"Not our Brother's Keeper, but…"
Rev. Sue Phillips
Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
March 14, 2010

It is such a pleasure to stand in this proud pulpit, and to look out at all of you in this beautiful sanctuary. Thank you for the honor of being with you, and for the special privilege of sharing this service with my friend Frank. You have distinguished yourselves not only by your hospitality but by showing up. In the not-so-distant past when folks heard someone from the District was coming to their congregation they would often run in the opposite direction, fearing that they were in trouble, or that god forbid they were about to be told what to do. But have no fear! The simple reason I am here with you is because Frank is my brother.

Frank and I look a bit alike this morning – we're both robed, and somewhere in middle age (though truth be told I am CONSIDERABLY younger even though I have a lot more gray hair) – we're both white, obviously, and ministers, true. But Frank and I were never meant to be friends. He's from some state south of the Mason-Dixon line and I'm a Midwesterner. He is kind of self-contained and charming, and I'm something of a rabble rouser. He's a straight guy and I'm not. He tends toward Christianity and I favor a Buddhist transcendentalist hybrid.

Frank and I are SO different, not just by virtue of our backgrounds and identities but because of significant theological differences that not so many years ago would have kept us from talking much less being friends. And yet here we are this morning, sharing these robes, this pulpit, and you.

Frank is my brother, and I am his sister, and we love each other. How did this little miracle happen?

I believe the blessing of our friendship was born 350 years ago when a group of our religious ancestors got together and generated an idea that was so radical, so powerful, that it has fueled relationships like ours for hundreds of years. The idea they had is called congregational polity. Congregational *what*? Congregational polity. Polity by the way is just a fancy word for how people organize themselves – your congregation has a polity – you have an elected board and an annual meeting. That's polity at work, but it's also about much more than that. And that story, too, begins three centuries ago.

Most Unitarian Universalists know that our religious forbears came to the New World because they were being persecuted for their beliefs in Europe.

The UU historian Alice Blair Wesley tells us that "English Puritans had tried for decades… to reform the Church of England… They were thwarted, persecuted, and punished by the monarchs and bishops for holding what we would call study groups and conferences. Eventually the Puritans concluded that something had gone terribly (wrong) in a Church that would not allow such innocent… gatherings."[1] Generally speaking, the theological disagreements the Puritans had with the Church of England and other reformation churches were minute by today's standards. So while the persecution was real, theological differences had very little to do with why the Puritans "made the brave and costly choice to cross the Atlantic and settle in a wilderness."[2]

The Puritans came to the New World because they wanted to be free to create their own churches, and call their own ministers, to worship when and where they wanted. They wanted lay people rather than bishops to be in charge. They wanted to escape the authority of decidedly man-made church hierarchies, which these deeply religious people felt infringed upon pure Christianity. So they came to this continent and founded congregations in Salem and Cape Ann, in Hingham and Boston and Cambridge.

The innovations our religious ancestors introduced in the New World were not primarily theological: the message preached from those pulpits would not have been very different from what was preached in English towns of the same names. What made the Puritans radical was not so much their theology, but their polity. They had dramatic new ideas about each congregation being autonomous, with the freedom to act according to their conscience. But they didn't stop there.

So it's 1648, just a few years after the first settlers arrived in Massachusetts. Life was unbelievably hard, with limited food, rampant disease, and terrible weather. There were only a few settlements by then, with about 20,000 white people clustered in small villages in and around Boston, each with its own independent church. After building rough-hewn homes and getting crops in the ground, what's one of the first things community leaders did? They called a meeting to talk about church. Are these our people or what! And so leaders gathered in a swampy village just over the Charles River from Boston to talk about how the new communities could support each other while still holding on to their autonomy. Together they created an amazing covenant known as the Cambridge Platform.

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[1] Alice Blair Wesley, Introduction to "The Cambridge Platform Contemporary Reader's Edition," edited by Peter Hughes (Boston, Skinner House Books, 2008), p. i.

[2] Wesley, p. xi.

Imagine this for just a second – the communities were miles and miles apart, people traveled primarily on foot or by horse if they were really lucky, and for months out of the year the villages were snowbound. But despite all the hardships they faced, their primary concern was how to help each other and to stay in relationship. You heard the fancy words they used in our reading this morning.

*…Although Churches be distinct… and equall, and therefore have not dominion over one another, yet all the churches ought to preserve Church-communion one with another, because they are all united unto Christ, not only as a mysticall, but as a politicall head…*

Even through the strange 17th century syntax you heard their desire to band together in the spirit of neighborly love, all the while preserving their independence. The Cambridge Platform spells out all the rights of local congregations that we still enjoy today: each church could elect its own leaders and minister, and worship in a format of its choosing. Given their history of religious persecution, the Puritans demanded that local churches be free from all outside control. But even so, prophetically so, the covenant they created stressed not the *autonomy* of churches but their *communion*.

They promised to care for one another, to pray for each other. They promised to ask each other for advice when they were having trouble or needed to resolve disputes. If a congregation was divided they were specifically not to think of those difficulties as "none of anyone else's business," but to seek counsel from their neighbors. The churches promised to share celebrations like moving into a new building or installing a new minister, and they asked their ministers to preach sometimes at neighboring churches. The covenant asked congregations to welcome visiting members from other churches, to care for them and treat them as their own. And finally, the churches promised to help each other in times of trouble, to share financial resources, pastoral care, and ministerial help in times of catastrophe.

Most of us sitting in the pews on Sunday morning take pride in the autonomy of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill which as you know calls its own minister, creates its own annual budget, and decides which symbols adorn its sanctuary. All those important decisions are yours and yours alone.

This same sense of congregational independence was equally prized by our Puritan forebears – indeed they were its authors. But those wise people also knew that unchecked autonomy is no healthier for individual churches than it is for individual people. They knew that independent congregations – like

people – are stronger when they band together. And so the early churches joined in a covenant, promising each other "care, consultation, admonition, participation, recommendation, and relief." This is congregational polity.

And this is why I am here.

And this is why the Massachusetts Bay District of UU Congregations and the Unitarian Universalist Association exist: to help congregations help each other. Fifty five congregations come together in the Mass Bay District, from Haverhill to Concord, and from Boston to Quincy to Framingham. Eleven hundred congregations across the country make up the UUA. The District and the UUA aren't some hierarchy from on high – trust me no one wears a Bishop's mitre or red shoes at 25 Beacon Street. No. The District and the UUA is YOU, and me, and the people sitting in the pews in Salem and Hingham and Cambridge, at All Souls in Washington DC, and Third Unitarian in Chicago and First UU Church in San Diego and everywhere in between.

When you all were searching for a new minister, you needed someone to vouch that your candidate had gone to divinity school, and that he was suitable for the ministry. And while you alone had the power to choose your minister, you didn't have to figure that whole process out by yourself – the association of congregations was there to help. When you look for religious education curriculum to teach your children about neighboring faiths, and to hold them during their coming of age, you turn to your sister congregations of the UUA. When your congregation wants to nurture the spiritual leadership of your board members, or help your worship committee learn how to create great worship, you turn to the Mass Bay District for help.

When you pay your district and UUA dues, when you come to district trainings to share your wisdom with other lay leaders, when you send delegates to General Assembly, and when you welcome me to your pulpit, you are doing exactly what our ancestors did. You are living a faith that says while our independence is important, our enduring strength comes from our connections. You have asked your sister congregations for help when you need it for their witness when it's time to celebrate, and when they have needed help and support you all have reached out a helping hand. All this is congregational polity at work.

Our polity gives us more than just institutional support, as important at that is. Our polity gives us brothers and sisters. I know Frank because his home congregation, South Church in Portsmouth New Hampshire, was a teaching congregation that trained ministerial interns. Trust me when I tell you that South Church did not need any more ministers. But that congregation knew they had something special to share, so they devoted their resources to

nurturing the people who would become other people's ministers. So when my home church, the Unitarian Society of Northampton and Florence in Massachusetts, decided to send forth its Board President to pursue the ministry, South Church invited me to be their intern. Meanwhile, the First Religious Society of Newburyport welcomed Frank as their intern, the Keene New Hampshire Unitarian Universalist Church called me, and later North Parish of North Andover hired Frank as their Assistant Minister. We know how this little story turns out. You called Frank to serve you here in Haverhill and I joined the staff of the Massachusetts Bay District of UU Congregations.

Frank and I love each other because six congregations in three districts did exactly what our Puritan ancestors called them to do: to support each other, to teach each other, to care for and minister to one another. There are more than a thousand people in those six congregations, and more than 25,000 people in those three districts. We are not connected because of a denominational flow chart, or an ecclesiastical hierarchy thousands of miles away, or even by our shared history or theological pedigree. No. We are connected in this place on this day simply because Frank's people reached out to my people.

Our shared faith teaches us that we are not our brothers' and sisters' keeper. We are rightfully proud of our independence and freedom to worship according to our understanding of God's call. But congregational polity is so much more than a justification for independence. It is the vehicle of *interdependence*. We may not be our brothers' and sisters' keeper, but through our polity we know that we are indeed our brothers' and sisters' brothers and sisters.