

## **Renew Among: The Beloved Community**

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This morning I am continuing my sermon series based on the church's new Long Range Plan "Renew at First U." There are three parts to Renew at First U: renew within, renew among, and renew beyond. Today we will examine the second of these; renewal among ourselves as a church community. Of course all three are interconnected. In between the individual and the community at large there is the congregation; what sociologists would call a "mediating institution."

This specific portion of "Renew at First U" talks a lot about welcoming people. We often refer to this as "radical hospitality": going out of your way to welcome the stranger in our midst. Radical hospitality is a culture, and way of thinking that values the comfort and ease of the stranger even if it means you have to be uncomfortable or inconvenienced in some way. For example as basic practice of radical hospitality might be to take one Sunday a month and only talk to people you don't know at coffee hour. Catch up with your friends three

Sundays a month, and on the fourth one talk to a stranger. This person may be a new visitor or they might just be a member you have seen before but never had occasion to meet. A small inconvenience to you becomes a big gesture of welcoming to someone else.

Being a “welcoming congregation” as we proclaim both from the pulpit every Sunday and on our sign is a process. Too often we mistake being a welcoming congregation as a state of being, as if we had crossed the finish line into some new status and can now rest. But take a look at that word “welcoming.” It is an active verb in the present tense. We are a welcoming congregation means we are always welcoming, always trying to get better at welcoming, failing sometimes, learning, willing to grow and improve, and then continue welcoming. It never ends. And while the term “welcoming congregation” initially had the context of welcoming GLBT folks, it has gone beyond that specific group. Rev. Barbara and I list more than one way in which we are a welcoming congregation each Sunday. People driving up and down 202 probably don’t know the initial context of the term. They just see “welcoming” all people no matter who you are.

The Apostle Paul, in the portion of Corinthians I read this morning, also makes this point about the church. Everyone is welcome despite their differences. He is writing a letter, actually a series of letters, to a church that he founded and who have been fighting among themselves. The church in Corinth is what some experts would call a problem

church; full of chronic anxiety. So Paul writes to tell them that there is a place for everyone in the church, people raised as Jews and people who were raised with Greek ideas who converted into Christianity. This passage is actually one of the favorite Bible teaching for many Buddhists. It says, you can be you and I can be me, and yet we are still connected. We do not sacrifice our identity in some massive goo of oneness. Rather we make room for the other in all their particularity. We seek and find those ways in which we are connected through commonalities. This is how we become a church.

Another more important influence this passage had was on Martin Luther King Jr. This is Black History Month after all. Martin Luther King uses Paul's description of the church as the basis for his vision of a world without violence and without injustice or hatred. He called this vision the "Beloved Community." We mention this term in our Unison Affirmation, and I have referred to it a number of times in sermons, and people have asked me what it means. The Beloved Community values love and trust as those things which will triumph over hate and fear. It is a community of peace yes, but peace with justice; with some resolution to conflict not merely its absence. In the Beloved Community both differences and commonalities are preserved, with all of the tension, and all of the gifts, that such a tension might create. It is a vision of the church that welcomes everyone: even the people who are different than us, the ones we don't like, the ones we disagree with or that make us

uncomfortable. This vision has been abandoned, for the most part, in the secular world, and certainly in the political realm, for being too impractical, too hard to accomplish. And so instead we have settled for a lesser vision that includes vast economic disparity and war without end. However among religious people, particularly liberal religious people, the Beloved Community is still a compelling vision of how we can be a welcoming congregation.

Take for example the good people in Tulsa Oklahoma. You may have read about All Souls Tulsa in a recent issue of UU World magazine. For those of you unfamiliar with the UU church in Tulsa and what they are doing, it all started when one of the local evangelical ministers started to change his theology. He was an African American minister with a large African American congregation. But, like many of us, he started to question some of the things he was supposed to believe. Eventually he decided that he was in fact a universalist. He could not preach that some people are going to hell. So one day he informed his congregation that he was dissolving the church he started, joining All Souls Unitarian Church, and that they should do so as well. Many of them did. Now All Souls Tulsa is a large congregation; the largest in the UUA believe or not. But overnight their demographics changed dramatically.

All Souls welcomed this minister and his people. They lived up to the ideal of the Beloved Community envisioned by Paul and Martin

Luther King. Most Unitarian Universalists would say this is exactly what we want to see happen in our churches. And it is. But it is not easy. I happen to be friends with the minister at All Souls, Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, and he is honest about the difficulties this has unearthed. There are two worship services that they do, the early service is much like it always has been at All Souls, and the later service is a high energy gospel service with loud music, clapping hands, and people shouting “Amen” during the sermon. This touched off a huge debate or discussion within the church of “who are we now?” This is a church that uses the word God with some comfort, but now we are using Jesus to refer to God. People say things like “I became a member when I saw that the minister was anointed.” There is a word you don’t hear in a UU church too often. “I thought they would change to be like me, why do I have to change to be like them?” This change unearthed all kinds of unknown and unforeseen assumptions people had about race, class, theology, and what it means to worship. The authority of the ministers has been questioned as to whether or not this was the right decision. For two years going on three, All Souls Tulsa has been the paragon of the Beloved Community, and the tension has been simmering with occasional boil overs.

The moral of this story, which continues, is not should we or shouldn’t we be a welcoming congregation. It is not should we or shouldn’t we strive to be the Beloved Community. We should on both

counts. No the take away here is that the moments we grow the most spiritually, emotionally, and personally, are often uncomfortable moments. Spiritual growth does not come in between episodes of Emersonian epiphanies. It usually comes when you have to deal with someone who is different or who pushes your buttons or you don't like or may even intimidate you. It is in those uncomfortable moments that we have to bring love to bear in our interactions with each other. The folks in Tulsa have come face to face with tough stuff: changes in worship styles, changes in theological language both from the pulpit and from their fellow congregants, changes in how we understand ourselves to be a church. People do not fear change, they fear the loss of the things they love: the church that fed their soul, that gave their children religious education, that gave them a spiritual home.

But they are rising to meet that challenge, thanks to the gifted leadership of my colleagues who serve there. The question is never is this change going to be hard or easy. It is going to be hard. The question is "is this change worth it?" Spiritual growth is happening there because they are willing to sit with being uncomfortable. They can give up a bit of their personal comfort and ease in service to the Beloved Community coming to life in their midst.

Julie-Ann Silberman-Bunn would say that Tulsa is not in the satisfaction business. I remember when "Renew at First U" was being written, we would discuss the differences between our church and a

social club or a benevolent society. Sometimes people would tell me that we are too business-like. There is one key difference between all of those groups and the church. There is a difference between McDonalds and First Unitarian. McDonalds is in the satisfaction business, and we are not. All they want to do is make you happy. By trying to sell you a product or convince you that this social group is where all the cool people are at, they are looking for satisfied customers. Now there is nothing wrong with this per se, it is the basis of our economic growth. But the church is not in the satisfaction business, we are in the transformation business. The “business” of the church, and my job as your minister, is to make you creatively uncomfortable. Uncomfortable with your complacency, uncomfortable with your pettiness, uncomfortable with whatever your stuff may be that you have to work on. I do this because I know I need to work on all that stuff too; so we might as well do so together as a Beloved Community.

We can't be afraid to bring out what is real simply because we want to be private or have people think we don't have problems. Let's bring it all out, in an environment that is safe, that intentionally manifests the values of the Beloved Community of love and trust, like in our small groups or among close friends. Occasionally this will mean that we will intentionally go to a place that is uncomfortable, that is no fun. But look what happens in Tulsa Oklahoma when they have the courage to take that risk. Oh and by the way, the church in Corinth that

fought over should we welcome Jews and Greeks together; they were struggling with perhaps the most important and defining issue in early Christianity. Their solution to welcome both traditions shaped all of Christianity from their time to now. That is creative discomfort if ever there was!

The writer Henri Nouwen referencing two key biblical images said that the church is called to be both pastoral and prophetic. Reinhold Niebuhr summed this up by saying that we are called to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. You have to do both and do each at the right time. I am not saying we should always be uncomfortable at church all the time, but so often we naturally want to avoid that which is difficult but healthy for us. First Unitarian Church seeks to be in the transformation business for the whole person, not just that part of you that is a consumer and seeks to satisfy your desires and be comfortable. That is nice when it works, but sometimes it just doesn't. I see the church's prophetic role as analogous to a personal trainer at the gym. Just as they seek to improve or transform your physical well-being, so too do we seek to transform your spiritual well-being. Imagine a trainer who told his clients to stay home and relax. Take it easy. Eat whatever you want, you will be fine. This guy wants to make everyone happy; he is in the satisfaction business. I am sure he would be popular! But the people he serves, or is supposedly serving, are not healthy as a result.

Sometimes as a Beloved Community we have to afflict the comfortable, sometimes known as tough love. The church has to be like that personal trainer who makes you eat a low carb diet and exercise every day. It might not be fun, it might be unpleasant or uncomfortable, but the results pay off. Transformation happens. As a Beloved Community we find renewal among ourselves.

I should give a caveat here: there is a difference, although occasionally subtle, between being prophetic and being a jerk. Being in the transformation business is not a license to make people upset through boorish behavior. We do seek to balance the pastoral with the prophetic, love and respect for other with honesty about how we feel. Martin Luther King saw the Beloved Community as a place where differences and conflicts were brought out into the open, but in a context of love and mutual regard. Here at First Unitarian Church the things that we use to maintain that balance is our behavior covenant. If you read it closely, and if you haven't it is on the back wall of the Parish Hall, you will see that it preserves both the individual and their feelings and their right to disagree, while at the same time defining what connects us as a church and how to be in relationship while still respectfully differing from one another. It is an impressive document, and those who wrote it and those who signed it are to be praised for defining the Beloved Community at First Unitarian Church so eloquently.

It teaches us to own our own opinions. Speak up when you are upset. Don't write anonymous notes or pass on anonymous feedback. I don't know why people do that; when we get such things in the office we ignore it or throw them away. It's a waste of energy. On the other hand I seek out people who are willing to stand by what they think and say even when it is a disagreement with me. From the large to the petty, I am happy to be in conversation with folks because those conversations build up the Beloved Community. It means that we can disagree with love even if we don't immediately convince the other person of our point of view. Disagreement is not conflict, sometimes it can be creative discomfort. We know the difference when we are following that behavioral covenant. It is a very useful guide as we move forward in the transformation business.

Let us strive toward that vision of the Beloved Community. Let us always be welcoming, always living by our covenant. May we have the courage to live in those uncomfortable moments and let them transform and renew us for the better. Amen Blessed Be.