

## Why Are We Here?

Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown

First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

January 27, 2008

### Readings

Psalm 133

Behold! How good and how pleasant it is  
when kindred live together in unity!  
It is like the precious oil on the head,  
running down upon the beard,  
on the beard of Aaron,  
running down over the collar of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon,  
which falls on the mountains of Zion.  
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,  
life forevermore.

from *Holy the Firm* by Annie Dillard (For two years Annie Dillard lived on a small island in Puget Sound; *Holy the Firm* is a memoir of that experience.)

There is one church here, so I go to it. On Sunday mornings I quit the house and wander down the hill to the white frame church in the firs. On a big Sunday there might be twenty of us there; often I am the only person under sixty, and feel as though I'm on an archaeological tour of Soviet Russia. The members are of mixed denominations; the minister is a Congregationalist, and wears a white shirt. The man knows God. Once, in the middle of the long pastoral prayer of intercession for the whole world – for the gift of wisdom to its leaders, for hope and mercy to the grieving and pained, succor to the oppressed, and God's grace to all – in the middle of this he stopped, and burst out, "Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week." After a shocked silence, he continued reading the prayer. Because of this, I like him very much. "Good morning!" he says after the first hymn and invocation, startling me witless every time, and we all shout back, "Good morning!"

The churchwomen all bring flowers for the altar; they haul in arrangements as big as hedges, of wayside herbs in season, and flowers from their gardens, huge bunches of foliage and blossoms as tall as I am, in vases the size of tubs, and the altar still looks empty, irredeemably linoleum, and beige. We had a wretched singer once, a guest from a Canadian congregation, a hulking blonde girl with chopped hair and big shoulders, who wore tinted spectacles and a long lacy dress, and sang, grinning, to faltering accompaniment, an entirely secular song about mountains. Nothing could have been more apparent than that God loved this girl; nothing could more surely convince me of God's unending mercy than the continued existence on earth of the church.

## Sermon

So, why *are* we here? Why are we here in the Old Ship Meeting House? And why have those of us who are members committed ourselves to maintaining and sustaining this religious community that we call the First Parish in Hingham, the Old Ship Church?

It seems to me worth while to step back now and then to ask such questions, to re-ground ourselves if you will, so that we might move forward not just out of habit, but with a renewed sense of purpose and meaning.

Thirty years ago, as I was considering entering seminary to prepare for the Unitarian Universalist ministry – agonizing over the decision – I had a conversation with my father in which I told him that there were many things that appealed to me about the ministry: the opportunity to ponder the big questions, to write, to teach, to help people, to make a difference in some way in the world.

But in the next breath I questioned the whole value of churches, including UU churches, in today's world. I said that these days people could hear stimulating lectures by experts in a wide variety of fields without going to church. People could go to concerts and be inspired by beautiful music without going to church. People could help to change the world through the hundreds of non-profit organizations attending to one and another social need and issue... without going to church. People could meditate or pray on their own. And for troubled souls there were therapists and counselors; no need for a church or minister.

Well, my father saw my point...

But he disagreed.

There *is* a place for the church, for religious community, he said.

Clearly I came around to agree with him; not right away, but I did come around. Here, after all, I am.

And you must agree too. Here, after all, you are!

*Something* is going on here – not only on Sunday mornings, but also at various times during the week, and in the Parish House as well as here in the Meeting House – something that draws us back again and again.

We make our way here each week, just as those twenty or so folks made their way to the little Congregational Church on the island in Puget Sound, as described with amazement by Annie Dillard in our reading, made their way with their small numbers, quirky minister, flowers that didn't quite do the trick, faltering music...

I'm amazed too, that we make it *here* each week. We don't *have* to be here. No one is forcing us to be here. There are other things (dare I say it) we could be doing on a Sunday morning.

But we are here today. And many of you are here just about every Sunday. It really is quite remarkable when you think about it.

What *is* so good about being here? Why *not* just go to a lecture here, a concert there, a counselor when you need one?

Well, the Psalm we heard earlier, while maybe not answering the question altogether, puts it simply: "Behold! How good it is to dwell together in unity."

Traditionally this psalm is among those named “A Song of Ascents,” which may refer to pilgrims going to (ascending to) Jerusalem to worship at the temple there. And “unity” of the Israelite nation was a hard won unity, for which they were grateful: “Behold! How good...!”. Worship at the temple was a great blessing, not only for those worshipping, but for the effect on the wider community of the faithful, for the world really. “Behold! How good...!

The imagery of the psalm beautifully suggests this diffusive effect.

“It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard... of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.” Oil was traditionally poured over the head of the high priest when he was consecrated, and Aaron’s beard was said to be particularly long. So, dwelling together in unity is *such* a blessing...

And “the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.” Mount Hermon was known for its abundance of dew... but the mountains of Zion are two hundred miles away from Hermon! So the image of the dew running from Hermon to Zion is a powerful and beautiful image suggesting the way in which the blessing of people coming together in unity to worship and celebrate becomes a blessing almost miraculously diffuse in its effects, like ripples in a pond which go on... and on... an on.

Well, our own Old Ship Covenant suggests such a diffusive effect, perhaps less poetically, but just as faithfully in its way:

As a congregation committed to Unitarian Universalist Principles, we join with one another in the spirit of respect, reverence, humility, and love:

To seek the truth freely,  
To nurture spiritual growth and ethical commitment,  
To care for one another,  
And, seeking justice, peace, and ecological sustainability, to serve life.

Maybe we should at least have begun with the psalmist’s “Behold!” Because the affirmation really is in the same spirit. Dwelling together, worshipping together, learning together, working together... is a blessing for us... and becomes (we hope!) a blessing for the wider community, for the world... in ways we may not be able to measure, but which are surely real and which do matter.

In this spirit, then, we could think of our covenant in a simple threefold, expansive and expanding, way: We come together “for me, for us, and for everyone.”

For me. We are here for soul nourishment, to develop spiritually and ethically in the midst of a sometimes troubling world, in the midst of our own lives sometimes overflowing with sorrow and challenge.

For us. We are here to teach and learn from each other. We are here to inspire and help each other. We are here to take care of each other and – simply – to enjoy each other’s company.

For everyone. We are here to serve the world, to serve life. To be inspired here, and then to serve in ways small and large, through our daily lives, through our work, through our volunteering. And sometimes to work together for common goals of justice and peace and sustainability – whether by helping to build a Habitat house, raising funds for the UU Service Committee, or, as today, working together to reduce our collective carbon footprint.

So... who wouldn't want to be part of a community that nourishes one's soul, that offers a deep and rich community of friends and fellow-travelers, and that offers opportunities to serve and change the world for the better? "Behold! It is good!"

A few testimonials may make the point more vividly:

One of our long-time members has affirmed the importance of Old Ship in her life by quoting that wonderful line in Robert Frost's poem "The Death of the Hired Man": "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

Old Ship is like that – for all kinds of souls: rich or poor, gay or straight, old, young, in between, joyful or sad. At least we try to be like that.

Another testimonial:

Not long ago we received a note from a parishioner from afar, someone who had once been active and then moved to another part of the country. She was wanting to reserve space in the Memorial Garden – for some time in the *distant* future of course. She said that she was in doubt as to whether or not there was any sort of hereafter gathering of souls. But if there is such, she said, she wanted to be with Old Ship souls!

Old Ship is like that!

Another parishioner, now long since passed from this world, once told me that though she hadn't gone to college, the education she received through classes here several decades ago changed her life. She became a respected leading citizen of Hingham through her work for fair and subsidized housing; maybe we had something to do with that. In any case, I hope our classes and workshops and groups at Old Ship still have the capacity not just to educate, but to transform lives.

Old Ship certainly tries to be like that.

Yet another parishioner, still very much with us, once told a small group of us that she and her family joined the church for many reasons; but that one of those reasons was that if and when something bad happened to someone in their family, she wanted there to be a community of love and concern to help hold them up. In fact, they did go through a crisis, and they did feel supported by this community.

Old Ship is like that.

And at one of our Coming of Age ceremonies, many of us recall COA leader Elaine Gomez affirming that what we do with and for our children and youth may well be the most important thing we do as a congregation. You've heard the credos at those ceremonies – our youth, one after another, each in his or her own way affirming their belief in the inherent worth and dignity of each person, affirming that a free search for truth is a good thing, and affirming that they intend to make a difference in the world with their lives and their gifts. How good is that!

Old Ship is like this too.

And through Old Ship we have the opportunity to join with other Unitarian Universalists to bear witness to the suffering of others through disasters of both natural and human origins, and

to help make a difference. Just one of innumerable possible examples: As we gather today, a team led by the president of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Charlie Clements (many of you remember his preaching here last year), is in Kenya to learn more about the tragic post-election violence and suffering there and to learn specifically from UUSC partner organizations in Kenya how the UUSC can best help. Our recent donations through the Guest at Your Table program and through our Christmas Eve offering, along with regular gifts from our Coffeehouse, are helping in this good work. We can also donate individually to the Kenya Fund by going directly to [www.uusc.org](http://www.uusc.org) and we can know that our gifts will be well used in service of values we share.

So... Old Ship is like this too, a partner with Unitarian Universalists and people of good will everywhere to create more justice and peace and sustainable ways of living on this precious earth we share.

So, yes, “Behold! How good it is to dwell together in unity.” And how good to know that our worshiping together, our learning together, our caring for one another, our working together... *is* both good in itself, nourishing to our souls, and also diffusive in its effect in the wider world, whether or not we can measure these diffusive, ever-spreading effects. It does matter that we are here.

This remarkable and beautiful old Meeting House – radiant on a sunny day, welcoming always – would be of interest only to antiquarians were there not a worshiping, learning, committed, caring, loving congregation here each week. As it is... here we are. Bring us together under this roof, like a stew of many and varied ingredients, seasoned with pungent spices... stir us with music and words, reflections from the depths of our lives and hearts... and who knows what might (and does) come of it.

“Behold! How good it is to dwell together in unity.” Not perfection. Not without differences of opinion, even occasional conflict. But good.

So, in the end, I’d affirm that we are here at Old Ship for the same reason we are alive: In this world sometimes gentle and beautiful beyond words and sometimes unforgivably harsh, we are here to grow in wisdom and love, to see what we can do to ease the life of another, and to make this world a little more beautiful and peaceful along the way. And we know that all of this is often better done together, as we mutually support and love and bless one another... and the world.

So it is. So may it be.