

Renew Beyond: We'll Build a Land

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

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This morning I will be wrapping up my sermon series based on the church's new Long Range Plan "Renew at First U." There are three parts to the plan, renew within, renew among, and renew beyond. Today we will go in depth with what it means to renew beyond the walls of our congregation and how we reach out to the community in which we exist. The purpose of this church, like any other, is to serve not only the people who count themselves as members, but to be a presence, a voice, of liberal religion in Northern New Castle county. We do this because we recognize that we do not live in isolation, but are embedded in a society that desperately needs that voice.

I watched the inauguration of Barack Obama on Scott Ward's computer. He, Terry, and I crowded into his office and watched that historic moment. I remember thinking that it was the first time that I had ever watched an inauguration on a computer rather than a television. I thought that was appropriate given how well Obama used technology during his campaign. The euphoria of that day was amazing. He swept

into office on a message of hope, and frankly, not being his predecessor. Unfortunately in the year plus since inauguration, we see that these things get you only so far. Obama's critics from both the right and the left are asking, "Where are the results?" Where is the progress on healthcare, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and GLBT issues? While these are good points, it can be easy to overlook that foreign relations have greatly improved. Not to mention the economy is starting to come back from the abyss. There is still a good ways to go, but it may be that Obama's efforts to save off another Great Depression were nothing short of heroic. Maybe. We will need more time, distance, and a few published Ph.D. thesis in macroeconomics before we can tell for sure. We are too close to that experience to be able to tell right now.

I believe that Obama is not as great as his supporters claim, nor is he as awful as his critics denounce him to be. He is a very smart, very virtuous person, but he is not superman. What we have seen in this past year is that decades of political polarization and isolation between Democrats and Republicans is not easily overcome by even the most well-intentioned. I believe it is this distrust of each other across partisan lines that is the real root of the problem. I am all for healthy disagreement, but that only works when you acknowledge the other side and work on common ground. Both parties are to blame for this situation that goes back at least thirty years. One individual cannot undo decades of acrimony.

And yet, somehow, we allowed ourselves to believe that at some level; that one person can do it all if they are placed high enough in office, and if they are smart enough, and good enough. In many ways this is a view not unlike the Confucian scholar Mencius or Meng k'u. Mencius is best known for organizing and establishing Confucian orthodoxy about three hundred years BC. Mencius believed, as Confucius did, that we are inherently good. People respond to benevolence and ethical treatment. If a ruler of a kingdom is a virtuous leader then the people will follow his or her example, and virtue will spread throughout that kingdom. Basically Mencius was one hundred and eighty degrees from Nixon! Thus to Mencius the key to the whole system is finding and training a virtuous leader for your society. The king is literally the lynchpin between the will of heaven and the harmonious society on earth.

This was pretty close to the level of expectation that Obama faced coming into office. Just get that one right person into office and all will be right with the world too. But no single individual, no matter how smart, no matter how good, no matter how relatable, can magically change things in an instant. Now this is not to say that elections are not important; they are. It is certainly to the benefit of society to elect such good people. My point is not that there is a problem with the people we elect, but rather the problem lies with our expectations of them, and of

ourselves. Electing good people is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a harmonious society. That is where Mencius went awry.

If we really care about an issue, than we should work on that issue regardless of who is in office. Take Prop 8 in California. Passing legislation that would allow gays and lesbians to marry should be a high priority in my opinion. Certainly some politicians are more favorable to that issue than others. But I cannot give up on marriage equality simply because one political party is against it, and I cannot just assume that the other political party will automatically pass it. You may have a different issue you care about, but the dynamic is the same. Simply electing the “right people” and hoping they do the right thing isn’t enough. It is just the beginning.

I cannot do it alone. Working for the transformation of society as a lone individual is a good thing. It is the fruit of spiritual maturity. We should be in service to others. It is the result of renewal within, but it is not enough to transform the world; renewal beyond. In order to do that, we need to build relationships with people who have common interests as we do. Otherwise we divide and conquer ourselves.

In our modern reading, Jacobsen describes how Saul Alinsky took this one step further. Alinsky saw that real power came when people organized themselves as institutions. Then when those institutions stood together around their common interests they held even more sway to

transform society. Thus power was found in-between individuals; in the relationships they built together around a common vision of the good. Yes they could elect better or worse people to office, but the beauty was that they could still work toward that vision of the good regardless of which party was in power.

It is no coincidence that Barack Obama was a community organizer, helping people and institutions come together in this way. He used community organizer tactics, and even his signature slogan “Yes we can!” is quite common in organizing circles. Community organizations work to find commonalities across divisions. As I said, I think this is the root problem in our body politic and I think Obama knows it too. Although it has been quixotic thus far, it is crucial for the two political parties to work together for that common good. And that requires that we build relationships with people we see as the other. As the Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Camara said, “If I dream alone, it is only a dream. If we dream together, it is the beginning of reality.”

Our best chance to renew beyond our walls, to build the land we sing about in the hymn, is to be in relationship not only with each other, but more importantly with others outside of our church. Many of you may remember last November when I shared with you an incident of someone writing a racist epitaph in one of our RE classrooms. On that Sunday, I challenged you the congregation to step up and speak out against racism both inside and outside our church. And respond to that

challenge you did. We packed room 29 that Sunday and from that discussion a group has formed called the “Anti-Racism Team.” And before you tell me, yes I know it is not a great name, but they are working on changing it!

This group in a very short period of time has been crafting a new vision for social action at First Unitarian Church. A number of suggestions were made about how we can build connections to each other so that we can talk honestly together about difficult topics like racism or other issues that can be a bit scary and intense. Conversations like that require that we trust each other, and that can only happen through a process of relationship building within a specific group. But the Anti-Racism Team also envisioned our congregation in partnership and dialogue with other congregations; not unlike what Saul Alinsky might have suggested. In forging this partnership with a predominately African American congregation, the Anti-Racism Team envisioned it as a mutual coming together as equals; learning about each other, and working together in the community over issues that called to all of us.

I am happy to announce to you this morning that the Canaan Baptist Church in Wilmington has agreed to be in partnership with First Unitarian Church in this way. Canaan Baptist is one of the largest predominantly African American churches in Wilmington and they are lead by Rev. Chris Bullock, a very impressive man. They have invited us to attend worship there, and we are still in the process of working out

the logistics as to what this new relationship will look like. They know a bit about our recent history with race and our desire to overcome that event. They are very excited and enthusiastic to be partnered with us. The credit goes to the Anti-Racism Team for their vision that was compelling enough to move *two* congregations to come together to help end racism. We also are grateful to Faye Bennaueu of the YWCA for helping to facilitate this partnership.

And when I say they are excited, they are really excited. Rev. Bullock announced the partnership to his congregation a couple of weeks ago; before I knew it was in place. We had a call come into the church office that evening from a member at Canaan Baptist who wanted to write a story about our new partnership for the News Journal. At the time I thought something was in the works, but Rev. Barbara, who happened to pick up the phone, was utterly surprised! As it was, the deadline for the story didn't work out this time, and things are so new that there wouldn't be much to report anyway. But of course the potential is huge. This goes to show that the folks in Canaan Baptist are chomping at the bit to get together, and I hope some of you are too.

The excitement we feel comes from two big important institutions coming together. Now I could have struck up a friendship with their minister, but it would not have been the same would it? I have friends in the local area who are ministers and rabbis. But this has more power because it is not *me* in relationship, it is *us* in relationship. Even if the

leaders are connected to each other that is merely a necessary but not sufficient condition. All of us need to be together speaking out in the community as a whole institution. When that happens, then the world can be transformed by our dreaming. The difference we make out in the world is proof that we are renewing beyond ourselves.

Making a difference in the world for the better should be what a Long Range Plan is all about isn't it? The way we make a difference, the way we build that land that can be, is by putting our collective resources of time, money, energy, and vision behind our Unitarian Universalist values.

The Anti-Racism Team has three areas that they operate on. 1. Education, reflection and transformation on the issue of race for all of us regardless of which race you happen to be. 2. Building relationships of trust and mutuality between members of our church and between the church and other institutions. 3. Working on community action projects informed by our personal reflections and our partnerships. These correspond to the three levels of the Long Range Plan: renew within, renew among, and renew beyond. Also note that all of these levels are interdependent. For us to renew beyond our walls, we need to renew among ourselves as a congregation first; otherwise we would be hypocrites. How could we call the world to renew with any integrity, unless we had done some of that work ourselves? That is not to say that we should wait until we are perfect before we try to make a difference in

our community. We never would. However authenticity is a key value to Unitarian Universalists, and to work for renewal beyond, we must at least of begun to renew among ourselves as a church.

Same for renewal within. You should not wait until you are a spiritually perfected being before serving others. As a friend of mine would often say, “If you ever find the perfect church, don’t join it. You will only mess it up.” In order to become a spiritually perfected being, if such thing exists, you have to be in service to others. We start where we are in all our imperfection, and strive for renewal. We do this not because we are less than or need to please someone or imagine we are pleasing someone. No we seek to renew out of a deep love for ourselves, for the people who share our spiritual community with us, and for the wider world which we have been born into. Our renewal within is dependent on both our renewal among and our renewal beyond.

Through this threefold process of renewal we are able to make that difference for the better. We begin to accomplish the mission of the church. We honor the history of First Unitarian Church and the values of the Unitarian Universalist tradition of which we are a small part. By living out this vision, we do nothing less than transform the world.

That is what I call “Renew at First U”! Come let us build that land my people we seek. Amen Blessed Be