

Evensong

by Bob Champagne-Willis
Sunday, January 27, 2009

Call to Worship by Barbara Hamilton-Holway

We are here to worship,
To be together,
To celebrate our desire for community,
To grow in respect for self and others.
We worship through our direct speaking
And attentive, respectful listening.
Come, let us worship.

Reading

Each one of us ministers; each of us is ministered to. *Barbara Hamilton-Holway*

The following quotations about ministry are adapted from a Starr King School for the Ministry catalog.

Church is where we are called to be a part of something larger than ourselves which is wholesome or holy.

Church is being present with one another in the wordless, the unspoken, the ineffable.

Church is where we speak and live the highest we know, living with the knowledge that it is never as deep, as wide, or as high as we wish. Church happens when there is a quality of relationship between and among human beings that beckons forth hidden possibilities.

Church is wherever in relationship we are encouraged to be more fully, more courageously our unique, individual selves.

Church is wherever there is a meeting that summons us to our better selves.

When our spines stiffen, and our muscles grow strong for the task, there is a church community, a ministry.

Church happens wherever our wounds begin healing.

Church happens wherever our loneliness is found.

Church is where people are invited into deeper, more constant, more reverent relationship with the world and one another.

Church is believing in life in the presence of death, struggling together for human responsibility against principalities and powers in institutions and structures that ignore humaneness and become instruments of death.

Church is where together we celebrate the triumphs of the human spirit, the miracles of birth and life, the wonders of devotion and sacrifice.

Church is where together we are witness to life-enhancing values, where we speak truth to power, where we stand for human dignity and for compassion and aspiration.

Ministry, real meeting, happens in prisons, and hospices, and hospitals; by cribs and cradles; in factories, offices and stores; in courtrooms and cocktail lounges and clinics and garages; in hovels, mansions, at bus stops and diners.

Ministry, real meeting, occurs in places and circumstances, likely and unlikely; in churches, not often enough, but sometimes.

Church is where people carry forward a long heritage of hope and liberation that has dignified and informed the human venture over many centuries.

Church is where we are present with, to, and for one another in our terrors and torments, our grief, misery, and pain, our joys and strengths, and in knowing that those feelings are each of ours.

Sermon: *Evensong*

Unity Church offers more than just Sunday services. For many, the Sunday service is enough, giving them a dose of spirituality and fellowship that helps with life's long journey. Perhaps your Sundayism is also sprinkled with committee work that both aids the work of the church and helps nourish the soul. There are also discussion and social gatherings, from the book club and the senior ministry brunch to the various covenant groups that meet once or twice a month. Whatever level of involvement you are looking for, Unity Church can fill that need.

Then, periodically, the Church has something more to offer in the form of Adult Religious Education or Adult RE. Now I know some of your ears picked up on that, and no, we are not offering a class on adultery, although I wouldn't be surprised if a curriculum on that subject existed. Indeed, the range of excellent classes prepared by the Unitarian Universalist Association is vast and all encompassing. Some of you here have taken classes on Building Your Own Theology and the New UU. I remember taking a weekend class on the Goddess workshop where we learned about the history of goddess worship and the efforts of current organized religion to belittle and squash any discussion around goddesses. Yet, we so easily worship at the altar of Lady Justice and Lady Liberty in today's culture. In this workshop, we were even encouraged to create our own goddess. Mine was a dowel headed, yarned haired, and wallpaper dressed goddess of Job Satisfaction. Apparently, she was not a very powerful goddess, because my job is still, how can I put this without resorting to the gutter, less than satisfactory.

Adult RE can take on any shape and last as long as this congregation wishes it to. Tess is willing and able to direct several different classes, depending on need. In December, she asked me if I was willing to lead a class this winter to help round out the Adult RE offerings this year. Several suggestions were offered. "Articulating Your UU Faith" was created because ministers heard persistent complaints about how hard it is to describe Unitarian Universalism. "Our Unitarian Universalist Story" helps participants know where we have been so that we can understand where we are going.

The third option she presented to me was Evensong, and I was intrigued. It's a little different than anything I have taught before. It's more on the worshipful side of Adult RE as opposed to strictly educational. It does follow the tradition of Adult RE classes to

be highly interactive among the participants. And it's longer, lasting eight weeks. Eight Weeks. Even that scares me. As Frank McGowen knows, I can't even commit to preaching a Sunday service very easily. It took him several e-mails and even a few phone calls to get me to commit to this Sunday service. And here I am, committing to teaching eight weeks of classes. Well, let me assure you. You do not need to attend all eight sessions. Come as often as you can; come to one session. It does not matter. Even I cannot attend all eight sessions. Andy and I have a trip planned to Costa Rica right in the middle of the eight weeks. Rest assured, between myself and the class's co-host, Cathy Kligler, we will offer consistent, thoughtful leadership.

The Evensong curriculum was created by Barbara Hamilton-Holway, who with her husband, Bill, co-minister to the Unitarian Universalist church in Berkeley, CA. Barbara is a graduate of Starr King School for the Ministry. Before ministry, she did graduate work in literature and for a decade she was a high school English teacher. Barbara also was a teacher as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Fiji Islands.

The title Evensong comes from the Anglican tradition. There, evening worship and singing is called "Evensong". This curriculum was first published in 1999. Evensong, part 2 was published in 2002. Then in 2006, she published "Evensong for Families." Her other works include, "Who will remember me; a Daughter's Memoir of Grief and Recovery.", published in 2004. Just visit You Tube and you can hear some of her sermons, including one about this book surrounding her mother's death. Barbara and her husband Bill preached the sermon at the 2007 General Assembly Service of the Living Tradition, speaking antiphonally. Always a fan of ten dollar words, I had to look that one up. It was as I thought; they spoke alternately, speaking in turns.

At Evensong's core is the art of Listening. The Christian scriptures tell us that in the beginning was the word. They are, of course, referring to the Christ. But in using the term, the Word, one must assume they are referring to the spoken word as the written word was not established for centuries after the creation story. And what good is the spoken word if there is no one to hear it. So the scriptures would more accurately say, Before the beginning, there was hearing, so that in the beginning, the spoken word could be heard.

Barbara Hamilton-Holway writes, "Listening solidifies relationship and is a foundation for community. Listening with undivided attention and without interruption moves us beyond differences and shows deep respect; the speaker is valued. Paying attention and being paid attention create a community wherein our Unitarian Universalist principle of affirming and promoting the worth and dignity of each person is embodied."

Barbara has designed the sessions of Evensong to be part readings, part sharing and all the while listening. The eight sessions are titled:

Beginning Together; Show and Tell

Religious and Spiritual Experiences

The Divine; What Do I Want

The Human; What Limits Do I Encounter

The Messiah, The Christ, The Buddha, The Divine Made Manifest; What Is Possible?
What Keeps Me Going?

The Community; What is Possible Together

Endings; How Do I Live With Loss and Death

Ministry; What is My Ministry? What am I Called To Do In This World.

While it would be impossible to recreate the scope of one of these sessions during this morning's service, in that Evensong is designed for a smaller group than we have present here giving participants time to share with each other, part of each class is reading from the reading bowl, various quotes that Barbara Hamilton-Holway has gathered together to spark discussion. You may not agree with everything that you hear. All readings are used to aid in discussion. We have already heard readings from the session called "The Community" earlier today.

I've asked Sue McGowen, Andy Champagne-Willis, and Cathy Kligler to assist me. Reading antiphonally, join me in hearing selections from the reading bowl from session 7, "Endings; How Do I Live With Loss and Death."

When it is over, I want to say: all my life I was a bride to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. When it's over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real. I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument...I want to step through the door full of curiosity.
Mary Oliver

Practice resurrection. *Wendell Berry*

Eternity is not something that begins after you are dead. It is going on all the time. We are in it now. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*

Gradually a certainty [arises] that there is in us "something" that nothing destroys, that nothing alters, and that cannot die. *Sogyal Rinpoche*

If there is whistling in the great beyond, I'll kill myself. *Jean Stafford*

The only things which we may take with us from our life on earth are those which we have given away! *Isak Dinesen*

Behind a good-bye there lurks much of the salutation of another beginning to me. *Walt Whitman*

All that we can know about those we have loved and lost is that they would wish us to remember them with a more intensified realization of their reality. What is essential does not die, but clarifies. The highest tribute to the dead is not grief, but gratitude. *Thornton Wilder*

Never spent an hour with more satisfaction. Never saw a person dying with so much pleasure and peace. When Thoreau was asked as he was dying if he wanted to make his peace with God, he responded, "I didn't know we'd ever quarreled." *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

The thought of death leaves me in perfect peace, for I have a firm conviction that our spirit is a being of indestructible nature; it works on from eternity to eternity; it is like the sun, which though it seems to set to our mortal eyes, does not really set, but shines on perpetually. *Goethe*

Earth brings us into life and nourishes us. Earth takes us back again. Birth and death are present in every moment. *Thich Nhat Hanh*

When I rise up let rise up joyful like a bird. When I fall let me fall without regret a leaf. *Wendall Berry*

I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens. *Woody Allen*

Because I can no longer ignore death, I pay more attention to life. *Treya Killam Wilber*

Life comes into being without any invitation of our own: we suddenly find ourselves in it. And as soon as we recognize ourselves as alive we become aware that we tend toward inevitable death. If we do not gain some adequate understanding of our life and our death during the life span that is ours, our life will become nothing but a refusal, a series of complaints that it must end in death. Then the fear of death becomes so powerful that it results in a flat refusal of life. Life itself becomes a negation, a neurosis, a frivolity.

Thomas Merton

I've also pulled together readings from session 4, "The Human; What Limits Do I Encounter." Listen again.

What are the implications of our seeing ourselves as verbs, as mystics and prophets in action and in a process of development, wherein holiness is not a kind of passive state or sacred vessel but is a decision, a choice, a movement, a living symbol, a process of coming alive. *Matthew Fox*

If you treat individuals as they are, they will stay as they are, but if you treat them as if they were what they ought to be and could be, they will become what they ought to be and could be. *Johann von Goethe*

I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think. Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is "Who in the world am I?" Ah, *that's* the great puzzle! *Lewis Carroll*

We are what we do. *Erich Fromm*

Deeds, not creeds. *Holly Bell*

Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues of fire. Don't let the pen banish you from yourself. Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don't let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. *Gloria Anzaldua*

I am convinced that there are no genes to carry the feeling of worth. It is learned. And the family is where it is learned...Feelings of worth can only flourish in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible – the kind of atmosphere that is found in a nurturing family... Since the feeling of worth has been learned, it can also be unlearned, it can be unlearned, and something new can be learned in its place. The possibility for this learning lasts from birth to death, so it is never too late...there is always hope that your life can change because you always can learn new things. *Virginia Satir*

In my life, I am learning that I am the person I tell myself that I am. *Suellen Fast*

There are no bad people; only bad institutions...Given sun, soil, air and water, a plant does not need to be told how to grow. *Uric Bronfenbrenner*

The only important thing is to make children feel brilliant and beautiful and perfectly extraordinary. *Mary Gordon*

In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart. *Anne Frank*

Where there are humans you'll find flies, and Buddhas. *Issa*

The ones who are never required to do what they cannot do, never do what they can do. *John Stuart Mill*

It takes a long time and a lot of practice to become a human being. *John Leonard*

Whatever happens in Indonesia is important to Indiana. Whatever happens in any corner of the world has some effect on the farmer in Dickinson County, Kansas, or on the worker in a factory. *Dwight D. Eisenhower*

Thank you, readers. You have given us food for thought and hopefully whet a few appetites for further discussion.

When I thought about doing this topic for today's sermon, I really wanted to offer something informational and spiritual, not just an infomercial. And I've really struggled to avoid the infomercial, really struggled. Oh well, here it comes....Come on down. We'll be meeting on Thursdays starting in four days, at 7:30 pm in the Chaffin Room. The first session has a show and tell, so bring something of religious or spiritual significance to share with the group. It can be a photo, and artifact; it can be anything. Come to one session, come to the whole series. You won't be disappointed.

Closing Words by Suellen Fast.

Only when we listen and decide if what we hear is how we want to be or don't want to be, can we be true to ourselves.