

“An Oak of Righteousness”

A sermon delivered by Reverend Meg Soens on May 5, 2013

“How then, shall we live?”

That’s how we ended our unison chalice lighting this morning. As a faith community united not by *what* we believe, but by our promises about *how* we will live out our shared values, this is our core question:

“How, then, shall we live?”

Each faith community’s answer is somewhat different, since many factors are involved including church traditions, local history and economic conditions, the characteristics of the people who make up the congregation, and – just as importantly – the characteristics of the people who are not yet members.

Oh yes, and there’s another factor: who your minister is. After our worship service, in accord with our proud Unitarian Universalist congregational polity, those of you who are members of the congregation will decide for yourselves whether or not you want that minister to be me.

I hope this past week has allowed you to imagine what my serving as your minister would mean, what it would feel like.

Oddly enough, I have been trying to imagine the same thing.

For seven days, I’ve been immersed in your faith community. I have gotten to meet and get to know many of you through meetings with the executive board and committees including membership, worship and music, green sanctuary, social action, and pastoral care. We’ve had fun events like potlucks and ice cream socials and desserts! You are a vibrant, engaged group. And you are a more diverse group of people than I had expected: a good balance of all age groups, of gay and straight, of male and female.

I was initially drawn to your church by the strong sense of positive energy, deep commitment to the church, and real love for each other that your ministerial search committee communicated. I felt in them, too, a desire that matched my own, a desire to creatively live a life *together*, as well as individually, that honors and explores our shared UU values. At its heart, this exploration is the imaginative adventure of learning to better love ourselves, our neighbors and what is beyond all that.

As I reflected, then, about the possibility of candidating here, an image came to me of a tree: an “oak of righteousness,” to be specific. If that sounds familiar, it’s probably because the phrase is in the wonderful hymn that will close our service today, “We’ll Build a Land.”

That hymn and the phrase come primarily from the words of one of the Hebrew Bible’s most famous prophets, Isaiah.

You need to understand that most of the book of Isaiah is focused on chastising – *at great length* – the exiled Hebrews he’s speaking to for bringing their slavery upon themselves by ignoring their God’s commandments to care for the orphans and the widows, the vulnerable and marginalized in their community. Finally, after verse upon verse of condemnation and sorrow, finally, the prophet offers a vision of hope to those exiled Jews. He announces that soon they will return to their homeland and this time, it will be different. This time, he says, they’ll build a land where their values are realized – where slaves are set free, and the heart-broken are comforted, where the weak are taken care of, and what has been destroyed that is good is rebuilt. It will be a land where justice will roll down like mighty waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

And the people who build this land, he says, will be known as “oaks of righteousness.”

I can see some of you grimacing at this word “righteousness”! Today, “righteousness” has a negative cast, because we confuse the word with self-righteousness, which is pretty awful! But in its older, Biblical meaning, righteousness simply meant “doing what is right,” or “doing what is just.” In fact, the Hebrew words for righteousness and justice are often synonymous in the Bible.

Furthermore, righteousness was often, like justice, a social, not an individual, virtue. It was a quality of the society, of the tribe, of the faith community.

It is a quality of *this* faith community.

You have a healthy, rich past; you have a pattern of doing the right thing. The integrity of your search committee and how they interacted with each other as well as myself told me this. And stories I heard made it clear that in the past few decades this church has dealt openly, forthrightly, and with great care when difficult issues have come up, including, most recently, the sign and welcoming statement discussions. Those were hard conversations!

You *are* an oak of righteousness. The land Isaiah spoke of is already here, and we are called by our values to nourish it, help it bud, green and bloom, everywhere and in every way, that we can.

As I learned more about you over the past week, my vision of this tree called FPUU became more concrete and detailed. Let me describe the tree as I see it, with its roots, its trunk, and its branches and leaves.

This oak has three primary roots: they are what has nourished this church, where it comes from physically, spiritually, and emotionally as a system of people and families down through the 350 plus years it has existed. These roots are deep.

The first root is the culture of Puritan New England. This we see today in the independence, practicality and self-reliance of this congregation.

The second root of the oak tree is labeled “Medfield.” There are several smaller roots, named “Norfolk,” “Millis,” and “Walpole,” but these are not as vigorous or well developed.

The third root I’ll talk about today is the church’s religious and spiritual sources. This one I labeled “Unitarian Christianity, Transcendentalism, and the Free Religious movement.” This root informs the liturgy of this church, for example, in the prominence of the sermon.

It also informs the values we cherish, particularly the role of reason in personal faith explorations and the central importance of love (which is often described today in terms like “community” or “fellowship” and “tolerance”).

This root also informs the theological grounding of this church. For example, our Transcendental heritage explains why so many congregants who connect to the holy through the lens of Nature feel so comfortable here.

The Unitarian Christian heritage supports our contemporary humanist affirmation that people are of central importance in religion, and are basically good and capable of being even more so.

And the Free Religious movement in Unitarianism? This grew up in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and proclaimed the core of the religion to be absolute freedom of religious inquiry – it lives and breathes here today.

Above the ground and roots is the oak tree’s trunk. The trunk is made up of the skills, talents, and special gifts of the church today. Energy, effectiveness, and high levels of skill in organization and technical issues like finance and administration are evident here, as is a deep, deep passion for music. The congregation’s pervasive appreciation for imaginative and creative thinking is also a special gift. So is the talent of loving, clearly apparent in the committed way folks care for each other when misfortune strikes through illness or accident, as well as in the green sanctuary and social action work within and beyond our doors. Finally, there’s a true commitment to living in a way that honors the UU principles. This is a very special gift.

The last part of our tree, above the roots and trunk, are the branches and leaves. The branches and leaves represent where we want to go, our aspirations and dreams. And here are some of the things I learned this week about your aspirations.

You want to continue to explore what it means to live out our values. In other words, you want to grow spiritually.

You want Sunday worship to challenge and inspire you.

You want to build the community of faith for adults and children in ways that go beyond worship and social events.

First, you want to have deeper sharing and connections with others in this community. You want places like covenant groups where you can share and explore with others, your life, beliefs and deepest desires.

Secondly, you want children and youth and adults to be more effectively integrated across the various programs of the church. You want the generations to connect more.

Third, you want to deepen and reflect on your connection to what is bigger than your selves, however you view that, and by whatever name you call it. You want this to happen through doing as well as thinking.

Fourth, you want engaging adult enrichment opportunities that will help you learn more about our faith and its history, and to reflect on your own beliefs and the life you want to live.

You also want people who are already part of this community of faith to be more involved in and nurtured by Sunday morning shared worship.

And many, many of you want new people to come. I found that some of you think about this primarily in terms of money, so I'll share a couple of thoughts on that.

This church has fluctuated between 35 and 120 members for the last several decades. If the dream is to bring in people in the hope that they add to the church's financial position but do so without changing anything else, you will fail. It simply doesn't ever work that way.

But if you believe, like I do, that this community of free faith, shared values and shared commitment has something wonderful to offer other folks as it works to renew and enrich the world around it and if you want to grow spiritually from encountering and truly welcoming in folks who will inevitably bring change, and will be different from you, then at this we can succeed.

Indeed, this is the heart of our tradition. Remember: we call ourselves *the living tradition*, because we believe that by reflecting on our experience and that of others, we will be able to learn more about our values and how we can truly live by them.

So, we need to reach out and bring in new folks and they will bring change. We need to do so with thought and intention, and if we do so, we will learn from this.

What do I mean by "learn" in this context? Our values have long lifted up the worth of all people. However, what that actually means has changed a great deal over time because of our engagement with people of color and openly gay, lesbian and transgendered folks as they sought to come into our churches, and we tried to learn how to welcome them.

We learn and grow, only by reaching out and bringing in, as Marge Piercy's poem last week put it, and by being willing to be changed by the experience.

If we do this intentional welcoming ministry together, I don't know how much bigger in numbers we will become, but I do know we will grow spiritually, creatively and in energy. And that will bring people here, and keep them here.

And that's why I'm with you today. I deeply believe in faith communities reaching out and bringing in, because that is how we really *live*, how we learn and grow in our understanding and care for our selves, and the world.

And this does mean, if we are to do this shared ministry together, that the folks who are here now have to be open to experimenting, trying things out, to adapting and yes, changing over time as we welcome in the folks who are not yet here.

In other words, if we are to live this way, we have to be gardeners.

We will need to remove the boulders that block the root system of this faith tree from fully extending into neighboring communities like Millis, Norfolk, and Walpole.

We want to look carefully at the ground around the tree, and clear away the weeds that obscure how we can do a better job of welcoming people who do not fit the dominant demographic, the weeds that hinder us from learning how we can welcome other folks as effectively as we have welcomed g-l-b-t folks.

And we need to fertilize the soil a bit. Through small groups and adult enrichment and greater intergenerational integration, we will deepen our spiritual lives and shared spiritual connections – this will be how we set out the spikes of fertilizer around the tree's bole.

*If we will make our seasons welcome here,
then a long time after we are dead,
The lives our lives prepare
will live here
And the river will run clear
As we will never know it*

The sap is rising in this tree,
new buds are starting to pop out.
Tend this tree well.
And may there be more adventures!
Blessed be, amen.