

## A Fish Tale

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It is so good to be back in this pulpit again! As some of you may recall, I noted last June before summer that I have the privilege of being the first Senior Minister in a number of years now who has been able to preach two Ingatherings in a row! I am happy to say that this Ingathering finds us still well into the ministerial honeymoon. My friend and mentor Rev. Ken Phifer, just before he preached my installation sermon last March, gave me a good piece of advice: if you can help it, don't let the honeymoon end! So let's keep it going.

Actually much has happened over this summer. Ingathering has a sort of "what I did over my summer vacation" feel to it, just as the first essay of the school year always did. Sharon and I took a couple of trips to see family, but mostly we enjoyed the new house and the new baby. However one trip in particular stands out. I had the chance to do a family wedding for my in-laws, my very Catholic in-laws, in Fort Lauderdale Florida. In the middle of July! My wife's brother got married to his fiancé on the beaches of south Florida and since it was a

non-traditional wedding and setting, and because I am cheap, they asked me to perform the ceremony. It was windy but lovely.

Interestingly, my brother-in-law Mike had not been to Florida before and so he wanted to do some sightseeing. He organized a fishing trip with some of his close friends who were coming down for the wedding and he graciously invited me to join them. We chartered a small boat and went deep sea fishing about three to five miles out into the ocean.

Now I hadn't gone fishing in about ten years, and only then in freshwater lakes in the Midwest. The biggest fish I ever caught in my life was an eleven inch small mouth bass. I was about nine or ten at the time and thought I had pulled in Moby Dick himself. My grandparents lived on a lake and I spent a good deal of my childhood up there. I had a lot of experience with lake fishing even if it was a while back ago. My brother-in-law's friends, whom I met the morning of our fishing trip, were also Midwestern guys who were experienced anglers with perch and trout but nothing like this. We were headed out after some big fish this day.

If you have never done it, deep sea fishing is basically like any other kind of fishing only bigger. The rods are bigger, the bait is bigger, the lines are bigger. We cast out a number of lines and just went trolling. After a while something would bite and the nearest person

would reel it in. We took turns so that all five of us on board got a chance to pull something in. As it happened I was the last one to catch my own fish. I saw the line bobbing, and I started spinning the reel. This was harder than it looked. My new friends found it rather funny to see a minister working so hard, and they would shout words of encouragement like, “Give it hell, Reverend!” I pulled this fish aboard: a two and a half foot mackerel. More than twice as long as my previous record. What do you suppose my new friends called the fish caught by the minister? A “holy mackerel.”

What do you call a two and a half foot mackerel on board a deep sea fishing boat? Bait for a bigger fish! Fish bigger than any of us had caught up until that point in our life was sliced up and put on bigger rods with bigger hooks in order to catch bigger fish. Finally we reached the point where we had the biggest rods with the biggest bait to catch the biggest fish this boat could possibly imagine. We throw out the lines and using balloons for bobbers we set out to catch the really big ones. Our boat captain would encourage us with lines like “You are only one bite away from being famous.” A line I think is taught to every fish boat captain in their 101 class.

Twenty minutes into having the big rods out the line begins to tug. The captain guns the gas and we all grab on for dear life to anything we can hold on to. We got a bite, and he had set the hook. We reel in all

the other lines to avoid entanglement. Then the soon-to-be-bride is strapped into the big chair with a hole in the middle to begin reeling in whatever is on the end of this line. When she got tired, someone else jumped in and had a turn. Eventually all five of us got to spend some time fighting our Moby Dick. The fellow with us kept saying, “This is something big!” I got to be the last one—the one who officially landed it. What was it? A six foot long hammerhead shark. On the charter boat’s website, they classify it as a “big game shark.” It was the fish of a lifetime.

Of course we were all elated. But what do you do with a shark that is almost as long as I am tall? We could take it to a taxidermist who would stuff it and ship it to one of us. This was the vote of our ship’s captain, no doubt because he probably got a piece of the action. But that was an expensive proposition, and someone needed to have the space to display such a beast. I didn’t think Sharon would let me put in the new house. And while Rev. Barbara does most of the pastoral care work around here at church, still I didn’t think it would be wise to have a large hammerhead shark leaping out of one of the walls in my office. That somehow doesn’t scream “pastoral presence” of the Senior Minister. Not exactly the feng shui I am looking to achieve with that room. What do you do with a six foot hammerhead shark? We let him go. We joked that we were going to try to catch his big brother, but we didn’t.

We felt that killing such a beautiful creature would be a kind of sacrilege. Let it live and keep swimming. I am proud of that decision. But I think the main reason we let him go was it wasn't about the shark. It was not so much about the goal or the trophy as much as it was getting there. All five of us had the experience of fighting a fish that would have eaten anyone of us. We shared in that common struggle and prevailed. Let me tell you, *that* is an experience that quickly turns strangers into friends. Some of the guys on that boat I had never seen before that morning, but by the end of the day and at the wedding the next day we were chums; exchanging e-mails, telling stories, recounting our adventures. We had bonded over a common struggle and our common achievement.

My friends, that is a taste of what is known as the beloved community. A beloved community is a group of people who share a common goal, a mission if you will, but they share something deeper than that too. They have a bond, a relationship of mutuality that is developed over time. It is a relationship that respects the other person's right to be an individual in all their quirkiness and uniqueness, but also recognizes our shared values and common experiences. The beloved community is a rare thing. It is extremely rare when it happens accidentally, as it did for me this summer. The beloved community usually needs to be cultivated, worked at, and strived toward, in and

among a group of people who are intentional about becoming or sustaining a beloved community. It is the ultimate goal of any church, but particularly the Unitarian Universalist church.

In many ways it was a similar experience to what Phil Jackson described in our modern reading today. Here he had achieved one of the greatest accomplishments it is possible to achieve in sports: an NBA championship as a player. Yet at the celebration party in Manhattan, it all feels so empty. The real championship had been the struggle together with his teammates to achieve that goal. It came in finally beating the Boston Celtics of the 1970s in a game seven on their court. That taste of a beloved community was the true victory.

You know I think the true test of a beloved community is not the achievements we accomplish together, our highlight films or our fishing trophies on the wall. No what is really important are the things we can never take a picture of and show to others. The true measure of the beloved community is in how well we meet the challenges before us more than it is the glitz and glamour of our trophies. It is all about how we get there that truly matters.

It reminds me of a song that was out this past spring and summer by Miley Cyrus called “The Climb.” She sings, “There is always going to be another mountain. I am always going to want to make it move. It is always going to be an uphill battle, sometimes I am going to have to

lose. It is not about how fast I get there, and it's not about what's waiting on the other side. It's the climb." We become a beloved community by meeting our shared difficulties together.

Of course we have experienced difficult times in the past. No one could have predicted what happened in the economic life of our country last fall. While things are starting to look up, the ripple effects of that downturn touched the lives of everyone in the country and eventually the world. Last year the election of Barack Obama brought the promise of unity in America across traditional lines of hatred and distrust. And now we see those old partisan lines reemerge as we bicker and squabble over the health of our country. While these national challenges can at times seem remote, they can have very tangible impact here at home. They do affect us as a beloved community.

Yes here at First Unitarian Church we have had our share of money woes as just about every group or individual in the nation has these days. But never forget that the limiting factor of our church's vision has never, ever been money. We may mistakenly think so, that we must pull back our vision for ourselves because we lack financial resources, but actually this is rarely the main cause of our fear. The true limiting factor on our church's vision for itself has always been the courage of our leaders, both lay and clergy. We are held back only by our inability to be inspired by what could be for us in the future. The

scarcity of resources in the present will always be overcome by an abundance of imagination for the future. And let me tell you, having been around this place for a year now, I can assure you that there is no lack of courage among our leaders in facing those challenges. That doesn't make them easier, but it does mean we are in a strong position to meet whatever mountains we may need to climb, or whatever sharks we may need to reel in, with an abundance of creativity and innovative thinking. If I could produce a sort of balance sheet of congregational mojo that showed you the amount of collective energy, imagination, and courage that exists in our beloved community right now today, it would be deep in the black. Sure more money would be nice, but courage to keep up the climb is the real precious resource. If we run out of that, then we are in trouble.

And so I am pleased to report to you that we will not be in mere survival mode this year; limping along just to get by. That is not my style. I have seen the talent of my staff this year, and it is impressive. They are unleashed; no holding back anything in terms of creativity and innovation. I have seen the dedication of the people who lead teams and run programs. So many of them go above and beyond anything asked of them because they see their work as their ministry to the church they love. I have seen the talent and vision of our Board and the passion they have for First Unitarian Church. They did terrific work on improving

and refining our governance system this past year. And at their retreat last month do you know what they did? They said to themselves, “We can do more.” Not being content to stand pat with the impressive accomplishments of the previous year, they committed themselves to becoming a forward-looking, strategic board. The vision for what our church can become is directly tied to the courage of our leadership.

This year we strive not to merely get by with the status quo; we are aiming at excellence. Let me tell you there are some exciting things in store too. This year we will be creating some exciting new programs to welcome people to our church through small group experiences that are intentional in developing deep and powerful soul connections. We will be trying new things with our music on Sunday and Rev. Barbara will be leading a Friday Night Worship service that will have a more contemporary feel to it. We will be exploring how social action is at the center of our Unitarian Universalist faith and practice, and putting those words into action. We will be trying new ways of organization and administration that will help align the institution of First Unitarian Church around the mission of First Unitarian Church. We will have themes every month that will cut across worship services, programs, small groups, and even committee meetings. But most of all we will renew and strengthen our commitment to being one church, one beloved community whose bonds of union can overcome differences of theology,

race, sexual orientation, generational gaps, and economic circumstances. These are the fish we will go searching for this year.

Not easy stuff to do. But no one promised easy. I walked off that boat in Florida with hands that were raw and bleeding; literally. I barely noticed. I was a bit sorry when some of those wounds healed up; they were a tangible souvenir. I was hoping that it would turn into some gnarly scar that I could point to for the rest of my life, like Ahab's leg, and say, "Here see what I sacrificed and see what came of it." If it was easy to haul in a hammerhead shark than everyone would have one. If it were easy to slay a white whale or beat the Boston Celtics, then everyone would have done it. If it were easy to instantly create the beloved community without doing all the work we do, and plan to do, then it would not be such a rare and sought after goal. When we had hauled this thing aboard we took a million pictures. I held the tail. (A fish tail!) I had in my hands this tight bundle of muscles that had resisted us for half an hour. The power in that animal is something I will never forget. It was all the trophy I needed.

So too at church. The challenges can be hard. The struggle sometimes intense. But the pay off is sweet. And even sweeter is who you become in the process. May this church year be a year to remember. May it be worthy of telling stories that surpass any fish tale. Amen Blessed Be.

