

Funding Our Dreams

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

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Over the course of the years there have been many studies done on why people come to church. I am sure you can guess who has funded these studies and why. With church attendance and participation in decline throughout most of the country, many a denomination has sought the elusive answer as to “why?” So there have been various interviews, surveys and focus groups going back for as long as I have been alive.

What they found is that assumptions and expectations of the church has changed over the years. Once upon a time church attendance was just something one did. Your denominational identity was usually passed down from one’s family or barring that it was done by proximity. You attended the church that was in your neighborhood. However there was very little question about church attendance itself. It was a regular part of life; an expectation of adulthood. Sure you could switch identities, but it was relatively uncommon.

As time has gone on, there has evolved a higher degree of diversity in American religious life. No longer is one restricted to one’s given religious tradition, or even the church of you neighborhood. Indeed, participation in a church has become less central to American life than it

was one or two generations ago. The church's main competition is no longer the church of another denomination down the road. The real competition is no church at all. There are a dizzying array of things that one can choose to do on a Sunday morning. Everything from the kids' soccer game to the New York Times crossword puzzle. Thus it is remarkable when anyone comes to church at all.

I remember the first time I wandered into a Unitarian Universalist church. It was in Ann Arbor Michigan, and the congregation at that time was walking distance from my apartment. I was a college sophomore and was on the hunt. About a year earlier, shortly after arriving in college as a Freshman, I had had a crisis of faith. For some reason my liberal Christian upbringing seemed to fall flat in the face of that dizzying array of diversity that I was experiencing. New people, new cultures, new ideas – the old ways of thinking didn't work for me anymore. I was a man in transition; I knew what I was moving away from but did not have a sense of what I was moving towards. And so I went on a search.

That story of spiritual crisis that leads to a search, it turns out, is the more typical reason for why people come to church these days. It is not so much because that is what you were raised; that is still the reason for some of course. But far more show up, not just at the UU Church but any church, because something has happened in their life. It might have been a divorce, a so-called "mid-life crisis," a child that starts asking questions about religion to which the parent has no ready answer, or grieving over a loss. In most cases this transition has left the person feeling lonely, isolated, and without meaning. And so they come to the doors of the

church. Actually these days they come to the website first, and then to the doors of the church.

That was what I did some twenty years ago. In preparing for this morning, I realized that I have now been a Unitarian Universalist just a hair longer than my life before I found our faith. I came to that first Sunday and heard a stimulating sermon, saw the blooming of spring outside the windows of the sanctuary in the memorial garden, was sincerely and earnestly invited to stay after the service to meet people, and I immediately bolted for the door as soon the thing was over! I was a Membership Committee's worst nightmare; the new person that comes regularly, that people can see is there, but who refuses to stick around long enough to talk to anyone. I was hesitant mostly because I needed to see if this was the place for me. But of course it later occurred to me that I would never know that unless I actually talked to someone. Church is not just a series of nice ideas presented in a twenty minute talk. It is a community that embraces values and lives them out.

This experience taught me a great deal when I eventually entered the Unitarian Universalist ministry. As time has gone on, and I have spoken to and gotten to know many many people who have come through our doors to test the waters of Unitarian Universalism, I have come to recognize a bit of myself in their stories. Not universally, of course, but in many cases people come to us with broken hearts. That was what I had when I first came. And I suspect that I am not alone. Think back to that first Sunday here. What prompted you to take that brave step to walk through those double doors with the impressive quotes on it? It may have

been last week, last month, or last decade, but I am willing to bet that the reason was very personal. If you reflect on it long enough, you may actually be able to trace it back to your own broken heart at that moment in your life.

But why church? Why would that be the place you go if you had a broken heart, or facing a difficult situation in your life? There are lots of preachers on TV. There are plenty of books in the library to instruct you on sitting Zen meditation. There are tons of self-help gurus and motivational speakers you can follow on Twitter. I think it is because of a unique vision we have here at the Unitarian Universalist church. It is a vision you have heard a number of times before, one we recite in our Unison Affirmation, and one that is our theme for our annual campaign this year: the Beloved Community. Obviously someone is feeling lonely or isolated, joining a community makes sense. But this morning I want to focus on the word "Beloved" because not just any old kind of community will do. Beloved is a key modifier on the noun.

It was about three six months into my visiting and bolting routine at the UU church in Ann Arbor when I finally stayed for coffee hour and talked to someone. And as it turned out they were not as scary as I had imagined them to be. They were quite nice actually. The church in those days was comparable in size to First Unitarian Church of Wilmington now, so like us there were a number of groups and programs going on. Ann Arbor is a college town, so there were a lot of people in the congregation who were either students or professors. I happened to find a group of people who were mostly students or recent graduates who were still living

in town. They had a little group going, and I started to hang out with them. As is true for most people searching with a broken heart, the remedy was as it has always been: a group of people similar to myself who shared my basic outlook on life. It was a powerful affirmation and the perfect balm for my loneliness.

As time went by I got more active in things beyond my immediate circle. I took a Building Your Own Theology class that introduced me to a whole new circle of folks at the church. I taught RE. I helped out in some of the social justice programs the church did for the local homeless population. Soon I considered the church I had once feared my home away from home.

Beloved community. Beloved. I think there are at least three aspects of being a beloved community. Two of them are perhaps self-evident. A beloved community is a place where we give love to others, and we feel loved in return. It doesn't happen instantly, and not every church is for everyone, but a beloved community makes room for people and gives them some assistance in loving and being loved. Note that I did not stipulate the kind of people who have to be in this church or what they do to express love to each other. Too often we assume that as long as we can get everything perfect; the right procedure in place, the right person on the Board, the right sermon to be preached, the right music played in worship, then we will be set and people will flock to us like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. However a Beloved Community has nothing to do with perfection. In that small circle of students I met in Ann Arbor there were people who were emotionally needy, who were selfish, who were doormats

who let their girlfriends walk all over them, there was even one fellow who was so verbally abusive that after a long and painful process he was asked to leave the group. While we hold up the Beloved Community as a religious ideal, and an integral spiritual practice I would say, we should be under no illusions that it implies perfection. Loving someone else means loving them as they are. Yes there are limits, and we occasionally need to impose order on those who would be disrespectful of others for the good of the whole, but we cannot wait for people to be 100% spiritually and emotionally grounded human beings before we love them. For it is because they love us that we are able to grow ourselves.

The first two aspects of the Beloved Community are loving others, and feeling loved in return. The third aspect gets expressed in different ways by different people. It is expressing the love of the universe for us. In some churches this is simply labeled as "God" and it is left at that. Unitarian Universalism is more humble in our labeling. Some people may not have a symbol or an expression for love that is beyond human relationships – hence the name Humanism. For others though, there is a feeling that the moral arc of the universe is long and that it bends toward justice. You may want to call that "God" as our Universalist ancestors did – proclaiming a God of unlimited and infinite love, or you can call it something else such as the Tao or the Compassion of Amida Buddha or the Goddess. Regardless of its name or expression love moves beyond our temporal lives and makes an impression on the people we leave behind once we are gone.

There are so many examples that we see every day here at First Unitarian Church of how we live out that dream of becoming the Beloved Community. I hear about it from the Connection Circles and small groups we have. There people have a very tangible experience of giving love to others and feeling loved in return. This experience is introduced to people as soon as they consider joining the church. The newcomer class that Rev. Michelle leads has been specifically designed to help bring about these connections with other new people. Other groups have a specific area of interest such as social justice, metaphysical spirituality, and more recently humor. Thanks to programs like these, very intentionally created to create the beloved community, we were able to report to the UUA our first net increase in membership in four years. That is the first year of these programs begin run, so their effectiveness is very clear.

Of course the Beloved Community is not just for new people; it's for everyone. We have new ways of connecting people into leadership, as you may have seen from the new gifts and talents inventory last week. If you are unfamiliar with it, stay tuned, there will be plenty more in the immediate future. We have revamped the youth program so that the youth of the church are more fully integrated into the life of the congregation and not relegated to a dark and nasty classroom. This has been the year of social justice and reaching out beyond ourselves, from a revamped and reinvigorated ILYA program, to the Martin Luther King Day of service and community concert, to hosting a panel of African American judges. Our Unitarian Universalist values have been reaching out beyond the confines of 703 Halstead Road.

Of course we all know about the changes to staff that need to happen over the next couple of years. As one of the people who made those decisions, I can assure you that it was not an easy thing to do. However, we are committed to responsible stewardship of our financial resources as well as our staffing resources. Although the change is necessary, and many of you have affirmed that, it is still painful. It is my privilege to work with our staff each and every day, and trying to imagine the future is a challenge. Not an obstacle impossible to overcome, but a challenge.

Just because a change is painful doesn't mean you are not on the right path. Sometimes just the opposite. Why was Chuck Yeager the first person to break the sound barrier? When the plane was shaking, and rocking, and felt like it was about to fall apart because it was approaching that physical limit, other pilots eased off the throttle. Chuck Yeager went faster. He knew all that shaking and chaos meant he was getting closer to his goal, his vision of what he wanted to accomplish. I think this is a great metaphor for the mission-centered church. If we are serious about becoming a beloved community, then we should push ourselves to limit in trying to achieve that goal. At times our financial resources might start rumbling, our volunteers shaking and vibrating, our staff seemingly on the very edge of what seems possible. The author and church consultant Gary McIntosh observed that churches that are declining focus on growth, but churches that are growing focus on mission. We dream of funding our vision of becoming a beloved community. We are very close to that dream becoming a reality.

My colleague Rev. Vanessa Southern, preaching to the General Assembly last spring, proclaimed that we cannot fund our dreams on starvation budgets. We have had many conversations over the last year about how our giving is too concentrated on a few individuals at the top who cannot maintain that level over the long term. Today is a great day because today we have the opportunity to solve that problem. By spreading out our giving in a more even manner we can avoid the budget crises of the past few years. Today is your chance to fix that problem.

The solution is simple. Make it a goal to give 3% of your income as your contribution to First Unitarian Church. Imagine if you had taken your broken heart to the Mormon Church or the Baptists; they would be asking you for 10% right about now. The UUA even recommends 5%. But you know if everyone gave just 3% of their income to the church, then our income would be far more stable and reliable than it is today. For some of you, you are giving way more than 3%. To that group I say, "Did I say 3%? I meant 13%!" No just kidding. But if you are there then you can feel good that you have accomplished an important spiritual goal. If you can't quite get to 3% this year, then increase your pledge by 25% from last year until you get to the 3% goal. That is just a one quarter increase. But doing that over the course of a few years will get you to the 3% goal.

So many broken hearts come through our doors every week. Many of them find here the beloved community they are looking for. It is because of you and your generous gifts of time, energy, and yes money that they are able to find a place to heal those broken hearts. During our musical interlude the ushers will distribute pledge cards and writing

implements for you to make your commitment to embracing beloved community. At the conclusion of the service there will be baskets where you can drop off your pledge card after filling it out. Then please, please, please join us at the Tallyville Firehall so that we can express our thanks by doing what we do best: enjoying each other's company and fellowship as a beloved community. Thank you for your generosity. Amen Blessed Be.