

150 Years of Longing©

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

Sunday, October 9, 2022

Unity Church Unitarian, Saint Paul, MN

Happy Anniversary Unity Church! This is your 150th anniversary year! The actual anniversary date was February 25, 1872. So – you I missed it – and perhaps you did as well. Maybe in normal times the church might have launched a big celebration of its history. But these are not normal times. Last winter we were approaching the second Covid anniversary with no clarity about whether and how long the church could gather to meet again. And there was one other thing happening on the day before you might have had an anniversary party in normal times. Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. I am thinking we just have a big party sometime next year!

One of the developmental tasks as your Interim Minister is to engage a congregation with their history – because by knowing your history provides an intimate insight into your identity – who you were, who you are now and who you are becoming. When we follow the threads of history, we find that they come together to reveal longings that occur and re-occur and are fulfilled and disappointed across the generations. It is a deep spiritual journey to search for meaning in those patterns. This is true for individuals, and it is true for institutions.

Let me acknowledge, before I go much further, I've only just begun to learn about your history. I've read the Story of Unity Church, from 1872-1972, by Elinor Otto. There are excellent resources on the church's webpage as well as a powerpoint presentation offered for a Wellspring Wednesday Program. So my task today is not to provide you a chronological outline of history, but to explore the ways in which knowledge of our history shapes our identity. As we examine the theme of longing this month, we can look at in a number of ways. We can look at longing as Burt Bacharach wrote: "Wishin and hopin' and thinkin' and prayin'" OR, we can see longing as a spiritual impulse that is translated into action, action that can build an institution that becomes the container for our dreams, dreams that can propel our future. Your future.

We must begin with the land, of course. Elinor Otto's book begins in this way: "There were Unitarians in St. Paul long before there was a Unitarian Church...unlike some of the early Minnesota settlers of other denominations, the Unitarians were not missionaries seeking to convert the Indians..." And if Eleanor was writing this today, I'm sure she would acknowledge the fact that all the lands upon which the church was built were inhabited by the Dakota and Ojjiway tribes and that they had been here since time immemorial. So any recognition of our history has to begin with humility, a recognition that we have benefitted from all those ancestors who have come before us.

The first Unitarian sermon offered here is believed to have been given by the Rev. George Woodward, of Galena, IL who in June of 1852, came up the Mississippi river to St. Paul and held a single service for Unitarians in a hall rented from the Sons of Temperance. We don't

know how many people attended the service who who they were, but it would be six more years until Frederic Newell, an inactive Unitarian Minister from Boston, travelled up the Mississippi on a sternwheeler. He wasn't planning on being a minister. He wanted to open a feed store on Robert Street. He made a deal with the thirty or so Unitarians in town that he would preach to them if he could use his old sermons! (We don't do that any more, by the way..) That first effort didn't work out. They went broke. They had to hope that the American Unitarian Association would send out an occasional visiting missionary minister to this remote city. One memorable location was in the bottom floor of the Old Concert Hall building on what was then Third Street. The cheap room where the services were held were one floor below the sidewalk, which led visiting minister Rev. James Freeman Clark to remark that he had preached to the St. Paul Unitarians in a cellar! .

Then Civil War intervened and disrupted the momentum of this struggling group. Only once could this faithful band of Unitarians gather, and that was on August 4, 1861, when a congregation of twelve men, six women and thirteen children gathered in the courthouse, the only space available to them at the time, to hear a sermon. In in a letter written by a Mrs. John De Graw, she recounts what it was like to gather in the courthouse to hear a sermon preached by Rev. Thomas Vickers.

“The courtroom had been in use all week and was in filthy condition. Three of the women, in their working dresses, with towels and dusters, tacked it early Sunday morning and had it fairly clean by the time they changed back into their Sunday clothes for preaching. Unfortunately, there was no Bible. Services were halted while a search was made...Vickers announced another hymn and while it was being sung two gentlemen of the congregation when to the jail, interrupted a cribbage game between the jailer and his deputy, discovered a Bible and rushed it back to the courtroom. The meeting continued properly but the congregation did not escape a scolding because the Bible had been forgotten.”

It would have been so easy for these ancestors of ours to just let the idea of a Unitarian church with its own minister die. Apparently, that had happened to the Universalists. Their building was vacant, with no settled preacher to lead Sunday services. The Unitarians offered to rent it. The Unitarians proposed that a Universalist minister, Rev. Daniel M. Reed, who had delivered some sermons for them in recent years might be called to serve them and the Universalist remnant. Alas, it was not to be. A squabble ensued. Perhaps if the Universalists, who were putting up most of the money, had known Rev. Reed better it might have been avoided. William Channing Gannet later described the squabble in this way:

Mr. Reed's liberality proved the wedge which split the congregation. When, in the summer of 1871 it became a question of whether he should be invited to settle down with them, the old divisive names Unitarian and Universalist had to spring up again. Therefore, they who had put the most money into the church building (which was Universalist) felt themselves obliged to veto the preference of what, I have understood was the majority...the

consequence was one of those sad, yet almost necessary tragedies that happen in church life. Mr. Reed went away and the two parties in the church went asunder, and for a while, I believe there were again no liberal services in Saint Paul.” The church could have died right there. But Elinor Otto, writing in “The Story of Unity Church” said

“one thing may be said about dissention, deplorable as it is when it strikes. Often it serves as a catalyst to precipitate definite positive action where previously there had been hesitation.”

Fortunately, that lasted only six months. The Unitarian lay leaders, having caught the scent of a settled minister, were now hot on the trail. First they built up a fund that might support a minister for one year. Then, they realized they needed to identify who they were, and so they adopted in 1971 the following affirmation that would tell any potential minister who they were and that for which they longed: *Recognizing the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Mankind, receiving Jesus as Teacher and seeking the Spirit of Truth as the guide in our lives, in the hope of immortal life, we, the undersigned, associate ourselves to maintain the public worship of God and promote the welfare of humanity.*¹

And they attracted a minister, - Rev. John R. Effinger. He preached his first sermon, and the little congregation thought this might work. Two weeks after that sermon, on February 25, 1872, fifty members signed Articles of Association. With their common affirmation as its Prelude, the Articles of Association declared they were not a bunch of individual believers. They were now a church.

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? These are questions that all institutions – all churches ask themselves in one way or another. That first affirmation, the covenant in utero, does not use words that we would use to describe our Unitarian Universalist faith today, but there are parts that we can resonate with. We still seek the spirit of truth as a guide in our lives; we pray to Thou Source of Radiance and Reason; we strive through acts of justice and encountering racism and other oppressions in ourselves, in others and in the wider world, to promote the welfare of humanity. From the dark confines of the cellar, where our Unitarian ancestors worshipped, to the filthy rooms of the courthouse, to the impermanent home of the Universalists, to the search for a settled minister, these Unitarians persisted, in spite of and frankly, against great odds of survival and success. They went through plenty of hard times hard times to become a church. And likely they prayed, in one way or another that “Hard Times, Hard Times, (would) Come Again No More...” **Music by Barrel Flash “Hard Times...”**

Sermon – Part II 150 Years of (More) Longing

Despite many hardships, the story of Unity’s resilience continues. Finances were a major problem, but even more than that, there was a deep mistrust in the wider St. Paul community about Unitarians. There’s a story that reminds us about how the Unitarians were viewed. It’s

¹ Ibid, pg. 7

about the teacher of a Sunday school class in a local Protestant church who described the three very bad sects engaging in church worship – Universalists, the Mormons and the Unitarians. The Universalists she continued were “quite bad” the Mormons were very bad indeed but the Unitarians – were the worst of all! As if this weren’t bad enough, the congregation’s first settled pastor, the Rev. John Effinger, worked himself into ill health and had to retire early. The church once again found itself without a pastor, barely solvent and with an expensive rental fee coming up month after month.

Here is a good time to pause and offer you an important reminder. There is a convenience in telling 150 years history to highlight it through tenures of ministry. Too often, this leaves out the lay members of a church – people who were not only the congregations’ leaders as well as being civic leaders; the women’s organizations that sometimes literally kept the church afloat with their efforts; and the thousands of children who were shaped by Unity’s theological and spiritual teachings. Their stories cannot be captured in one sermon; nay even in one year. But I hope as we continue to look at Unity’s history together, those stories will be told as well.

So let me finish this founding story with one last chapter, a chapter that begins where we started as the sermon began. They have a church but no minister and not enough money. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, then the Secretary of what was called the Western Conference, visits Saint Paul. He tells the members that he could put them in touch with just the right man: young William Channing Gannett, the son of a famous Unitarian minister, Ezra Stiles Gannett. William, however, has no experience and does not feel strongly drawn to parish ministry. He is a writer, a poet, an abolitionist, a suffragist, and he is a dutiful son to his renowned and aging father, who wants him to take the job.

Getting Gannett to serve Saint Paul was a long shot for this church. As Otto writes: “ [the record] gives a clear picture of the discouraging plight of the local Unitarians at this time; the church and Sunday School were closed and the situation seemed hopeless unless a man of Gannett’s stature could be obtained to pull the group out of its doldrums.”

But Gannett said yes and lo and behold both he and the church began to flourish. It was he who wrote the Bond of Fellowship, which the congregation affirmed on the day they ordained him, and which you can find on our website today. Gannett wrote: *As those who believe in religion; as those who believe in Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion; As those who believe that the religious life means the thankful, trustful, loyal and helpful life; And as those who believe that church is a brotherhood | community of helpers wherein it is made easier to lead such a life, we join ourselves together, name, hand and heart as members of Unity Church* Those words helped speak to the longing and to this day help define the identity of the church. In a sense, they became what we might call today, a an Ends statement for its members.

As a result of church growth, they needed a new building and began construction on May 31, 1880. What happened next? Here’s Gannett’s own words, writing about what happened:

The chairman of the building committee resigned...The contractor failed, insolvent, left his half-finished building on our hands...the chimneys tumbled down. The gas-fitters sent a drinking workman to do their work and much of it had to be done over. The plasterers had to do their work in zero weather. The price of materials rising. There was no effective supervision after the contractors failure; honest and sorry, he looked after the job awhile and then left the city.”

Oh, t’was ever thus! Any one who has built a home or endured a building renovation knows the perils involved. But by 1883, the church was on solid ground. It had a building of its own; free of debt, and enjoyed a growing respect within the city for this most unorthodox of faiths. The Sunday school was thriving; the establishment of a choir was planned, and the congregation was alive with activities. The members were proud of their accomplishments.

It seems unfair to conclude here with Gannett’s ministry incomplete and the full litany of ministers and lay accomplishments in our history unspoken. But my point today is not to narrate only facts but to mine their meaning. There have been eleven settled Senior Ministers since Gannett’s time; some who were unintentional interims, some who left under duress; some who resigned because of stress. Each one, in partnership with the members who comprised the church, brought to their shared ministries a mutual longing.

Initially it was a longing for recognition and respectability in the religious landscape of early Saint Paul. Then, it was longing for a home, a building, a place from which they could practice their faith. And then, beyond that, the longing that I see, that I experience in this congregation, is an desire to go deeper – to develop your personal spiritual practice; to develop the skills of intimacy that help you engage with those with whom you disagree; and then taking the compassion that arises from these first two, and to use it to bless the world through acts of courageous witness, advocacy and service.

If you don’t believe me, just look at the church newsletter sometime. See there not a litany of groups and neat-o activities you can do, but each one represents a desire to bear witness to what I just described. Connection. Meaning. Purpose. Desire. Deepening. Learning. Longing. These are for real. Imperfectly done, of course, as all human endeavors are. Yet aren’t they worthy of our attention and our support? Our ancestors thought so. That’s why we’re here, following their thread. In the third and final part of this sermon, worship associate Sara Ford will offer a contemporary perspective on how the church puts its current longings into practice.

I hope by now you know that next Sunday is the Annual Canvass Sunday; which means your fellow church leaders ask you to make an annual pledge to the church by which we can build next year’s budget. To that point, I’d like to invite Lee Carey, who is part of the Stewardship Team, to speak about next Sunday’s offering.

SERMON – PART III written by Worship Associate & Church Member Sara Ford

The church’s efforts to grow into our longing on so many fronts have been many since my days as a child here. For one thing, we are far more engaged in justice work than ever before,

including environmental justice, indigenous justice, dismantling white supremacy, pushing back against the mistreatment and dehumanization of immigrants, transgender, non-binary, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, and more. We have learned to embrace both exquisitely rehearsed music and music that is less practiced but that allows us to dance, shake, drum, and holler out our joys and our laments. We have evolved in more ways than I can name. And we continue to long for more. For a deeper impact, for more skills that will allow us to walk into the values we share. And I hope and assume we always will.

These tensions between who we are and where we want to get are present in any group committed to growth and greater justice and truth telling. These tensions reflect a really profound struggle—the ability to hold two ways of knowing and two ways of being at the same time.

We are holding on to two entirely different world views, and we are learning to live and learn from both of them. We are holding onto the kind of knowing reflected by post-Enlightenment, white, European traditions that reflect the power structures that define the vast majority of our community and our lives. At the same time, we are trying to recall, learn more about, and live into ways of being that reflect a far different view of the world, a way of being that allows for deeper connections to one another and our planet. We explore valuing interconnectedness over independence and individual property. We learn to value our relationships, even relational language over the nouns that isolate people, creatures, and all things, as if they exist independent of a larger ecosystem.

Here at Unity, one thing we do that raises up our connectedness over our isolation, one of the many of such practices we have, is our youth musical. And I want to share a story that examines the power of just one of many of the ways we help one another live more deeply into our values.

Unity's youth musical offers our kids so much more than a theater experience, and it does that because of Unity's longing to step outside of the world view many of us inherited, one that values individual achievement over community, and into a broader, richer world view that values each of us in relation to community. Sure, the musical helps some of our youth develop leadership and public speaking skills. But ours does so much more than that. Our musical is based on the premise that every youth who wants to participate gets a role. Not the best singers. Not the kids who best approximate the problematic but extremely powerful and ubiquitous western standards of beauty. All of them. They want in? They get in. And they get a role or a job that suits them. -So that's lesson number one: Everybody belongs. Period. And you know the underlying theme of every single script? That we are all in this together. That our communities are interconnected at a fundamental level, and that we cannot be wholly ourselves without a healthy relationship to our larger community. So, lesson number two: We are in this together. Maybe this seems trite, or overly obvious, but I think it profound.

When our oldest son was young, he struggled. Social interactions did not come easily to him, and he felt disconnected more often than he felt connected. It was a struggle to get him to come to church, and he was deeply uncomfortable and self-conscious when he did. ~~But~~ And

then came the Unity musical. I don't remember which adult Unity member reached him and convinced him to show up for the first day. But I can tell you what happened when he agreed to do that.

He was embraced. He was embraced by the loving parents and volunteers working with the young performers; he was embraced fully by the former participants who come back to help the younger actors each year; he was embraced by his peers. Those who could sing beautifully and those who could not. Those who had mastered social boundaries and those who had not. Those who walked with confidence and those who did not. He was embraced. He was valued. He was an integral part of a community.

He was in the musical every year his age made him eligible. His cast parties were highlights of his life up until then, when he glowed with his newfound connectedness. It was the first time we got to see him feel happy, to feel like he belonged in his own skin, and to know that he felt his connectedness to a larger community.

He didn't go on to pursue theater. The musical didn't make him an outstanding singer or dancer or choreographer or set designer, though he learned a little about all of those things. He was aware, even while he was participating, that theater was never his interest. His interest, his need, indeed our need, was to belong. He would have signed up for anything with that particular group of people. What they were doing was so much less important than how they did it. ~~It was beautiful.~~—You don't have to sign up for the musical, you just need to remember two things: Everybody belongs. We're in this Together." and that the Beloved Community You Long For - WE long for - is already here.