

Reverend Claire Feingold Thoryn
November 23, 2014
Theme: Truth
Sermon: The In-Between Church

Reading: “Self Portrait” by David Whyte

It doesn't interest me if there is one God
or many gods.
I want to know if you belong or feel
abandoned.
If you know despair or can see it in others.
I want to know
if you are prepared to live in the world
with its harsh need
to change you. If you can look back
with firm eyes
saying this is where I stand. I want to know
if you know
how to melt into that fierce heat of living,
falling toward
the center of your longing. I want to know
if you are willing
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love
and the bitter
unwanted passion of your sure defeat.
I have heard, in *that* fierce embrace, even
the gods speak of God.

Sermon: The In-Between Church

What do you know to be true?
How are you willing to live?

“We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” (II Corinthians, 4:18)

In 1835, this congregation was born next door, in that empty white wooden building right there. The Robbins family of East Lexington commissioned that building as a meetinghouse where people against slavery—abolitionists—were allowed to speak. Other local pulpits had been closed to abolitionists. ...

The story I have been told still includes the identity that First Parish is for the bluebloods...and Follen is for the rabblers.

In a bit of an oxymoron, that wooden building that was our birthplace is called “The Stone Building.” It was named after a descendent of the Robbins family, and a member of this church, Ellen Stone, who donated the building to the town of Lexington to use as a branch library. But now it’s empty.

When we met over there, our first name was the Second Congregational Society. And our first minister was Charles Follen, an outspoken abolitionist and the person who both designed this sanctuary and led the fundraising to get it built.

Thirty years after our congregation was born, in the 1860s, we did something that other Unitarian churches would only get around to doing a century later, in the 1960s. We merged with the local Universalist church.

That marriage brought with it a new name.

We called ourselves the Church of the Redeemer.

Some years later we changed our name again, to honor our first minister.

So: Yes.

We went from Redeemed to Follen.

And years later, after the churchgoing hey-days of the 1950s, fall we did. I reached out to a bunch of different people who were here in the 1960s and 70s to hear their stories. Of course everyone experienced their experience differently, so the stories are different depending on who is telling them. But all agree there were conflicts, some political, some relational, some related to the minister and staff. People took sides. Mistakes were made, as they say...

And this congregation dwindled.

Though the records I could get my hands on in the office this week are missing definitive numbers, the stories I heard from people who were here then say that this congregation consisted of around 100 members; some remember more and some remember less, but most agree that Sunday morning attendance was pretty low. Diana Cole, our soprano soloist for 40 years, told me *she* remembered times when the choir was as big as the number of people in the pews. The music program, thanks to Louise Curtis, was still strong, but overall, finances were tight. Some say that merging with First Parish was a real possibility.

I remember talking to someone at my former congregation, in Lincoln, just after I had accepted the offer to be the candidate minister here. She looked sympathetic: “Oooh, isn’t that a tiny church?” “No,” I said, “it’s actually about the same size as this one.” She looked surprised. When she moved to the area in the early 1970s she had tried out a bunch of different churches, and remembered sharply her visit to Follen: “There was almost no one there,” she said.

Well, there is now.

You lived, day by day, with the consequence of love
and the bitter unwanted passion of your sure defeat.
And this congregation came back.

There were some amazing leaders: Louise Curtis, Marilu Nowlin, Rev. Polly Guild, Rev. Barbara Marshman, Rev. Lucinda Duncan, our own still serving Thomas. I hear that at the 20th anniversary party next Friday I’ll actually learn how to pronounce your last name correctly.

But you know, none of us could do any leading worth talking about if it wasn’t for the congregation sharing that vision and ministry.

You imagined doing something that you had never done before,
And then you did it.

We have over 300 members today, and if you add in “friends”—people who pledge and actively participate, but for one reason or another have not signed the membership book—that number comes up to about 400. Do you know how amazing that transformation is?

My favorite little symbol of how change asks us to imagine things we never even thought were possible
is in here, the oldest membership book we keep in the office. It goes back to members who joined in 1881.

In the frontispiece, someone wrote:

This Record Book should always be in the hands of the Minister of Follen Church
If found elsewhere
Please return promptly to him

That hasn't been possible since 1975.
Everything changes.

Don't worry, boys, you can be ministers too.

“What can be seen is temporary,
but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

I just read this weekend about the death of Crystal Cathedral, the Christian evangelical church started in the 1960s in California. It had thousands of members. Their building was gorgeous, 10,000 panes of glass—not crystal—covering 60,000 square feet.

They ministered nationwide via their television show Hour of Power. They had stages, movie screens, “lights, cameras, below-stage elevators, theater-style seating, an indoor reflecting pool.”

And they just declared bankruptcy and sold their building to the Catholic church, who will rip all of that out, and install an altar. What was old is new again.

One author and evangelical pastor wrote recently, “The United States has shifted into a ... post-Christian age...No one disputes this.”

Rob Bell, a well-known evangelical Christian minister, even wrote a book called *Love Wins* which threw the evangelical world into a commotion.

Bell's book suggested that maybe
God loved everyone, not just Christians,
and maybe
there are many paths to a moral and compassionate life,
and maybe there actually isn't a hell, after all.

Just what we Universalists have been saying for, oh, at least 400 years now.
What was old is new again.

What could these changing religious times mean for Unitarian Universalism, we who were essentially post-Christian before post-Christian was cool?

And what could that mean for Follen?

Here is something I think a lot about:

An evangelical is not the same thing as an evangelist.

Even though evangelical Christians have basically laid claim to the word, *to evangelize* means, using the Greek roots, “to spread good news.”

Traditionally the “good news” is referring to the gospels, the Bible.
But I don’t think it has to.

Evangelizing is different from proselytizing.

A proselytizer says, you have to believe what I believe or you are wrong and going to hell.

Evangelizing is when you say, hey, I have some good news. This thing has made a difference in my life. Can I tell you about it? Can I help you enjoy it too?

I can almost guarantee that you have been an evangelist this past week. Here are my guesses for how you evangelized:

“Awww, that was a sweet video. I’m going to share it on Facebook so other people will see it too.”

“Hey, I just read this great book. Do you want to read it? You can have my copy.”

“Hey, there’s this band I love, you may not have heard of them but they are great. They are playing a show this weekend, want to go with me?”

And *maybe* for a select few of you:

“Hey, so, I go to this church. I know, I know, *church*, but I swear, it’s cool. Actually, to be honest, it’s a really meaningful part of my life. Want to come with me sometime?”

I’ve heard it said that Unitarian Universalists don’t evangelize because we don’t have a saving message. If we don’t believe in hell, we can’t offer to save people from it. How can we evangelize from that place?

Well I ask you, how can we not?

Is there a message more saving than, Love Wins?

It doesn’t interest me if there is one God
or many gods.

I want to know if you belong or feel
abandoned.

Our theology says that whatever your beliefs or circumstances,
you are beloved and forgiven and redeemed
and inherently worthy.
Not original sin, but original blessing.

And when you falter and when you fail—
as we all have, as we all will—
it is never your last chance to change for the better.

Whatever the limitations
of our human institutions
and our human hearts,
there is a larger Love that embraces all,
from the beginning, to the end.

As I have the honor of saying, when I bless babies:
“I bless you in the name of God, who has loved you from the start, and who will love you
always.”

What does that mean for Follen?

Well, let me read you our mission statement, created a few years ago, before I arrived:

Reach out and welcome all, experiencing difference as opportunity;
Pursue our spiritual paths independently and in fellowship, sharing our quest for
understanding, wonder, and meaning;
Commit ourselves to justice, service, and increased harmony with nature through
thoughtful, compassionate, and courageous action;
Give generously of our time, talents and resources at Follen and beyond,
energized by our contributions and grateful for those of others.

Do you remember the first two words?

Reach out. You can't get to the rest of the mission without getting through those two
words. You could probably spend your life just working on those words.

But, you might protest, this congregation is big enough.

We are pushing the limits of our facilities.

This sanctuary comfortably seats somewhere between 160-200 people.

Today we have two services, and we'll have three services on Christmas Eve, because
last year we had standing room only, and I am told that people were literally turned away
at the door.

Fire codes are fire codes, but it is a little too ironic to say there is no room at the inn at
Christmas time.

What if we actually did do more “reaching out”?

What if we did keep growing?

Well, I did mention that empty building next door.

But beyond that—and deeper than that—

I want to know
if you are prepared to live in the world
with its harsh need
to change you.

There is no spiritual practice that I find more difficult and more fulfilling than reaching out and sharing my good news.

I want to know if you can look back
with firm eyes
saying this is where I stand.

“What can be seen is temporary,
but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

The foundation to any good that we have to offer the world is the quality of relationship we give to each other. And not just to the people we know well, but to any person here, young or old, first-time visitor or decades-long member, your long-time pal or the person who annoyed you recently.

There’s this tv show my kids watch, called “Friendship is Magic”—it’s about My Little Ponies.

And friendship *is* magic:

but magic of the Ben and Tariq variety.

Magic that takes a lot of practice to get it looking so effortless, so joyful:
trying and failing and trying again.

There is a reason why they call it spiritual *practice*.

And living together in a spiritual community that houses so many differences...

I’m sorry, I mean opportunities—

is a spiritual practice in and of itself.

Do you make eye contact and smile? Do you start with trust? Do you assume goodwill and forgive mistakes? Do you experience difference as opportunity?

And do you share from the heart about how you
melt into that fierce heat of living,
falling toward the center of your longing?

Reach out.

Share your good news.

It doesn't interest me if there is one God
or many gods or even no God at all.
I want to know if you
know despair or can see it in others.
I want to know
if you are willing
to live, day by day, with the consequences of Love.
I have heard, in *that* fierce embrace, even
the gods speak of God.

May it be so;
May we be so;

Amen.