

## **Now More Than Ever**

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

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### **Reading**

Our reading this morning is taken from an address by Charles Eliot Norton, a descendant of our second minister, John Norton; this address was given in 1881 on the occasion marking the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the building of our Old Ship Meeting House.

But as the Old Meeting-house still stands essentially the same, so in spite of differences of form and statement of belief, in spite of differences of moral judgement and spiritual aim, the congregation gathers here from week to week with essentially the same purpose as that which brought our forefathers to this house, - namely, to be instructed in the truth and to study to be good. A continuous spiritual life runs through the centuries, and here its continuity is most deeply felt, for here in each generation have high ideals been quickened, pure resolves animated, and all that was best in the hearts and souls of the men and women of this town cherished, strengthened, and confirmed.

### **Sermon**

I remember very clearly a conversation I had with my father during my years in seminary. Though I was finding my studies and experiences at Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley rich and interesting, I still had my doubts about parish ministry as a career.

When Dad asked me about those doubts, I said I wondered about the value of church, since people could find interesting lectures (and maybe better speakers) elsewhere, could find good music elsewhere, and could do social justice or charitable volunteering elsewhere with organizations who are dedicated to one or another cause.

What, then was the value of church?

This conversation may have taken place before I participated in creating a program at one of the Bay Area churches that we titled something like: "How is Church Different from a Country Club?"

The only thing I recall from that conference was the essence of the message from one of our speakers which was the beginning of an answer my question. Here was a young woman who was deeply involved in social justice activities – as I recall some of it was with the local chapter of the NAACP. *And* she was also deeply involved at the First Unitarian Society of San Francisco – really one of the young pillars of that large church. She said that the other organizations with which she was connected were fine organizations doing important, even essential work. The difference for her – the huge difference – was that in church she was accepted as a whole person. For church – or

temple or mosque – is not just about one or another aspect of who we are: the social activist or the business person or lawyer or carpenter or teacher or parent. Church is about the whole of us.

This, really, was at least the seed of an answer to my doubts about the value and meaning of church – though, as I wrote in this month's Old Ship newsletter, it still took some time for this message, this truth about religious community, to fully soak in.

This truth that religious community – church, temple, mosque, sangha – is about the whole of us, mind, body, spirit; not just what we do, but who we are, the nature of our families, our unique passions, the social issues that matter most to us; the unique suffering that life has brought our way, as well as the joys in our lives.

Religious community, deep community as we might also put it, holds it all, holds us all, is interested in it all.

Why does this matter? And matter quite a lot? And perhaps matter now more than ever?

Well, first, we might want to note that this sort of thing has mattered to human beings for a long time.

In the Buddhist tradition, for example, what are called the three jewels or three refuges of Buddhism are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

The Buddha represents the ideal which is possible for each of us, stands as inspiration for our spiritual practice, and as reminder of the Buddha-nature within each one of us,

The Dharma is the teaching of Buddhism.

The Sangha narrowly understood is the community of Buddhist monks and nuns, but more broadly includes any community of those who practice Buddhism. The wisdom here is that practicing together helps us keep on; for in practicing together we learn from one another, we are strengthened when we falter, we can help others along the way when they falter.

Deep spiritual community.

In the Jewish tradition, the writer Eliezer Shore notes that “From its very inception as a nation – the deliverance from Egypt and the group revelation of God at Mount Sinai – community has been the focus and backbone of the Jewish nation.”

He goes on to affirm that the teachings in the sacred texts of Judaism are “by and large a testament of communal spirituality.” In other words, the teachings are about how we should be with one another in community, how we should treat one another in community.

Deep spiritual community.

In Christianity? Well, even before there was such a thing as “Christianity” Jesus had drawn around him a community of disciples and other followers. When Jesus was crucified this community scattered briefly; and it was only when some of them drew back

together – in community – that they once again felt they experienced the presence of their teacher and the power of his teachings.

Then, all of Paul's letters are to these little struggling communities trying to figure out what it meant to be Christian, what they should believe and how they should behave – what does it mean, after all, to, as Jesus had said “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Deep spiritual community.

The examples are endless, found in every tradition.

Including of course ours. I think Charles Eliot Norton put it quite beautifully in the reading when he affirmed back in 1881 that the purpose of our gathering here – *here* – week to week was “to be instructed in the truth and to study to be good.” And that gathering as we do has been “A continuous spiritual life [that] runs through the centuries.” And that in *gathering* “high ideals have been quickened, pure resolves animated, and all that was best in the hearts and souls of the men and women of this town cherished, strengthened, and confirmed.”

In short, gathering is not incidental to church, not by any means. Yes, we can read inspirational books on our own. Yes, we can pray or meditate on our own, for solitude in some measure is for most of us essential to the spiritual life. And yes, these days there are all sorts of “spiritual resources” as we might put it, on the internet.

But none of this – none of it – takes the place of flesh and blood community, embodied community, being together in the same room on a regular basis community.

Deep, spiritual community.

Examples and stories abound here. Your stories and mine.

Think of it:

How many candles have we lit for the joy of new births, graduations, renewed health, the shared beauties of nature?

How many candles have we lit for the sorrow of loss, illness, and hardship?

And how many times have we gathered around a dear one in our community in the midst of loss or serious illness?

How many times over the years have we celebrated our Coming of Age youth as they stand before us with utter and pure vulnerability and speak their carefully crafted credos?

How many inspiring insights have been shared in a class or forum?

How much support offered in what may have begun as a casual coffee hour conversation?

How many meals have we served – together – at Father Bill's? How many books and supplies collected for the Mather School?

How many voices and funds raised – with the mutual support of community – for social justice and peace?

Yes, a continuous spiritual life has indeed and still runs through the generations – here... now... among us.

Are we perfect? As individuals? Or as a community? Of course not. Which, actually, is one of the reasons we *need* community. I'm guessing that many of you can name times when this Old Ship community failed you or fell short in your eyes in some way or another. But here you are still – not expecting perfection (I hope not) – just community and love.

When Bronson Alcott was laying plans for his utopian community that came to be known as Fruitlands, Emerson was critical for a number of reasons – not least because he knew his friend, though a great talker, was not much for the practical and mundane details of living; but also because Emerson had come to understand precisely this, that we human beings are not perfect and that a community that pretends to the possibility of perfection is doomed from the start to fail. Emerson understood, by contrast, and rightly so, that community, most assuredly including spiritual community, must assume that imperfection is our human lot, and organize itself accordingly.

Which is what churches and other religious communities at their best try to do – with love and mutual understanding.

One more dimension of community, perhaps in some ways the most important. As I've said on other occasions: Simply our gathering together – even before we say anything, before we sing the first hymn, before I welcome us here once again – simply our gathering together reminds us, if only unconsciously, that we are not alone and isolated beings, that there is no such thing as one human being, that we are part of larger realities:

This community significantly yet only to begin with... for this gathering in community reminding us of our part in the larger tapestry of life, the network of mutuality as Dr. King named it, what Hindus call Brahman, what St. Paul called the body of Christ, part and parcel of God, as some would put it... the unity of life by whatever name.

And then, as we speak, as we sing, as we care for each other, as we work together for a better world, this experience of unity, of connection, this awakening to wholeness and love, only deepens.

It might – likely does for most of us – ebb and flow. But given time and devotion, it deepens.

As for “now more than ever”?

Perhaps it hardly needs saying that our lives these days tend to be pulled in untold numbers of directions – pulled by a variety of commitments, pulled by financial pressures, pulled perhaps most insidiously by our electronic devices.

I say “most insidiously” because the connections we have through email, texting, Twitter, Facebook, and on and on are real enough in some ways, and important enough in some ways... but in the end are pale substitutes for living, breathing community. Community that takes us in our wholeness, even or especially when we are broken.

When we need someone to hug.

Need a hand on our shoulder.

Need the look in the eyes of our neighbor in the pew or on the committee or in coffee hour or a class.

We *need* this. And the good news is that here... here... we have it.

Deep community. Spiritual community. Sangha. Meeting. Church.

Well then, how much is the deep community of Old Ship worth to each of us?

Tough question, since nothing I've been talking about can be quantified – spiritual inspiration, support in the midst of trial, shared work for justice and peace. All priceless, as the old credit card ad put it.

But... it does cost actual money to maintain and heat our buildings, to pay our staff, to plow the snow. Almost \$400,000 actually.

And yes, as one of our pledge chairs put it years ago, the good news is that we have that money! But the bad – or at least challenging – news is that right now it is in our individual pockets.

Because the reality is that about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of our annual budget comes from our pockets, our pledges and gifts. The further reality is that we've been running deficit budgets through much of the great recession – and still are running deficits... with little or nothing left to cut.

Can you quantify the value of deep spiritual community? Inspiration? Support? Love? Of course not.

But if all of this in its many manifestations – the buildings, programs, and staff – feels essential to the fullness of your living... well, your Board of Trustees and I ask you to join with us in considering a generous pledge – 2-5% of your income if that is at all possible for you. More if that that is possible for at least a few of you. And maybe this means that some of you will make a substantial increase over last year, maybe even doubling your pledge!

But whatever we can each commit for the next three years, or even just the next year, you will be helping to ensure that the spiritual life that has been a thread here through the centuries, as together we seek the truth and “study to be good”... continues and thrives.

So may it be.