

Readings 3/30/08

“The Thread You Follow”

There is a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what things you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.

While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and grow old.

Nothing you do can stop times unfolding.
But you don't ever let go of the thread.

William Stafford

The Puritans' introspection, their self-examination, the private conversion experience that set off soul from soul by God's election, the minute scrutiny of the stages of conversion- all this made the individual prize his or her singular experience. Tocqueville discerned something like this when he introduced the word *individualism* into the analysis of America: "Individualism is a considered and tranquil trait that inclines each citizen to separate himself from the crowd of his fellows, withdrawing into the enclave of his family and friends so that, having formed a little society of his own, he gladly lets the larger society go its way without him." One coming to that passage directly after studying the Puritans could well imagine that it was meant to describe New England, where the individual withdrew into the private experience of being saved and then joined the elect circle of "visible saints," separating himself from the unregenerate world, which had to wallow along to damnation apart from him and his. And that private experience of being saved was like the personal assurance that was later called "self-reliance" by Emerson-the highest virtue in his eyes.

From Head and Heart
Gary Wills

Promises to Keep

Unity Church
March 30, 2008

In the year of our Lord 1648, in the City of Cambridge in the colony called, Massachusetts, delegates gathered representing all the congregations, which had been founded in New England since the Plymouth pilgrims landed twenty-seven years before. They came together to make some agreements about how they would order their lives both as particular religious communities and as a community of congregations. The document resulting from their labors is known as the Cambridge Platform. It is one of the formative statements of the early American experiment.

Though the language is antiquated and informed largely by the Letters of Paul three key concepts transcend the cultural context of 17th century New England, concepts we would do well to revisit them on a regular basis. The first is that we covenant, or in you prefer, we promise, “to walk together in love.” The promise applies both within and among congregations. As members of a congregation we covenant, or promise to show up, to try to tell the truth as we see it and to stay engaged even and especially when things get difficult. As a congregation, “to walk together in love,” means making common cause with congregations and in modern times with a wide array of organizations that share our basic values.

The second and most often touted assertion of the Platform is that only the constituent members of each congregation have a right to control its affairs. This was a dangerously radical concept in 1648. The free churches of New England were rejecting any temporal authority beyond the authority of the congregation itself. At a time when kings and bishops conspired together to rule the world, our spiritual forbearers forcefully rejected the dominant paradigm. 132 years later the concept first introduced at Cambridge became central to the words, which would become the moral compass of the American ideal. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights- that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. - That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...” Do you hear it? Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. Free congregations are likewise constituted and for like reasons.

These familiar words of the great Wallace Robbins who served as minister here at Unity from 1938-1944 embody these same values in the context of congregational life. “Ours is a church, which holds the dead in sacred memory, and the living in a goodly fellowship. We desire to live together in such affection as will not allow us to feel threatened by our differences. We dare not fence the spirit, nor close off the sincerity of conversation with which souls must meet in religious association. As others have their ways of religion, so do we have this faith; and in honest difference, we order our lives together.”

This brings us to the third and for us probably the most challenging declaration of the Platform to which I want to call our attention. The congregation should be made up only of the “visible saints.” Unlike the Anglican or Roman Catholic parish churches, which were intended to serve everyone living within the boundaries of the parish, churches of “the Standing Order” as they were known, the Puritan churches allowed into membership only to

those who could credibly testify to having had an authentic experience of the holy. Those hoping to join the congregation would appear before a council of elders, all of whom had already passed muster themselves. The council was charged to determine the applicant's fitness for membership in accordance with the description of visible sainthood appearing in the Platform.

It reads as follows: "By saints, we understand: Such as have not only attained the knowledge of the principles of religion, and are free from gross and open scandals, but also do, together with the profession of their faith and repentance, walk in blameless obedience to the Word, so as that in charitable discretion they may be accounted saints by calling...those of you who wish to preserve your membership may sign up to meet with the Unity Council of Visible Saints at the wizened elders table in the Parish Hall.

The story of the long slow shift from our ancestral beginning as congregations of the elect to our present-day desire to be a church that welcomes everyone who wants to walk with us in love closely parallels the story of the Nation. Ambivalence and longing are embedded in both stories. We are by no means alone in wanting to do church our way, to sing our songs, to recite our poet's words. We don't discuss it much but deep inside most of us are not so sure we want the church to change. And we say we want all people to be equal while despite our condemnations of disparity we still benefit from the very inequalities that we condemn. The ambivalence is very deep. But so is our longing for change. And change is coming friends. It's coming to our neighborhood and to our Nation and its coming to our beloved church as well.

The good news is "there is a thread that you can follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change." That thread leads us back into our history. And we can follow it forward as well into a future that will be different from today. We are held together not by a creed, not by a statement of shared beliefs but by a covenant, a way of walking together in love that asks us to consider two basic questions. What shall we promise each other? And in what interest? The Cambridge Platform is not in essence a theological document. It doesn't tell us what we should believe. Instead, it provides a framework for how best to "order our live together."

A creed is a noun. A creed is a thing. A creed is a set of beliefs, ostensibly shared by those who subscribe to it. In practice one finds that a high percentage of participants in creedal traditions will admit, in private at least, that they don't actually believe the words that they recite. Instead they experience the creed as something that cuts across time and space, a poem, if you will that helps them to feel connected to their spiritual ancestors as well as to their neighbors who also recite that same creed. We have no reason or right to condemn those who find such creeds helpful. But "as others have their ways of religion, so do we have this faith..." and it is a promise-making, promise-keeping faith.

Though the word covenant, may serve as a noun to describe a brief statement of shared values a statement such as the one we recited together at the start of this service:

Mindful of truth ever exceeding our knowledge
And community ever exceeding our practice,
Reverently we covenant together,
Beginning with ourselves as we are,
To share the strength of integrity
And the heritage of the spirit
In the unending quest for wisdom and love.

Or another we often use:

Love is the doctrine of this church,

The quest for truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve human need,
To the end that all souls shall
Grow into harmony with the Divine-
Thus do we covenant with each other and with God...

I suggest that the use of the word as a verb as in, to covenant, more accurately reflects our practice. “The human being as such,” Martin Buber says, “is the promise-making, promise keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature.” The greatest Jewish theologian of the 20th century is talking about covenantal faith as an essential aspect of being human. Mature human beings make promises. They ask what shall we promise each other and in what interest? The practice of making and keeping promises is at the heart of the liberal tradition.

Gary Wills is correct when he points to the logical connection between “The Puritans’ introspection, their self-examination, (and) the private conversion experience” and Emerson’s impassioned endorsement of self-reliance. The strength of a tradition, which holds to the centrality of personal experience, is that it gravitates against both the diminishment of dull routine and the dangers of dogmatism. But those strengths are challenged by the ease with which the centrality of personal experience becomes a kind of new age pietism. De Tocqueville had it right when he wrote; “Individualism is a considered and tranquil trait that inclines each citizen to separate himself from the crowd of his fellows, withdrawing into the enclave of his family and friends so that, having formed a little society of his own, he gladly lets the larger society go its way without him.” We need to be on guard against this tendency. There’s a fine line between the kind of individualism we affirm for everyone, from a commitment to self-determination and yes, to self-reliance and the shadow side of individualism which might be better called, atomization, that deadly inclination we humans have to wall ourselves off from the neighbors we fear and to live in our own little worlds, those gilded cages which ostensibly will keep us safe but which in reality cut us off from the solidarity which is our only real safety.

This service serves as the beginning of a series of services on covenant. Next week we’ll ask what does the liberal church promise its people. Then, on April 13th we’ll hear from the Rev. Bela-Botond Jakabhazzi a brilliant young Unitarian minister from Transylvania who will help to deepen our understanding of who we are and where we come from. The 20th brings us to our annual Arthur Foote Music Sunday, which is intended to help us contemplate the promises we make as we shift our focus from this house out into the world. And then, on April 27th we’ll ask, what matters most? As we celebrate those who are coming-of-age we’ll ask, what can we promise them? What can we ask them to promise?

So my friends keep a good hold on the thread. “While you hold on to it you can’t get lost.” Practice making promises and practice keeping them. I don’t imagine the visible saints who met so long ago at Cambridge would see themselves in us. Their religious lives were informed almost entirely by the ministry of Jesus as depicted in the Christian Bible. Since the time of Channing and Parker and then of Thoreau and Emerson the sources that inform our faith have expanded to until we now embrace religious truth wherever we find it. We read the scriptures of the world and Nature itself has become like scripture for us. But I still like to think that if we could strip away the particular images, if we could set aside the stories long enough to see behind them noting only the bare bones of our experience, those

saints would see that we still walk together in love. I like to think they'd see their faith made new and urge us to remember that we still have promises to keep.

May it be so and amen.