

“Building the Beloved Community,” Rebecca St. Clair

Today’s reading was written by Mark Morrision-Reed. The Task Of The Religious Community.

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen and our strength is too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

I’d like to start out by telling the story of how I came to be a part of Harbor UU. I was raised in a strict Baptist household until I was 17. I loved church and my faith was huge in the way that perhaps only a child can really believe. How I came to lose my faith and leave the church is a story for another day, but I will tell you my leaving the church was full of betrayal and pain. I came to distrust any kind of organized religion and for the next decade I avoided any church at all costs. Although Christianity had left a bad taste in my mouth I became a bit of a seeker, reading up on Buddhism, Hinduism, and paganism, but never settled into any other faith path. I always felt something was missing, and the words of the Susan Werner song that Kwame shared with us for the offertory speak to this,

Sunday morning, there is someplace that I’m supposed to be, keeps returning, the feeling keeps coming over me... and i went back the other day

closed my eyes and tried to pray, but a voice spoke loud and clear

"you ask too many questions, dear" and i said, "you ask too few"

that's why i still don't know quite what to do on Sunday mornings ...

Fast forward to February of 2004. I was working on my under graduate degree in social work. In one of my classes I received an assignment to put myself in a situation that would be uncomfortable and then write about it. I decided going to church would be about the most uncomfortable situation I could think of and set about finding a church to attend. One of my coworkers was a member of HUUC and suggested that I come with her. I had never heard of Unitarian Universalism but figured any church would do. I came to Harbor on the weekend of Valentine’s Day and thought I had slipped into some kind of alternate dimension. The service felt so familiar to me with its protestant roots but the words, oh the words were so different from what I had been raised with. The sermon that week focused on gay marriage and the inherent right to love and be married no matter who you loved. These days that might not

seem so strange, but a decade ago that conversation was NOT being had anywhere public that I had been and certainly not in a church. What sort of place was this? I was completely blown away by the sermon and the music, but what I was not was uncomfortable. My experiment had backfired, but not for lack of trying on my part. I had tried to be uncomfortable, but this just wasn't the place I had expected.

I did not come back after that first Sunday but I would think about it from time to time. I was busy with work and school and thought that someday when I had more time I would like to go back. What got me back was the 2004 general election. Two things happened that I felt were catastrophic. Bush was re-elected, and Proposition 4 was passed by almost 60 percent of the vote. For anyone that doesn't remember, Prop 4 is the amendment blocking same sex marriage. I could not believe that the amendment passed and by so wide of a margin. My heart hurt and I wanted to be around people that thought like me and felt like I did. That Sunday I went back to Harbor and found the safety and community that I needed.

I never left and next month it will be 10 years since that first Sunday service. We have changed as a congregation over the past decade but I believe we remain a beacon of hope for the lost, the lonely, the sad and the seeking. A month ago or so Kwame and I were having lunch at Rykes. A few tables over was a group of young man having what appeared to be a bible study. They were passionate about their belief and appeared to be supportive of each other. Observing them got Kwame and I talking about our faith community and he asked me what I hoped for HUUC in the future. The word that immediately came to mind was harbor. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines a harbor as a place of security and comfort: A refuge. I had never really given consideration to our name before, but our founders were wise. We all come from different places with baggage, hopes and history of our own looking for a place of safety and belonging, a beloved community, if you will. Our beliefs are broad ranging as individuals, but as a community we find shelter in the harbor of our Unitarian Universalist faith traditions. We talk a lot about the seven principles and they are very important. Equally important, but less emphasized are the six sources. I'd like to share them with you now.

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.
- Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

I am going to close with an analogy. Imagine a big comfortable bed, with a nice warm quilt, in a really cold room. Now imagine you are the only person in that bed. You can stretch out any way you want to; snore or talk in your sleep without bothering anybody, and no one is stealing your blankets. Nice, huh? But it is kind of lonely and hard to keep that big bed warm by yourself. We humans are social creatures who look to each other for warmth and companionship. So, you decide that your big bed has room for some other people. You start a bed fellowship and likeminded people start to come. Now you have company and warmth, and the word starts to get out that your bed is a really great place to be. So more people come. They don't think quite like you do, but you have been getting bored with the same people, so that is okay. Diversity is good and this is a really big bed, you think. And more people come. There is still enough room for everybody, but now there are a few problems. Some people want to lay with their heads to the west, and others think that facing the east is the proper way to sleep, so you have some little factions. It is not quite as comfortable with someone's feet in your face, but it is still okay. So more people come, and now you are starting to have a nice big bed congregation. There is still enough room for everyone, but things are getting a little more difficult now because everyone wants to be in the middle of the bed. No one really wants to be at the edge of the bed because it is hard to keep covered and really warm there, and sometimes it feels like you might get pushed off the edge. The bed is still big enough for everyone though, and you realize that you can make it work better if everyone takes turns being in the middle. No one has the perfect spot all the time, but everyone knows that they will get their turn, and that makes it easier to deal with a knee in your back or having your feet stick out of the blanket. This way everyone is a little uncomfortable sometimes, but no one is uncomfortable all the time, and there is enough room for everybody. That is how I think Unitarian Universalism is meant to be. But feel free to argue with me if you disagree, because that is how Unitarian Universalism is too.

Amen, blessed be, shalom and salaam.