but lifting Jesus as the supreme example of such radical welcome can ironically and paradoxically sometimes end up being subtly and sometimes not so subtly *exclusive* of those who have different primary sources of inspiration and spiritual grounding.

This said, the idea of the Prayer Breakfast *broadly* expressed: to be in the same room in order to connect at deeper levels than we ordinarily connect, to address questions of personal meaning in a profound way, so that we might live more loving lives... isn't this what *we* try to be about – in *our* uniquely imperfect ways – here at a Unitarian Universalist church, here at Old Ship?

And shouldn't *that* goal transcend differences of opinion among us concerning one or another issue of the day, transcend where one sits on the conservative to liberal political spectrum? And shouldn't connecting in ways more significant than we ordinarily connect enable us *then* to have conversations concerning those issues that are not just tolerant conversations, but deeply respectful conversations, and that just might lead to more effective and loving lives?

And this is, after all, precisely what Rev. Hosea Ballou, the great 19th century Universalist meant when he said:

*"If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good.
Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace."
--Hosea Ballou*

This *is* the heart of the matter. If we can meet someplace deep, connect at the heart – "agree in love" – then we will find that we are better able to disagree, as we so naturally will, about other matters – even difficult matters such as abortion, war and peace, tax policy... even church budgets! – we will be able to disagree about such things and still be in "right relationship" one with another, still respect one another, still love one another, still be able to work together to help heal a hurting world.

Okay then, how do we meet at the heart level? Sometimes it just happens naturally, at those times our hearts are wide open – at a memorial service for example. But at other times we need to be more intentional.

Maybe it is as simple as this: We *agree* to meet at the heart level.

This is after all the ground of our faith tradition, reaching back to the Puritans founders of our congregation. For ours is a tradition based in covenant, not creed. Simply put, we agree to walk together in love.

Our current covenant says it this way: "...we join with one another in the spirit of respect, reverence, humility, and love."

To some purpose?

Yes indeed.

First: "To seek truth freely." Which means we may, we probably will, come to varying conclusions about matters ranging from the theological to the political.

Then... "To nurture spiritual growth and ethical commitment..."

And... "To care for one another..."

All different ways of talking about strengthening the bonds of love.

And finally... "seeking justice, peace, and ecological sustainability, to serve life."

Yes, we join together to a purpose.

And in all of this our covenant echoes our Unitarian Universalist principles, which affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, which promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, which affirms our intention to seek justice, peace, and world community.

One might then ask: why should honoring our beautiful and powerful covenant and inspiring principles be at all difficult?

One short answer: There is a built-in creative tension in our covenant and our principles, a creative tension which can either defeat us or propel us into ever deeper community and wider service.

The tension – creative we hope – is this:

How can we nurture and support the passion of convictions deeply felt on the one hand and, on the other, honor the requirement we rightly impose on ourselves to welcome the unfettered exchange of ideas and opinions, Socratic dialogue if you will... which will quite naturally lead to some diversity of convictions and beliefs? This is by no means always easy! So how do we do it?

Perhaps it is, once again, as simple (if not always easy...) as this: To take the small but critically important step from agreeing in covenant... to being more often fully *conscious* of that covenant and to hold that covenant both in our minds... and in our hearts.

So that, for example, when we light a candle of concern expressing our opinion on some issue about which we feel passionately (wherever on the political spectrum we sit...), we simply remember and acknowledge that probably not everyone in the room, in our community of love, agrees with us.

So that when in conversation among Old Shippers – whether at coffee hour, in small group discussion, at a community dinner – we should always assume that a diversity of opinion is represented in the room, in the circle.

As early Transylvanian Unitarian leader Francis David put it, in words we heard echoed centuries later by the Universalist Ballou, "we need not think alike to love alike." Which is a good thing, because we will never all think alike!

We might believe it would be *easier* if we did all think alike. For then we could speak without worry of offending, without fear of disagreement; we could speak with one voice in the public conversation.

But what a terrible loss it would be. What a sacrifice of our principles it would represent. How boring, even oppressive, it would be – a monoculture of mind and spirit you might call it.

Not only this, but the truth of the matter is that our voice becomes *more* powerful on those matters upon which we *have* come to consensus agreement because we have had to work so hard to get there.

As we did when we became a Welcoming Congregation, a congregation which not only welcomes but celebrates the flowering of love wherever it grows, gay or straight. It was years of conversation, some of it hard work indeed.

As we are doing right now as we talk – and listen – about Old Ship finances and how they relate to “my treasured program” or “your treasured program”... And you know what? In these sometimes difficult conversations, we are discovering profound opportunities at the heart of our budgetary challenges: the opportunity to strengthen our sense of community and mutual understanding, the opportunity to clarify our vision and mission, the opportunity to deepen our love.

It has been happening in recent months. It has been happening this weekend.

We often get all of this right, but we must acknowledge that we don’t always get it right. And this sadly may cause some disaffection, even some departures.

Can we not then strive to more fully “agree in love” so that other disagreements can be spoken freely and respectfully, everyone staying in the same room?

To bring respect and love to the unfettered exchange of ideas – conversation about things that matter, as I like to express it?

To remember that religious liberalism (the open mind and the open heart) is *not* necessarily equivalent to political liberalism, that there are many who are open-minded, open-hearted religious liberals, yet at the same time who are politically conservative on many issues?

To remember that we are a congregation of Democrats, Republicans, Independents, Greens; a congregation of agnostics, atheists, humanists theists; a congregation in which some are inspired by Jesus, others by Buddha, others by poetry, others by science, many by all of the above?

And that all are welcome to this marketplace of ideas?

Can we remember all of this as we strive to agree in love?

All of us guided by the mind... speaking and living from the heart.

Agreeing with love, so that other disagreements may cause us no injury.

So that we may say with ever increasing conviction about *this* hour, and other hours spent within our Old Ship community – in a small circle of conversation in the parlor, in circles of conversation in the Fellowship Hall – that it’s the best hour of the week.

An hour of radical hospitality in the spirit of Jesus. An hour of radical questioning and probing conversation in the spirit of Socrates. An hour of deepening commitment to one another and to the larger life we share and have agreed to serve... in love.

Of *course* we don’t and won’t always get it right. We will make mistakes. We will hurt one another. Which means that we are then called to offer the final form of love, as Reinhold Niebuhr put it, which is forgiveness.

At the National Prayer Breakfast both President Obama and Prime Minister Blair, each in their own words affirmed that love of neighbor is their guiding principle in life, a principle which they also affirmed transcends differences of faith tradition or political affiliation.

May it be ever more so, among us and among all people.

For *this* matters.

So may it ever be.