

What Sort of Church Did You Join?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
June 14, 2020
(text from live-streamed worship)

Call to Worship

We've gathered once again for worship...
knowing we are stronger together than apart and alone...
feeling our kinship and connection helps us along the way...
experiencing our love for one another and love universal...
healing, encouraging, inspiring us for the days to come.

Lighting of the Flaming Chalice

I light the flaming chalice of our Unitarian Universalist faith.
In the words of Albert Schweitzer:
“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”

Song – Kumbaya (trad. African American)

Meditation and Prayer

May we now pause, slow down, breathe into this moment, become more fully awake to this moment we share in spirit...
And from this deeper presence in the moment, our hearts' yearnings arise, prayers to the God of our hearts, God of all blessings...
Continued prayers of gratitude... for all the helpers and healers courageous justice-seekers in our troubled land.
Prayers that the rising for justice that has begun will continue and make real and lasting change – in that spirit prayers that our heart's yearning for justice becomes the work of our hands.
And prayers holding each individual in our community of faith, in the midst of whatever personal sorrow or challenges each may be facing.
May we pause in silent communion... wherever we are... whoever we are... whatever our circumstances...

Readings

“Stand By this Faith” by Rev. Olympia Brown (1835-1926)
the first woman to be ordained by the Universalist Church

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it.

There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals.

Which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful.

Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost.

Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments for their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves.

“The Task of Religious Community” by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed
African American Unitarian Universalist minister
author of *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

Message – “What Sort of Church Did You Join?”

Years ago – actually decades ago, as I was in the midst of career discernment, discernment that included the possibility of parish ministry... I found myself wondering about the value of religious congregations, particularly liberal religious congregations such as our Unitarian Universalist churches.

After all, thought I, if you wanted “intellectual stimulation”... plenty of books to read and lectures to attend, lectures by speakers quite possibly more practiced and inspiring than the usual minister.

And if you wanted to hear beautiful music... well, there were concerts of all sorts by professional, world-renowned musicians, quite possibly, I thought then, more beautiful, with more varied styles and forms, than the music offered, often by amateur musicians, in a church.

And if you wanted to change the world... well, there were innumerable social justice organization out there probably more effective and more focused than the typical church.

Spiritual nourishment? How about meditation classes and yoga.

Counselling? Plenty of highly trained psychologists and social workers out there.

Yet here is where my career discernment led me after all, serving a Unitarian Universalist congregation for almost 33 years.

What did I figure out?

And why, after all, did you find your way here – some of you for far longer than I've been here, some of you just in recent months or years, some of you maybe just trying us out.

What sort of group, congregation, organization did you think you were joining... or exploring? What sort of group – what sort of church – do you *hope* we are... and will be?

Well, I can only speak for myself...

My discernment led me to a conclusion that I've held to for all these decades since: That yes, there are plenty of other opportunities to stretch the mind, open the heart, and nourish the spirit; and plenty of other ways to serve in the wider world, to strive to make change in the direction of more justice, peace, and sustainability... but here... in such a congregation as ours, we are held in community as whole persons, no small thing in our fragmented, rushing world.

And here, as I said in my call to worship, we know we are stronger together than when separate and alone...

Here we *feel* our kinship and connection helping us along our way...

Here we can *experience* rather than only imagine or conceptualize our love for one another and, through that, love universal... healing, encouraging, inspiring us for the days to come.

A few years ago we acquired a banner from the Unitarian Universalist Association that reads, in big, beautiful letters:

Nurture Your Spirit, Help Heal Our World.

Well, I think that says just about all that needs to be said about the unique purpose and power of a congregation.

And I don't know about you, but during these days of pandemic and the rising for justice, I feel the need more than ever for this purpose and power.

Because, to begin with, the opportunity we have here to deepen our spiritual lives feels all the more important right now, when we can so easily feel unmoored in this changed world – to deepen our spiritual lives in community as we share with one another the truths of our lives, share the questions that keep us up at night, share helping hands with one another in the midst of all the vicissitudes of our lives – and sometimes just share silent communion.

And because we have the shared opportunity here to educate ourselves to the issues we face as a nation and world and to discern how we can best make a difference, each of us and all of us working together to help heal our world also feels more important than ever.

So I don't know about you, but in relation to the challenges we collectively face in these days of living with coronavirus and reckoning with racism I would feel more alone and helpless were it not for being part of this religious community and part of our Unitarian Universalist faith across our nation and indeed around the world.

So, what sort of congregation did you, our new members and members who have been with us for decades, join?

The sort of congregation in which people feel so at home that they can speak the truths of their lives in conversations about things that matter - whether in a class... or coffee hour... or Zoom screen... as we seek to grow our souls.

The sort of congregation that teaches and learns from our children and youth, mind and heart.

The sort of congregation that, in the 60s and 70s, marched for peace during the Vietnam War and whose members supported boycotts to help farmworkers.

The sort of congregation that flew a rainbow flag when it might have been the only one in Hingham, and that was on the front lines of work for equal marriage in Massachusetts, and that supported, without blinking an eye, your minister in officiating at same sex weddings.

And... the sort of congregation that knows we need to come to terms with our own history, our stumbles and worse, as we struggle to find ways forward to do our part for racial justice.

More intimately, the sort of congregation that fills the Meeting House when a beloved elder dies, and that reaches out and holds in our hearts – and arms when we can – the bereaved.

So... whether we are worshipping and meeting and sharing on screens or in our Meeting House and Parish House, I hope we are indeed a congregation that, however imperfectly and haltingly, however much we might stumble and fall, nurtures the spirit and helps heal the world as we welcome each and every soul to our community of love, compassion, and care.

Indeed, I would not have devoted these decades of my life to Unitarian Universalism and to this Old Ship Church were we not ever striving to be this sort of congregation.

And may this striving ever be so.

Hymn – We Are a Gentle, Angry, People (Holly Near)

Closing Words and Benediction

May we be among the gentle, angry, loving people who, all together, seek to heal and help, seek to make justice and a more peaceful world.

Be well. Be safe.

Take care of yourself, take care of one another... take care of everyone!

As best we can...

May it always be so. Blessed be. Amen.