

Turning North

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February 28th, 2010

Today marks the fourth and final Sunday of a series of services on love. Today we consider “caritas” the way love takes form and manifests in the life of a community. Today is also, conveniently enough, the Sunday closest to the anniversary of the signing of the Articles of Incorporation by the founders of the congregation. On February 25th, 1872, after twenty years of conversation, 48 people, representing 30 households, having pledged \$1,305.00, formally established this church by signing the Articles “Recognizing,” as the preamble puts it, “the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Mankind, receiving Jesus as teacher, and seeking the Spirit of Truth as the guide of our best hope of Immortal Life, we the undersigned, associate ourselves to maintain the public worship of God and promote the welfare of Humanity.”

Though our theology and our language have changed with the times, our basic mission remains unchanged. “The mission of Unity church is to engage people in a free and inclusive religious community that encourages lives of integrity, service and joy.” From the very beginning we have understood that our ministry is lived out at the intersection of spiritual development and social justice. We are here to “maintain the public worship of God and promote the welfare of Humanity.”

As we have grown in our understanding of how best to maintain and promote our ministry we have come to suggest that in order to lead what our early minister, William Channing Gannett called “the thankful, trustful, loyal and the helpful life,” one needs to learn and practice a prayerful daily discipline, develop the intimacy skills necessary to go deep quickly with strangers and to maintain clarity with friends and then to find ways to serve and bless the world.

Gannett, whose transcendentalist perspectives shaped this church just like a potter’s hands gives shape to a beautiful bowl, was minister when our first church home was built. Pauline Eichten and Ellen Green in Sacred Place, an illustrated history of the church, tell us that “Like the liberal religion it housed, this first church, built with Gannett’s active involvement, was of unorthodox Queen Ann-cottage style. On April 15th, 1883 after securing a lot at Wabasha and Summit downtown, members attended the first Sunday Service in the “audience

room” of the new church. The total for land, construction, sewer, grading, and furnishings was almost \$23,000. A barrel at the front door offered free water to passersby.”

For more than 20 years the fledgling congregation met for worship, religious education and social interaction in its unorthodox Queen Ann-cottage close to the center of downtown St. Paul. Then, having outgrown their house church and recognizing that most of the membership had moved up to the ridge above the river, on June 4th, 1905, they laid the cornerstone for this grand sanctuary, setting aside to some degree the humble naturalism embedded in the design of our first church home.

For 105 years we have kept house here at Portland and Grotto. During that time there have been five major construction projects. The Sanctuary in 1905, the Parish Hall and Chapel in 1923, the Eliot Wing in 1958, remodeling in response to the fire in 1963 and the expansion of the Eliot Wing in 1988. In each case a generation of Unity Church members has stepped up to renew the vision of the founders.

Now the privilege and the duty of renewing that old covenant have come to us. The planning process is well underway. With the Board’s approval, the Executive Team has assembled an exceptionally talented “Unity Tomorrow Team” to consider our options. The rationale for needed changes and details of the planning process will be included in the March edition of CommUnity and in a special newsletter intended to keep the congregation fully informed whose first issue will also be in your hands this coming month.

Only rarely do we use this pulpit to discuss the nuts and bolts of church life. And I wouldn’t have done it today except that the questions we need to answer as we plan for future church facilities lead directly back to the values which undergird our efforts. Here’s an example. The job of the Unity Tomorrow Team is to begin to imagine what facilities our church will need fifty years from now. The magnitude of the task requires that we to let go of the immediate realities of life at the corner of Portland and Grotto and to explore three possibilities. We stay here and expand and remodel the building. We move to an entirely new site or we pursue some combination of the two. The Team was divided into two groups each of which has been exploring one of the first two options. Then, at last week’s meeting they began to explore the some of the issues and implications that arise in imagining that we might move toward having two locations.

How, for instance, given the likelihood that we will not have enough money to do everything we would like to do, will we decide who gets the goodies. Will we concentrate on the present site making sure the present congregation has the best possible facility or might we choose to balance our commitment to ourselves with a like investment in the interest of neighbors we have yet to even know? What a wonderful, troubling, prophetic question to ask. Among us we will need to answer it or better yet, we will need to live into it. There are questions we don't yet know how to answer. Church leaders are gathering data to help to inform our decisions but in the end data is only part of what informs us.

In "Ash Wednesday" Eliot pleads, "Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to keep still." We collect the data, we study and wrestle and work at it all. It's how we care. But for us to be able grow into questions as profound as those we are considering we will also have to learn how not to care. We will have to learn how to keep still the way St. Kevin kept still so as not to disturb the blackbird nesting in his outstretched hand.

"How do you do it?" he asked me. "What spiritual understanding makes it possible for you to live with the fact that your son's life is threatened by cancer?" He wasn't asking about my daily practice. He didn't want to know how I kept my balance in the midst of all that fear. He was asking how I could continue to be faithful in a world so viciously unfair. I thought about it for a while and then I said: when I'm most afraid I try to remember that every child is my child and that I am inseparably connected to every parent who had ever feared for the life of their child. That fact in no way alters the depth of loyalty and love I feel for my son. Instead it leads me into a larger love which informs and reinforces my love for Jonah. Love knows no limits. It's only our fear which deludes us into thinking there's not enough to go around.

Part- way through Clint Eastwood's recent film Invictus Nelson Mandela played by Morgan Freeman, sets off on his pre-dawn morning walk. Two body guards are with him, one black and one white. At the very beginning of his presidency Mandela had insisted despite the worries of those who had provided security up to that point that his security team would be integrated; that his ANC bodyguards would be joined by the men who had guarded his predecessor during apartheid. As they set off Mandela speaks to the white guard. "How is your family?" Not knowing of the crisis and the impending divorce between Nelson and Winnie Mandela, and not having been told of the unwritten rule that no one should ask the President about his family, the guard responds, "My family is well.

Thank you for asking. And how is your family?" Mandela pauses, downcast, turns toward the white guard and replies, "There are 42 million people in my family now. I don't feel like walking today." Then he turns and goes back into the house.

You and I cannot continue to refuse to see. There are so many invisible women and men, real people we refuse to see. Nor can we continue to indulge talking only among ourselves about the deplorable disparities of race and class. We cannot allow ourselves to be forced to choose between those closest to us, those we hold most dear and all the neighbors we have yet to know.

For a more than a century we have made our home here on the hill. Socially, we have faced south, serving primarily those descended from the founders. There's no sin in that story. But for all the years we have been here we've worshipped facing north. Beyond the raredos, across the freeway, that old battlefield where "moonlight shines cold on white bones, there is a world too many of us scarcely know at all. We have family there. It may be time to get to know them. Who knows we may even want to stay awhile.

May it be so and amen.

Readings for 2/28/10

"St. Kevin and the Blackbird"

Seamus Heaney

And then there was St. Kevin and the blackbird.

The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside

His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff

As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time.

From the neck on down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underneath

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?

Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,

'To labor and not to seek reward' he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely

For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird

And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

from Invisible Man

Ralph Ellison

I am an invisible man. No, I and not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you sometimes see in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination- indeed, everything and anything except me.

“Traveling Northward”

Tu Fu (713-770) a translation by Kenneth Rexroth

Screech owls moan in the yellowing

Mulberry trees. Field mice scurry,

Preparing their holes for the winter.

Midnight, we come across an old battlefield.

The moonlight shines cold on white bones.