

“What’s A Church For?”
Stewardship Sunday and Flower Communion Sunday
April 3, 2005
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Call to Worship

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.
(Robert Frost, from “A Prayer in Spring”)

Lighting the Chalice (Congregational Covenant Statement, spoken in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: Some things will never change. Some things will always be the same.

CONGREGATION: The glitter of sunlight on roughened water, the glory of the stars, the innocence of morning, the smell of the sea in harbors;

MINISTER: The voice of forest water in the night, a woman’s laughter in the dark, the clean hard rattle of raked gravel, the cricketing stitch of mid-day in hot meadows, the delicate web of children’s voices in bright air;

CONGREGATION: The leaf, the blade, the flower, the wind that cries and sleeps and wakes again, the trees whose stiff arms clash and tremble in the dark, and the dust of lovers long since buried in the earth;

MINISTER: The feathery blur and smoky buddings of young boughs, and something there that comes and goes and never can be captured;

CONGREGATION: The tarantula, the adder, and the asp also will never change. Pain and death will always be the same.

MINISTER: But under the pavements trembling like a pulse, under the buildings trembling like a cry, under the waste of time, under the hoof of the beast above the broken bones of cities, there will be something growing like a flower –

CONGREGATION: Something bursting from the earth again, forever deathless, faithful, coming into life again like April.

(Thomas Wolf, The Web and the Rock, adapted)

Flower Communion Ceremony

Flowers and infinity

The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has a meditation based on the poem of a friend who died a number of years ago at the age of 28 in Vietnam. The little poem, found in his effects after his death, reads as follows:

Standing quietly by the fence,
you smile your wondrous smile.
I am speechless, and my senses are filled
by the sounds of your beautiful song.
Beginningless and endless
I bow deeply to you.

Who is the “you” to whom this little poem is addressed – this “you standing quietly by the fence smiling this wondrous smile?” It is not a human, as one might first think; it is a flower. In the flower standing by the fence the young man sees that which is beginningless and endless and he bows to it.

English poet William Blake also saw infinity in a flower:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour...
(William Blake, from “Áuguries of Innocence”)

The first of these poems, the one written by Thich Nhat Hanh’s friend, is connected to a traditional Buddhist story, a story told in many versions:

The Buddha is sitting before a large assembly of his followers. Eagerly they await a sermon from him. Instead of speaking, however, he simply holds up a flower. For a long time he does not speak, but simply holds the flower. He twirls the flower in his fingers. Then in that uncomfortable silence suddenly the Buddha smiles.

Why does the Buddha smile? Because someone in the audience has smiled first. One person, but only one, Mahakashyapa by name, the one who would become the Buddha’s successor to pass on his teaching, smiled. He got it; he got the Buddha’s meaning.

What was that meaning? Of course, it has been endlessly discussed and debated by the Buddha's followers.

For Thich Nhat Hanh it is the message of mindfulness. When the Buddha holds up a flower, he wants you to see the flower. He wants you to be *mindful* of the flower. He doesn't want you to spin a theory about the flower but simply to see the flower ... as you are able.

The meaning of Flower Communion

Today near the beginning of Spring, along with many other Unitarian Universalist congregations at this time of the year, we celebrate a Flower Communion. This is a simple ritual in which each individual in the congregation is invited to bring a flower to the sanctuary, place it in a vase along with flowers that others have brought, and then in a simple processional select a flower different than the one you brought as a source for meditation and reflection.

In this simple ceremony we are called to do two things:

First, we are called to simply see – it's not so simple – the flower we have chosen.

Secondly, we are called to see ourselves as a flower – as a singular, beautiful, fragrant, holy, and fragile creature that has sprung from the earth, that has mysteriously arisen from out of the depths of Being itself, and who is here on this earth above ground for a short time in midst of others who are also here on this earth for a short time.

The origin of Flower Communion

This simple Flower Communion ceremony was introduced to the Unitarian congregations of America in the mid-1900's by a minister from Czechoslovakia named Norbek Capek. At one time Rev. Capek led the largest Unitarian congregation in the world, a congregation of 5000 members in the beautiful city of Prague in what is now called the Czech Republic. That congregation was decimated by both World War II and the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia following World War II and Rev. Capek himself was arrested, imprisoned, and executed in 1942 in a concentration camp in Dachau, Germany.

The congregation he built still exists and is trying to re-construct itself, and the Flower Communion ceremony he initiated lives on in many congregations. When Rev. Capek would lead this ceremony he would offer a prayer of consecration for the flowers brought to the service. So before we come forward to select a flower from these vases, let us join together in prayer as I read Rev. Capek's "Prayer for the consecration of Flowers."

Prayer for the Consecration of the Flowers

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these, thy messengers of fellowship and love. May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection and devotion to thy holy will. May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing alike. May we cherish friendship as one of thy most precious gifts. May we not let awareness of another's talents discourage us or sully our relationship, but may we realize that whatever we can do, great or small, the efforts of all of us are needed to do thy work in this world. Amen.

The processional

Now I invite each of you, in meditative silence, to come forward down the outside aisles beginning with the back rows, select a flower from the vases that attracts your attention, then return quietly to your seats up the center aisle. After everyone has selected a flower and returned to their seats, we will stand and sing the verses of hymn #305, *De Colores*, and on the final verse make our arch for the children to go to their classrooms.

Reading

In addition to this Sunday being "Flower Communion Sunday," it is also "Stewardship Sunday." This is the Sunday set aside each year for us as individuals and families to consider our financial responsibility to this Fellowship.

Since money is one of the chief ways by which we measure value in our lives – that is, we contribute our money to that which has value for us – it is fitting to ask at this time about the value of this religious community in our lives.

Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams said that what people in our day are primarily looking for from a religious organization are two things: a sense of ultimacy and a sense of intimacy.

Ultimacy and intimacy.

Ultimacy has to do with what can be called the "vertical dimension" of our lives. So much of modern life seems to be lived at the horizontal level – flat, rushed, disconnected, void of meaning and avoiding meaning; it's lived only on the surface. Thus we long to slow down, to seek a center, to be connected in depth, and to be ground-rooted. That's ultimacy.

And intimacy has to do with feeling yourself to be part of a community of shared value and interest, part of a community with whom you share a sense of what is ultimate, meaningful, and full of value; a community with whom you can mark the passages and transitions of a life, with whom you can both celebrate and mourn, a community that supports you and is concerned with your well-being. That's intimacy.

Ultimacy and intimacy. Modern religion, if it's working, says James Luther Adams, will assist us in meeting these two human needs.

But these two human needs, of course, are not just current human needs; they are long-standing human needs. In the New Testament scriptures, for example, when Jesus is asked about the greatest of the religious commandments or about what is needed to inherit eternal life, he summarizes the heart of the religious enterprise in just this way, namely: love God – that which is ultimate – above all; and, secondly, love your neighbor as yourself. There you have both ultimacy and intimacy in one package.

I will read two different versions of these summary statements by Jesus, the first from the Gospel of Matthew 22:34-40, in which Jesus is asked about the greatest of the commandments:

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ He [Jesus] said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

And then there's another version of the same encounter found in the Gospel of Luke. In this version, however, it is the lawyer who gives the summary statement of the heart of religion and Jesus who affirms the correctness of his summary with the admonition to the lawyer to put into practice what he knows. From Luke 10:25-28:

²⁵And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and made trial of him [Jesus], saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶And he [Jesus] said unto him, “What is written in the law? how readest thou?” ²⁷And he [the lawyer] answering said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.” ²⁸And he [Jesus] said unto him, “Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.”

“WHAT’S A CHURCH FOR?”

Introduction

I don't believe in trying to convince people to support what they don't really want to support any more than I believe in trying to convince people to believe what they don't really believe.

On the other hand, I do believe in sharing my own beliefs and in asking others to think about theirs. I appreciate help from others in that regard and I am willing to play that role for others.

One of the beliefs I hold, one I will share with you on this Stewardship Sunday morning, is a belief in the value of and need for religious organizations, particularly of the sort represented here by this Fellowship.

I suppose it ought not to be especially surprising to you that I would hold such a belief since my life-work has been involved in organized religion, and, quite frankly, I have never been able to see myself fully in any other kind of work. Already as a youngster of ten years old I was drawn to the ministry. I prepared for it through college and seminary; and it has been the labor to which I have happily given myself for about thirty years now. So: “*caveat emptor*,” “buyer beware.”

An overview of religion

What I'd like to do this morning is to give a brief overview of religion and the need for it, starting with religion broadly defined and then moving more narrowly to liberal religion and to this particular congregation.

I find sometimes that persons in liberal religious institutions, in their need and desire to put some distance between themselves and more traditional and orthodox religious institutions, overlook the common quest and the common structures that underlie both liberal and orthodox religious institutions.

So I want to begin with a brief summary of the various dimensions of religious organizations – that is to say, the typical roles, functions, and purposes that religions world-wide have played in the lives of individuals and communities whether those religions are literal or liberal, creedal or non-creedal.

For this summary I'm turning to a very fine scholar of world religions who has the unusual name of Ninian Smart. Dr. Smart – aptly named, I believe – is the author of a comparative study of religion titled, The Religious Experience of Mankind.

In the introduction to this study he refers to religion as a “six-dimensional organism.” In other words, in his analysis of religions throughout history and the world, he finds that they typically involve six different dimensions of human reality. I will now briefly summarize those six dimensions for you:

1) The ritual dimension

First, there is the “ritual dimension” of religion. This is the dimension in which inner intentions and sensibilities are given expression in outer forms of structure and behavior.

Just a few weeks ago Peggy Albers spoke in this sanctuary of the everyday rituals that regulate our lives and add meaning to them. And certainly ritual is part and parcel of all religious organizations, including this one. This service in which we are now participating is a ritual.

And this lovely sanctuary in which we have gathered was constructed as a housing for the ritual dimension of religion. Here is this *special* building, which was felt to be of sufficient importance and value to be built by the manual labor of the members itself, is a housing in which we give ritual form and concrete expression to our sense of place in the world and the universe.

Here in this building we light our chalice, sing our songs, read our scriptures, enter into our meditations, express our individual sorrows and joys, tell our stories, share our truths, and mark the passages and transitions of our lives.

We give outer form to inner feeling; we give ritual expression to what is most moving and sacred to us. This has to do with the “ritual dimension” of religion.

2) The mythological dimension

Secondly, there is the “mythological dimension” of religion. This has to do with the important stories that we tell, the stories in which our lives are embedded, the stories that make sense of our lives.

Myth here does not imply one way or the other whether the story is historically actual or historically fictional. The function of myth in religion, as Prof. Paul Laughlin says, is to “convey spiritual truths.” These are the truths by which we live our lives, spiritual truths, which, as he says, “are more profound than factual truth or truthful facts.”

The stories that shape our lives in this religious community are not limited to just one stream of spiritual inspiration. Here we are encouraged to read and learn from not only a variety of traditional scriptural sources but from authors, writers, and poets of all times and places, including our own time, for we believe that revelation is not sealed.

And we gather our stories from ourselves as well for we don’t exclude the possibility of revelation and inspiration being close at hand. The greatest story ever told may not only be still unfolding and developing but it may be very near at hand.

This is the “mythological dimension” of religion.

3) The doctrinal dimension

Thirdly, there is what Ninian Smart calls the “doctrinal dimension” of religion. The doctrinal dimension has to do with an attempt to give system, power and intellectual clarity to one’s religious approach and faith.

In this dimension of religion there is an attempt to bring the rational mind into relationship with what is essentially a non-rational enterprise – not irrational, but non-rational – for religion, to my rational mind, arises out of the body and blood, the heart and the soul, and not first of all the intellect. Nevertheless, the intellect has its rights that need to be honored and ought not to be abrogated.

And though we say that ours is not a creedal faith with a set of doctrines systematically in place, certainly our faith is not lacking in an attempt to apply the intellect to matters of faith and religion. Indeed, often our religious approach is criticized, and perhaps not without cause, for being dominated by the head, the intellect. But whether or not that criticism is warranted, ours is an approach that takes very seriously the intellect and the rights of the rational mind.

This is related to the “doctrinal dimension” of religion.

4) The ethical dimension

Fourthly, there is the “ethical dimension” of religion. This has to do with the code of ethics that religions propound and the question of how to live concretely and practically in this world – how to be a neighbor to other humans and how to relate to the non-human world and the earth itself.

Certainly ours is a religious approach in which questions of how we should live concretely in *this* world are at the very core of our faith:

How should we construct our individual lives?

How should we shape our community?

How should we promote justice in the world?

All this has to do with the “ethical dimension” of religion.

5) The social dimension

Fifthly, there is the “social dimension” of religion, which has to do with the social and communal shape of our lives.

One of the functions of religious organizations and institutions – an increasingly important one in our time because of the scatter and mobility of our lives, as I mentioned this in the introduction to my reading – is to provide a social center for people: an opportunity for people to come together in social communion; to get to know each other; to raise their families together; to care for each other in need; to celebrate occasions of joy, sorrow, and times of passage; and simply to take pleasure in the company of fellow humans.

Port Townsend has a stronger community sense than many communities – is more intentional about community than most places – and this can go a long way in meeting our human social needs. Yet there are very few members of this congregation who actually grew up in this community. And so this religious organization also meets the social needs of many persons who have come to Port Townsend.

This has to do with the “social dimension” of religion.

6) The experiential dimension

Sixthly and finally, there is what Ninian Smart calls the “experiential dimension” of religion. This has to do with the most personal and individual aspect of religion, namely, one’s sense of being connected to what is most real.

Ultimately organized religion is organized to assist one in communing and connecting with what is ultimate, with helping one to touch the magic at the heart of the universe, however one conceives that and by whatever name one calls that.

Religion in this respect – again as I mentioned in the introduction to my reading – has to do with pointing us to the depth dimension of our life, the vertical within the horizontal, the sacred time that exists within calendar and clock-time.

The experiential dimension of religion has to do with awakening the individual to a sense of wonder and participation in what is ultimately the mysterious reality in which we find ourselves.

I would like to think that you come to this Fellowship and this special hour with the expectation that you will be invited and called to drop a level or two below the surface of your daily life to reflect upon the mystery of your being – to feel and experience your kinship with the unnameable, unoriginated, and infinite power of Life and Being out of which you have come and back into which one day you will fall.

This is the “experiential dimension” of religion.

These, then, are the six dimensions of organized religion, as Ninian Smart has delineated them: the ritual, mythological, doctrinal, social, ethical, and experiential dimensions. They are the ground and substance of religious institutions in general, the broader context of all organized religion.

Liberal religion

Within this broader context of religion there is what is called, “liberal religion,” of which the Unitarian Universalist congregations are a part. Briefly, what does it mean to be a “liberal” in religion and what is a *liberal* religious organization about and for?

Over the years I have delivered a good number of sermons on this subject, but perhaps, given my time constraints, I can get at the heart of it with a personal example.

Like a good many of you I grew up, not in a religiously liberal tradition, but in an orthodox religious tradition. I know from personal experience the point at which I moved from orthodox to liberal religion. I was old enough, and studied enough, and aware enough of the consequences, to know where the line was and when I was crossing it.

And even though the distance across a line is not large in terms of breadth, it can still be a most arduous journey.

The line to be crossed had to do with the surrender to outside authority and tradition in matters of faith and religious philosophy. The authority in my particular case was the Bible as interpreted by the creeds, confessions and councils of the Calvinist heritage in which I had been raised.

For years I struggled to bring my thoughts into line with the teachings of these inherited traditions and authorities. Finally, it was all too much and I said, “enough” and “no more.” “From this point on, in all humility, the questions will be my questions, the answers will be my answers, the thoughts my thoughts, and the feelings my feelings.”

And so inwardly I said to St. Paul and to St. Augustine and to John Calvin and even to Jesus of Nazareth, “I join you in your search for truth, beauty and goodness, for meaning, value and worth. You found your way in your way; I claim the same human right.”

I remember a particularly poignant moment in this unfolding drama. It was after I had crossed the line and had come to this way of thinking, but I was still doing graduate work in the Calvinist seminary in which I had studied. And I was speaking with the professor who had been my mentor, the teacher I most admired, whose every class I had taken. He was freshness and light for me; he encouraged my questions and brilliantly responded to them.

But now I was really pushing the envelope, at least in the context of that tradition, and I asked a question that implied that the Christ might not be the final revelation. And I don't know whether my much admired professor was trying to save me from trouble in our community, or whether this was a question he himself was not willing to address, but at any rate, he said to me, “Bruce, you can't ask that question.”

But, of course, I had asked the question, and I would continue to ask that question and many other questions as well ... for by now I had crossed the line. I had through long struggle become what is called, or what I would call, a “religious liberal,” that is, one who takes the inherited tradition as a resource not an authority, as a place of departure rather than a place of arrival.

This approach is at the heart of my “chosen faith.” It's at the center of my sense of what it means to be religious. Personally, it means a great deal to me to be part of a religious organization that honors this principle of personal and individual authority in matters of faith and religion in contrast to the authority of creed, council, or religious official.

Conclusion

This congregation, which belongs to this religiously liberal tradition, has made some very dramatic organizational leaps in the last few years. The brochure that you should receive in the mail from the Stewardship Committee in this coming week will reveal an

organization that has moved from an annual operating budget of less than \$18,000 in 1995 to an operating budget of \$174,000 this past year.

And now again this year the Stewardship Committee is recommending another \$25,000 increase over last year's level – an increase that is more than the whole budget just ten years ago. The reason for this increase, in addition to the rise in costs due to typical inflation, is to reach a level of financial strength so that if this congregation decides to move forward with an expansion program in the next couple of years it will be in a position to do so – the yearly operational budget will be in place so we won't have to worry too much about that.

This is what the Stewardship Committee, as I understand it, is asking you to consider in the next couple of weeks.

At the same time, the Long-range Planning Committee is asking you to begin to think about the future shape of this place. They are now working to organize opportunities to consider imagining and visualizing what that future might be.

And though I've been here only a little over a half a year, I have gained a sense of what this can-do Fellowship has been in the past, and I also have been developing some sense of what possibilities there might be in its future.

But as I tried to say at my Installation Ceremony: whatever decisions for the future are made, and however we decide to proceed, I would have us first of all open our eyes to what is already here and to what this religious fellowship already means. I would have us enjoy it and be grateful for its presence in our lives; be grateful for its value, worth, and meaning; so that we work together toward the future out of that abundant and delightful present.

Benediction

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms
And the larger circle of lovers,
Whose hands are joined in a dance.
And the larger circle of all creatures,
Passing in and out of life,
Who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments.

(Wendell Berry)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again. Amen.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on “Stewardship Sunday,” April 3, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)