

What Remains

A Sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

Sunday, June 21, 2020

Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

Ecclesiastes is best known for its lines, made famous by singer songwriter Pete Seeger, “to everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.” In that scripture, Ecclesiastes reflects on the cycle and seasons of life, on how to everything there is a time and a place. And then, a little bit later in the book, he writes this: *Better is the end of a thing than its beginning*...I’ve puzzled over that simple sentence for a long time, because I’ve always loved beginnings and disliked endings. Beginnings, while fraught with anxiety, are full of promise and potential; of plans and projects and possibilities. Endings – well, are a micro-reminder of the larger ending that all of us will face; that all things have their seasons, including our lives, including my time with you.

Now, you know I’m fond of quoting a favorite line from the Monty Python Film, “In Search of the Holy Grail” so I’ll quote it again today “.. I’m not dead yet!” By this I mean that I will continue to serve as your interim through mid-July, but in a limited and discreet way to allow our interim minister Leika Lewis Cornwell’s ministry to emerge as the summer minister. But your ministry team, staff and I wanted to make this Sunday a formal ending to the interim ministry, to recognize it liturgically and to spend some time in reflection on the three questions I asked you when we began this journey together. “Where did you come from – what are you – where are you going?”

So, I want to take you back to that first Sunday in January 2018, when we sang the same hymn that we sang earlier this morning. The words were taken from a painting by the artist Paul Gauguin and it is one of his more famous paintings. I’ve always loved it and was excited to bring the art into the worship space to augment the message. Afterwards, a church member approached me and said “were you aware of the racist history behind Gauguin’s great art? Of how he fetishized black bodies and of his treatment of women, not only the young girls of Tahiti but the abuse and

abandonment of his first wife? That was my first Sunday. So, what did I do with that information? At first, nothing. I was embarrassed to be called out on what I thought was a successful service. I brushed off the critique as one person who just didn’t like Gauguin that much. But the critique left an imprint and it made me realize that my experience with where UUCA was and where it was headed was moving – and moving fast. I had a lot of learning to do.

When I came to UUCA I found a congregation that had said goodbye to Rev. Fred and Karen thoroughly and well – but you were exhausted. I had wondered if the conflicts that had emerged prior to Fred’s retirement, the process of saying goodbye would have left you too tired to do anything else but to come to church, tend to your children and youth and say goodbye to beloveds who moved or died. It was as if the last year and half of saying goodbye to Fred was a bonfire that had burned down, and yet -- even when a bonfire burns down, there are always glowing coals. Those glowing coals from back then are what remains to this day; and it’s a few of those glowing goals that I’d like to reflect on this morning– as well as some areas of the areas of growth that are in the works but have not yet come to completion

So what did I find here at UUCA? I found a congregation who was not as exhausted as I thought you might be. I came to UUCA in the midst of your decision to adopt the 8th Principle. I came at a time when you were evaluating and amending your by-laws, an accomplishment that often takes years in the making – but you accomplished this in under 18 months. When I arrived, UUCA leaders were engaged in an analysis of your existing governance system – called policy-based governance, culminating in a report with recommendations from the Rev. David Pyle. I came in the middle of the question “Where did you come from?” as you examined your history with Rev. Fred and Rev. John, sorting out what were their passions, and what

was yours as a congregation - and where they intersected.

This led to the next question of “What are you?” Throughout the course of my time at UUCA, a lot of questions about identity came popping up in various ways. Are you the social justice church? Are you the racial justice church? Are you the church that will physically offer sanctuary? Are you a church that responds to neurodiversity – to those with obvious or hidden disabilities? Offering internship? Offering money and space to minority businesses? Are you the haven in the woods for the religiously wounded? Are you the bold and inclusive church in the community? Are you the humanist church, the Christian church, the Jewish synagogue, the Pagan gathering place? The church for children, youth and young adults? Are you the church for GLBTQAI members and friends? Are you the church that tends to its elders? Are you the church that avoids conflict? Are you the church that makes microaggressions towards people of color? Are you the church that can admit mistakes and make amends for those mistakes?

The answer to all of these questions is, of course, “YES AND NO.” You were and are all of these and so much more. If Rev. John and I were to identify a single theme which we have explored from many angles it’s about living in the both/and – or as you’ve heard me say before – thinking beyond the binary of good & bad. It is creating space to engage in the practice of building the world we dream about and acknowledging when we fail. I have found the culture of UUCA to be high demand – in that you ask for and expect excellence from your ministers and your staff, but you will often balance that demand with a lot of genuine love, respect, appreciation and forgiveness. I’ve watched this in action between members; and I’ve experienced your generosity and hospitality – even when I’m sure my personality was annoying or even painful. So this is one of your glowing coals; there is genuine warmth here and appreciation for one another which is a great strength. I have witnessed countless acts of true kindness and generosity among you – of giving and caring and trying to live up to the ideals that are at the core of this faith and of this church. And, as is true with all human endeavors - there are also two smoldering coals,

ones whose smoke can cloud the coziness of your congregational campfire.

The first smoldering coals is not unique to UUCA – it’s part of Unitarian Universalist culture and in fact, American culture. That is, of course, the reality of white supremacy in which we all live and move and have our being. You’ve heard your ministers, Board and leaders in Building Beloved community talk about this at length. You’ve maybe attended a workshop or the 8th Principle Practice Series and maybe a part of you thinks “we got this. We can now move onto something else that is equally as important, like climate justice or fair housing or wage equity or trans rights.” All of those issues ARE important of course. Yet, what we are also coming to understand, as a congregation and as a country, is that white supremacy infects everything and that we, this liberal religious community bound together by 7 Principles plus one, are not immune to it. Therefore, because it infects all – all must be examined through that lens.

The smoke that arises from UUCA’s commitment to the 8th Principle is also one that all of Unitarian Universalism is grappling with. To understand the depth of this, I encourage you to download and read the report just published from the Commission on Institutional Change, I have created a slider on the home page for you to be able to view it, and for a very limited time download it for free – or you can purchase it from Skinner House books. This is a stunning piece of work that represents a comprehensive overview of our faith today. It analyzes not only Unitarian Universalism’s resistance to and some successes with anti-racism work, but details how imperative this work is for the survival of this faith. It is too detailed to cover in the short time we have here, but what I can tell you is that Unitarian Universalism, like the rest of the world, is rapidly changing. Rev. John said it best in last week’s sermon that if our congregations are still arguing about whether or not black lives matter or the lives and concerns of people of color matter; or if we want to argue about terminology or language used from the pulpit - we will become little more than a religious relic. The Commission on Institutional Change describes current and projected future trends in the clearest and starkest language – and to summarize some of the highlights:

- We continue to attract a greater diversity of people and retain a small percentage of those who do not match the resourced, white, aging majority within our congregation.
- We have spent time comparing our religious wounds rather than healing them. As a result, we have often operated from the least-common denominator approach rather than one linked to our highest values as a people of faith. Our time as a haven or social club for those disaffected by other religions has passed. In these searing times of political division, climate change, global pandemic, economic polarization and global strife, people need a sustaining faith that can speak to a wide diversity of people.
- The unfinished—and interrupted work on race within Unitarian Universalism has marred our ability to move forward at a time when accountability, multicultural awareness and inclusive language are becoming the new normal in the larger world.

I expect that this congregation will continue to deepen in their understanding of the 8th Principle and be a leader in the denomination with the depth and breadth of your anti-racist work. As a result, you may rival All Souls and other multicultural congregations with the number of Black, Indigeneous and People of Color attracted to and wanting to help shape the future of UUCA.

The second smoldering coal I want to mention represents a characteristic found in all Unitarian Universalist congregations as well, that creates a lot of smoke to one degree or another. I'd recommend that you get clear on your governance structure. When Rev. Fred proposed that you adopt a Policy-Based Governance system, most people didn't really understand what that means. Some interpreted it meant that the minister has more power to make decisions. Some interpreted it to mean that it is this elaborate and confusing network of policies that are impossible to implement. When Policy Governance works well, the ministers, not the laity run the church; and the lay members find, practice and are supported to do the ministry. My job as your interim minister was

to help you get institutional clarity on how the church was run – so that you can do the really important stuff that we call ministry.

And what is that ministry? It's learning to preach a sermon and lead a worship service; it's being part of a faith formation team that mentors children and youth; it's deep involvement in ACT and community organizing; it's providing relief for a stressed out family; it's driving scared undocumented families to their hearings; it's legislative ministry and bringing flower arrangements; it's singing and playing music and serving food. It's listening to and believing the voices of color in the congregation. It's dreaming of a building that can house the future; it's accepting and supporting the leadership of youth and leaders of color; it's showing up to mourn our dead and holding our infants and children. . This is the ministry that you can be and are so good at; so extraordinarily good. These things – this kind of ministry - is food for the soul, and these opportunities are able to flourish because you have clear lines of authority and accountability; because you have nurtured, developed and trained leaders and you trust your leadership. So getting clear about your governance is not the shiniest new thing on the church's agenda, but I think it's unfinished business that I hope will be taken up in earnest in the next chapter of your life.

Where do we come from, what are we, where are we going? Those questions are still good ones. What's different today than when I asked those questions in 2018 is that I know things that I didn't know back then. I clearly didn't know about the legacy of Gauguin, but now I do. It's not that I can't appreciate his work, but I see it differently. We have been changed by each other – you and I – but honestly, you have given me more gifts than whatever I have given you. You've been generous with me, you've listened to me, you've respected my authority and you've put up with me and my never to be humble opinions. We've laughed and cried and organized and marched and sang and fought and forgiven and protested and accepted and learned and challenged each other.

Being an interim is such a unique ministry. I took to it in part because I wasn't sure I had the emotional capacity to love a congregation any more

than the one I served in Cleveland. But you – the members of UUCA and with the help of my colleague Rev. John and – Leika - and the incredible staff at UUCA; Julie, Josh, Pam, Jannina, Betsy, Charles – you’ve taught me that love is an ever abundant and ever renewable resource. It’s true that ministers and interns and staff do come and go; children and our elders will leave us, new leaders emerge, fresh ideas spring forth, older programs fade away. To everything there is indeed a season, yet, like hope, love remains.

I love you and I’m grateful for you and I am so excited to watch this next season of your ministry unfold. Amen and may it be so.