

Youth: Our Future or Our Present?

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This morning I want to talk to about youth and their importance to our congregation. I want to thank Travis Laster for purchasing this sermon topic as part of the church service auction last spring. So if you like today's sermon you know who to thank. If you don't like today's sermon, then you know who you need to outbid at next year's service auction!

In our Modern Reading this morning, no less than William Ellery Channing, the father of American Unitarianism himself, says that the purpose of our religious education is not to imprint our minds on that of the young but to stir up their own. This is an often quoted line from his larger work on spiritual freedom. Implicit in this line is an idea that Channing unpacks later in the sermon. You see he was arguing against the long heralded Christian belief that we are all born inherently sinful. Because all human beings are born with the taint of Adam's original sin, we are all separated from the goodness of God, claimed Calvin and others. Even the smallest child, an infant in fact, is born with this innate

flaw. The only way to remove such a separation was through the practice of infant baptism. The assumption of orthodox Christianity was the children were basically evil. They were born in sin and baptism was needed to wash it away.

Channing, on the other hand, did not buy this at all. He argued first that there was no precedent in the Bible for such an idea. Certainly there isn't in the Old Testament—neither Jews nor Muslims believe in original sin even though they revere many of the same scriptures Christians do. However Channing also did something that was very unique in the history of Christianity up until that point. He also argued that belief in original sin was unreasonable; it didn't make sense. He appealed to reason as a source of religious understanding. Channing lived at the dawn of the Enlightenment, and arguments based solely on scriptural sources were losing in the battleground of ideas. What Channing did, and this is what really defined early Unitarianism, was that he would argue a point using both scripture and reason. Indeed, he believed that the very fact that human beings could reason and think about these matters at all demonstrated that we cannot be so flawed, so fallen, as the proponents of original sin would have us believe.

In our reading today, Channing extends this argument to include children and youth. Instead of assuming that all kids are evil, what if we saw them as a blank slate. Or better yet as possessing a potential for reason, wisdom, compassion, and moral action. If that were true, then it

would fall to us, the adults to nurture and bring forth that potential. This is exactly what Channing is calling us to do. Instead of stamping our thoughts on to them, we should arouse in them their inherent wisdom and goodness. Create circumstances that call out the best of our youth, and therefore call out the best in the rest of us as well.

In a very practical sense, there are many ways in which we try to live by these values here at First Unitarian Church of Wilmington. For those of you who have been around awhile, you have probably seen a number of child dedications but have not witnessed too many baptisms here at First Unitarian. We don't do baptism because we don't believe there is any inherent sin that needs to be washed away from an infant or any other child. We do however dedicate ourselves to the upbringing of every child in our church. We commit ourselves as a church family to help stir up their minds and to help them bring out that inherent goodness. We want them to express it and be themselves. Which brings me to the other practical way in which we live out what Channing said. Our youth groups are very special places. We have both a junior youth and regular youth group at our church. Youth groups in Unitarian Universalist churches can be sanctuaries for kids, because everyone is accepted.

There is a show on TV these days, I am quite sure none of you have ever heard of it. It is little program called Glee. Just me and few of my friends know about it. Actually if you haven't seen it, Glee is

about a glee club in Lima Ohio, a real place incidentally which is not all that far from where I grew up. It has become so popular in large part because of the musical performances, but I really like the scenes where they come together in glee club. It is a group full of misfits: a gay teen, an insecure diva, a kid in a wheelchair. It is diverse; consisting of African Americans, Asian American, and Jewish kids. Individually they are always being tormented by the cheerleaders or the football jocks. The contrast is striking too; all of the cheerleaders and football players look alike, but the glee club is as diverse as it could possibly be. When the members of the glee club come together they are transformed. What they have done is form a micro-version of the Beloved Community. Everyone is accepted. Yes they get mad and fight, but the foundation of their relationships is love and acceptance. When all of these misfits are together, they find affirmation through singing. Their self-esteem is built up. They are so accepting of others that when the quarterback of the football team wants to join glee club, he is accepted. This is a real love your enemy kind of approach.

Now I am not implying that our youth are a bunch of misfits! But like the glee club in the show, youth groups at their best become a beloved community within a beloved community. By that I mean that a beloved community is a place where we stir up our own minds and do not follow others in an unquestioning manner like lemmings off a cliff. This is extraordinarily important particularly during the teen years.

Teenagers need to explore ideas, test them out, say some smart things and some dumb things. It is all part of the process of learning what it means to be an adult. To have a safe place where kids are accepted during this phase is very very important. The only place you can find that level of unconditional acceptance is in the beloved community. Taking our cue from Channing, we strive to have our youth groups to be such places.

And yet, I am sad to say, Mr. Channing gets it mostly right, but he has an assumption that many people fall into. When I went to General Assembly for the first time, I heard people talk about this. General Assembly is the annual convention of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and it brings together thousands of Unitarian Universalists. It is an impressive sight the first time you go. Actually many of our youth will be going for the first time this year—they are raising money to attend General Assembly in Phoenix. I hope that they hear there what I heard at my first GA, as it is called. A fellow who had just graduated out of the youth group, and was headed into college, stood up and said, “You know people are always saying that the youth are the future. But we are also the present.” Channing’s assumption was that youth are the future. But they have something to offer us today, not just when they are adults.

This is probably not news to any of you who have seen our youth services lately. I can only speak for the last three years of course, but

often the youth service gets the most glowing reviews of any worship service we do all year. The youth are not just our future, having their minds stirred up and the souls molded for some long term benefit. That may be true, but it isn't the whole truth. The youth are also our present, meaning that they make real and significant contributions to our congregation right now, today, as youth.

Of course this morning that is very obvious. The youth group has committed to be in the service every second Sunday of the month, and thanks to Kathie Thomas working with Rev. Alison and myself, we have been incorporating youth group members into those second Sunday worship services. Of course Scott had a big hand in this morning as well. If you were paying very close attention a few weeks back when we did our new member recognition, you might have caught that some of those names read were members of our youth group who had formally signed the membership book. And if you enjoyed one of their pumpkin pies at Thanksgiving recently, then you certainly experienced ways the youth contribute to our church.

These are the tangible examples that we can point to. There are, however, intangible things the youth bring to us that we may not at first notice, but are important elements to making our church a beloved community. The experts in church growth will tell you that if you do not have kids and youth in your church, then you are in a lot of trouble. According to one statistic from the Alban Institute, if the number of

adult members of a congregation is four times or more the number of children and youth in a congregation, than that church will cease to exist some time in the next twenty years. It is the simple law of nature that one generation passes away and the next generation takes over. Without a next generation, our church, which has been around since 1866, disappears. Incidentally, I crunched the numbers a couple of years ago when I heard that stat and found that we are dangerously close to the four to one ratio. I suspect it has gotten better in the last couple of years, but the message is clear: without our youth our church as we know it ceases to be.

The greatest contribution that youth bring to our church is their unique perspective. People who plan on being on this planet two or three decades longer than the rest of us do, bring their own ways of looking at things. That and the pivotal moments that shaped their life are not the same as the ones that shaped your life or mine. Church is really the last place in our society where multiple generations come together, get to know each other, and have a chance to learn from each other. I might even go so far as to argue that that fact alone makes the church unique and extraordinarily vital in our culture. Sometimes this means that the youth are a healthy prophetic voice within our congregation.

Now hopefully they don't take things to the extreme that Mattathias did in our Ancient Reading this morning! Believe or not

though there is a little boy in our RE program named Mattathias. These days, while UUs appreciate a good prophet more so than most people, there is essentially no line that separates a religious zealot from a terrorist from a murderer. No one here would condone religious murder either back then or now. Zealots by definition have abandoned reason which Channing noted was a corrective on such overreactions. No I bring up Mattathias not because I think we should approve of his actions, but rather that we consider his position. We cannot go along with selling out, he warns. We cannot abandon who we are. We must keep this heritage of ours going. We are the stewards of a lineage which has been charged with the task of handing it off to the next generation. In fact it is Mattathias' sons, especially Judas, who leads the Maccabean revolt after his father's death. We are a proud people and we have to preserve that identity. This was not the popular thing to say at the time. It was vogue among Jews, particularly in the cities like Jerusalem, to go along with Greek culture and political authority. Out in the sticks where Mattathias and his sons lived, they were unimpressed. They were the red states who did not take kindly to such changes. And so they spoke up against the hypocrisy that they saw around them. They organized and got energized and they did something about it. They worked for a cause that few people would have given much of a chance, and yet they prevailed.

Again, it is not the method, but rather the spirit, the vitality, and the energy that the Maccabees had which is the same energy our youth bring to us. Theirs is a voice which speaks out against hypocrisy—as uncomfortable as that can make us at times. Their spirit calls them to get involved in various causes, some of which we may or may not understand. And their energy in service to those causes is extraordinary. A month or so ago the Executive Team received a proposal from the youth group outlining their strategy for funding their trip to General Assembly. I think we spent two meetings go over all of the fundraisers spread out across the year. We asked ourselves, “Can they really do all of this?” Bake sales, babysitting services, pancake breakfasts, all of it displays a certain zeal, perhaps not for the law, but definitely a zeal for wanting to join in General Assembly. This year General Assembly will be focused on the immigration issues and racial tensions that are simmering in Arizona right now. In addition to all of the fundraising, the youth are spending this year preparing and learning about those issues. So this is not fundraising so they can go on vacation together. This is fundraising so that they can join their peers in speaking a prophetic voice to those in power on behalf of people they have never met. It is a moving and inspiring thing to do. That prophetic witness and energy is what they bring to our church. That is the present.

This month we are talking about hospitality. Hospitality is not serving the right tea with the right kind of cookie. Hospitality is about

making room for the other in all of their full humanity. Normally we think of hospitality in the context of welcoming new people, but it is far far broader than that. We need to make room for the full humanity of our youth, right here and now. They have so much to offer, and yes we too have things to offer them. The youth group is a beloved community, but remember it is a sub-set; a beloved community with the larger one that includes all of us. Let us not mistake that for segregation or separation. That would be anathema to Channing's vision of a church community that stirs up the minds and souls of the youth. Just remember while we are trying to stir up their souls and minds, that we need to be open to the possibility that they may stir up ours in turn.

May we never lose sight of the fact that youth are both the present and the future of our church. May we be inspired by their passion, energy, and vision. And together may we bring about the beloved community that we hold so dear. Amen Blessed Be.