



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“A Sanctuary for Strength and Courage,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on August 10, 2014

I want to ask you to reflect for a moment on what brought you here today. Take a moment now, and search your own heart and mind, and ask yourself, “What is it that I want, or need, or desire?” See if you can be in touch with that.

The hymn we just sang¹ is about this--why we gather for worship. “We would be one, as now we join in singing, our hymn of love, to pledge ourselves anew...” We come to church, don’t we, to be assured that we are not as separate as it seems. To have this tangible reminder that we do belong to one another and need one another.

“We would be one in building for tomorrow, a nobler world than we have known today. We would be one in searching for that meaning, which binds our hearts and points us on our way.” We come here, don’t we, to touch and be touched by that mystery, that power, that Spirit in which we live and move and have our being. We come to be reminded that we can access that Spirit in our daily lives; to be inspired to do our part to leave this world better than we found it.

I love being in church on Sunday morning. I love this particular sanctuary, and the spirit I sense here, in this place, with you.

Three weeks ago, on Sunday, July 20, people were gathered for worship at the First UU Church of New Orleans. The congregation that morning included a group of youth from around the country, who had been there all week as part of a social justice training program. There came a time in the service, like we have here, for prayer and for silent meditation. For the people in New Orleans, that silence was especially poignant, as they remembered a member of the congregation, a young mother of two, who had died of cancer.

Suddenly the silence was broken by loud and angry voices. People in the church started standing up and shouting things like “Abomination,” and “You are going to hell!” These people disrupting the service were anti-abortion activists who had come to town to protest the opening of a new Planned Parenthood clinic down the street, and it seems the UU church was a close and

¹ *We Would be One*, words by Samuel Anthony Wright, #318 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

convenient target. So these protesters, who consider themselves to be religious people, decided to invade a worship service in order to spread their version of “the truth.”²

I wonder, and you must wonder too, “What would I have done in that situation? What would we have done if that had happened here?”

Rev. Deanna Vandiver, the minister leading the service, asked the protesters to stop and worship respectfully with the congregation. But that was not their intent, so as their outburst continued, the pianist began playing music to counteract their angry voices.

And then, the youth who were there for their leadership training took up a song, and led the congregation to gather in a circle around the sanctuary as they sang together:

Circle ‘round for freedom,
Circle round for peace,
For all of us imprisoned, circle for release,
Circle for the planet,
Circle for each soul,
For the children of our children,
Keep the circle whole.³

While this was happening, church leaders approached the protestors, told them they were trespassing, and needed to leave. Most left, though some tried to get into arguments with church folks as they departed. A few quietly remained, and the worship service resumed.

The image that stays with me is that congregation, led by those youth, joining their voices in song and standing as one against this threat. Not responding to hate with more hate, not trying to reason with unreasonable people, but rather, showing strength and courage. In those moments they said more about their spirituality and our faith than any sermon could.

This reminds me of stories I’ve heard from back in the days of the Civil Rights Movement. There were these mass gatherings in churches across the South, to build the movement and get people organized. But the police knew this, so they would come in and their presence would intimidate the people there. A silence would fall over the gathering as the police began taking pictures and writing down names. But then, someone would start to sing, and others would join in, and this act of singing together would inspire and embolden the people and allow them to reclaim the space from those who had invaded it.⁴

This is a great reason to know some songs by heart. You never know when you might need them!

² Here are several links to accounts of the incident I describe. From the minister leading the service: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/uucollective/2014/07/circle-round-for-freedom/>; from the church’s Director of Religious Education: <http://viveleflame.com/religious-terrorists/>; and several online bloggers/reporters: <http://wonkette.com/554846/fun-loving-anti-abortion-pals-making-new-friends-invading-unitarian-church-calling-them-satan>, <http://www.latimes.com/local/abcarian/la-me-ra-antiabortion-fanatics-invade-a-church-service-20140723-column.html#page=1>

³ Linda Hirschhorn, *Circle ‘Round for Freedom*, #155 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

⁴ This account is told by Bernice Johnson Reagon in a PBS interview with Bill Moyers titled, “The Songs are Free.”

I've been wondering, how would we respond if something like this happened here? Would we have the heart, the courage, the spirituality, to respond to hatred with soul force? And isn't that why we are here, to build up our hearts and to strengthen our souls, for moments just such as these?

That church in New Orleans has been through a lot. Hurricane Katrina flooded their sanctuary and it took a long time before they were able to reclaim it. Did surviving that trauma play some part in helping them face this latest challenge? Our congregation has been through its own challenges, has faced its own storms too. And here we are, stronger, more resilient, more vital. Ready for what may come, yes?

What about your particular lives? None of us go seeking after hardship, but isn't it true that the struggles we face are what make us who we are? Aren't we stronger because of how we've overcome? So if you find yourself in a difficult place right now, take heart. "Tough times never last," one minister said, "but tough people do."⁵

A couple of days after the events in New Orleans, UU minister Tom Schade wrote this:

"I just hope that as we discuss the disturbance of the New Orleans UU Church service, we remember to put front and center the reason why we were so targeted: we stand as a matter of faith on the side of women's autonomy and freedom concerning her reproductive life. That's our top priority and concern. We know that some disagree, but we demand that we be respected in our religious observances. We are not victims here, but religious people who stand up publicly for our understanding of what is of ultimate value. And we are not intimidated in the slightest."

Tom is saying is that, rather than feel victimized by this, we ought to take pride that we are part of a religious tradition that trusts individuals to make the right choices for themselves and their families, a progressive tradition that has been willing to change and grow with the times, that has stood on the side of human rights and dignity, and led on many pivotal issues.

So we should take heart when people criticize us or target us. It means we are living out our faith. Which begs the question, are we out there enough? Or have we been too reluctant to let our light shine and too shy about preaching our gospel of love and justice?

I admit that I am by nature more of a contemplative than an activist. I'm grateful for those of you who have been leaders here in our social justice work, and for everyone who has rolled up their sleeves and done the work. You inspire me, and you inspire others too.

The protesters at the New Orleans church have been called Christian fundamentalists. Fundamentalists, as the name implies, say they want to go back to what they see as the basics of the faith, such as a literal interpretation of the Bible, which they see as the inerrant word of God. But Christian fundamentalism is a relatively new phenomenon. It developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a response to Christian liberalism and modernism, which began to incorporate reason and learnings from science to understandings of faith. The fundamentalists

⁵ Rev. Robert Schuller.

who disrupted the service in New Orleans are, ironically, part of a strand of Christianity that's much younger than Unitarianism and Universalism. And clearly less experienced and thoughtful.

As one who identifies as a Universalist Christian, I am reluctant to call those protesters either Christian or fundamentalist.⁶ There is nothing Christian, in the true sense of the word, about their hateful words or their tendency to use violence to achieve their ends. There's nothing fundamental about the past they seek to go back to, when straight white men held all the power. It may have been the Church at one time, but has little to do with the life and ministry of Jesus or the early Christian communities, which were quite diverse in belief and practice.

One observer, Amanda Marcotte, noted that these reactionaries are really against the worldview and principles that began with the Enlightenment and on which our nation was founded, including such things as the use of reason and the scientific method, democracy and the rule of law, more trust in the individual and less reliance on tradition, and, of course, freedom of religion and celebration of diversity.

"There are many pro-choice churches" Marcotte wrote, "but the religious pluralism of the Unitarians is what really sets fundamentalists off. Indeed, there's a strong reason to believe that the religious right is basically using the battle over reproductive rights to advance a much larger agenda against religious tolerance."⁷

As part of the Jewish and Christian tradition, we claim as our forebears patriarchs and matriarchs who sought a new homeland, who left bondage in search of freedom. We hold dear the words of prophets through the ages who have called people to remember who they are and whose they are, like Micah, who asked, "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God?" We count among our number mystics and saints, ancient and contemporary, including Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said:

"Courage is an inner resolution to go forward despite obstacles...
Cowardice asks the question, is it safe?
Expediency ask the question, is it politic?
Vanity asks the question, is it popular?
But conscience ask the question, is it right?
And there comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular,
but one must take it because it is right."

A sanctuary is a sacred place, and it ought to be a safe place. But the church is no place to hide. The church is not a club or a fortress; it has to be open to the world.

Some of you might think the events in New Orleans raise a security issue: should we consider steps to avoid something similar happening here? There's nothing wrong with taking proper precautions, but let's never respond out of fear. Rather, let us be people and a community who

⁶ I'm grateful to the Rev. Ron Robinson for these insights he shared in an online forum.

⁷ Amanda Marcotte, available online at <http://rhrealitycheck.org/article/2014/07/28/anti-choice-activists-harass-unitarians-new-orleans/>

are seeking ways to live our faith more boldly. Looking for ways to speak out and sing out and live out our principles.

Let us remember that we are here to be formed as people of faith and courage. That what happens in this sanctuary is practice for how we will live our days. That is our tradition and our calling. So will you join me in this prayer for strength and courage, words by the great liberal minister Harry Emerson Fosdick. Let us pray.

God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power;
Crown your ancient church's story, bring its bud to glorious flower,
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour.

Lo, the clouds of evil 'round us hide your brightness from our gaze,
From the fears that long have bound us, free our hearts to faith and praise.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days,
For the living of these days.⁸

Amen.

⁸ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *God of Grace and God of Glory*, adapted, #115 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.