

WHEN TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED TOGETHER IN

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PASTORAL PRAYER:

Transforming Love, we unite drawing together our hopes in mutual blessing this morning. In this quiet hour we consider the aspirations and dreams, goals and objectives we move towards in a daily basis. May our hopes be worthy of the great blessing.

May our dreams for ourselves and our loved ones neither harm nor injure anyone. May the works of our hands and the steps of our feet craft improvements in our lives and for the world we all live in.

As we gather in fellowship this hour, may we weave together our diverse spirit journeys to create for a moment a common narrative, a single sparkling mandala. May the words of our mouths be kind and the feelings of our hearts be welcoming.

In the silence may we let down our guard and allow love to blossom ...

Peace be upon you. Amen.

READING: Dennis McCarty [The Tyger and the Lamb](http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/117934.shtml), UUWORLD, Fall 2008.

<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/117934.shtml>

SERMON

Are you capable of making ethical, moral decisions?

Are you spiritually, morally and intellectually capable of struggling with complex, ethical decisions?

DAH!

We are Unitarian Universalists! That's what we do best!

Shortly after our worship, we gather for St. John's Annual Meeting. Time for decisions!

Did not Emerson say, "Whoso would be an [adult] must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness."?

In our Responsive Reading this morning, did not one of our leading Religious Educators, Sophie Fahs say, "some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction?"

Choosing your own direction! We gather in religious community to explore what direction we would take with our lives. What is your spiritual journey, what meaning do you give to the adventures of your daily life? What story frames your joys and sorrows?

Can we ask anything more meaningful than what can we hope for? Some seek the salvation of their soul. Some shall seek reincarnation in another life. Some shall seek comfortable years in golden retirement; some social justice. Some seek to fulfill their potential.

What can we hope for? We dream dreams. We have aspirations. What shall we hope for?

We gather in religious community to respond to our hopes and dreams, to give texture to our aspirations.

We enter into dialogue with others to listen to the stories of our lives. Many in our society ask “What Would Jesus Do?” They recall that Jesus said, “When two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them” Mt 18.20

When we gather together in two or three or more, we gather not just in the name of one or another, but in the name of many: Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, Confucius. We ask not just what would Jesus do, but what would Buddha do? What would Channing do? What would Darwin Do? Today we might ask what would George Tiller do? What would Tolstoy do? And then what would people we know do? What would Howard Tolley do? What would Karolyn Schalk do? What would Ethel Ingalls do? What would Craymon Maples do?

We draw on the experience, strength and hope, not just of one, but of many of an entire community. A religious community is a community which helps us interpret our life, give meaning to our daily acts.

A few weeks ago I went on retreat with UU ministers studying what is called the emergent church. This is a relatively new movement among evangelicals, the newer brand, post Christian Coalition evangelicals who are experimenting with what worship is about, with what church is, and maybe they are throwing the baby out with the bath water, as some claim. As religious explorers, both baby and bath water are fascinating.

<http://www.consortiumnews.com/2009/052609c.html>

One of the readings we had particularly struck me, helping to define the gathered religious congregation as a place where people, you and I, come to understand what our lives are about:

Tipp O'Neill famously quipped that .All politics are local. Maybe so, but the postmodernists have argued that *all hermeneutics are local*. It is our local communities that shape how we see the world, and as Christians our ecclesial communities that shape how we interact with the texts of scripture. Stanley Fish calls them .authoritative interpretative communities; we call them ‘church’ But in what way does the grand tradition of church history interact with our local iterations of the faith? Does Chalcedon trump Minneapolis? The emerging church movement offers some insight into how

coming generations will navigate this relationship between old and new, for in an age of micronarratives, Vincent of Lerins's exhortation that orthodoxy must hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all rings somewhat hollow. Or, maybe, orthodoxy has always been fluid, dynamic, open source.

http://www.emergentvillage.com/file_download/14

Does Chalcedon trump Minneapolis? Or, in UU talk, does Boston trump Cincinnati? Jesus himself said that when two or three are gathered together, that's when spirituality happens. Not 1000 years ago when people had gathered together, but now when people gather.

With orthodoxy, with the idea that spirituality is about what went down 1000 years ago, faith becomes a matter of answers. Here, have an answer. Don't bother us with your questions, your doubts.

Surely we can identify with this. Are there not times in our lives when we wish for simple answers? Responding to complex issues of life can be overwhelming. Should we have a particular medical procedure? Should we move? It's not easy. What to say when a friend asks advice of us? Would you give your friend the same advice you give yourself?

There are times when you are tired? Not the best time to make a difficult decision? Can you delay responding?

Sometimes we get conned into thinking there ought to be an answer somewhere or other or somewhere else. This reminds me of the young Native American boy who was ever curious. One day he asked where his village was. His father thought a bit, not knowing quite what his son was asking, responded, "It rests on the Great Turtle." That satisfied the boy for a while

And then he came back, asking his father, what does the turtle rest on? And his father began to look a little nervous, and quickly said, another turtle. The boy quickly responded, and what does that turtle sit on?

The boy's father wondered what to answer, and saying, "There are turtles all the way down," hurried off on the hunt.

Complex decisions reveal to us that there are decisions all the way down, and that there is no bottom line, there is an infinite regression of questions and finally we have to, well, make a decision. Not calculate a sum.

A faith which would con us into thinking that the answers of thousands of years ago works for today may protect us for the moment but leaves us in great moral hazard. Having good questions is often more adaptive than having a random answer.

I am reminded of what Picasso said of the computer. What good are computers? All they give are answers.

We as Unitarian Universalists are a community engaged in asking questions, asking if we are asking the right questions. Says Fahs:

Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world.
Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.

We are an adaptive faith. We practice adaptive worship. We adapt to a challenging world with excitement and hope. What shall we hope for? Among other things, let us hope for challenge!

The dreams we dream adapt to a changing world,; our aspirations are adaptive; we face complex situations. There are no simple answers. Faiths seeking to answer today's questions with the answers of thousands of years ago are not adaptive; are not relevant.

All too often they encourage, as Sophie Fahs reminds us, a sense that we do not have to make complex moral decisions. We gather in community to understand our lives.

Last Sunday, as we stood out on the front lawn dedicating our new Peace Pole, in Wichita, Kansas, someone believing in a simple answer to questions about life, shot down someone immersed in the complexity of life, someone ushering at his church.

Dr. George Tiller practiced what he believed and was martyred for his beliefs. Dr. Tiller believed that we are faced with complex decisions in life. [Dr. Tiller said](#) "Women are spiritually, morally and intellectually capable of struggling with complex, ethical decisions and arriving at the correct decision for themselves and their family."

http://www.democracynow.org/2009/6/1/dr_george_tiller_1941_2009_murdered

That is why we seek peace. That acts of violence occurred as we stood up for peace is why humanity hopes, why we dream dreams.

Peace is the great hope of all faiths. President Obama concluded his [speech in Cairo](#),

The Holy Koran tells us, "O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another."

The Talmud tells us: "The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace."

The Holy Bible tells us, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

Now, that must be our work here on Earth. Thank you. And may God's peace be upon you.

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?_r=2&pagewanted=8&ref=middleeast

Our aspirations, our hopes and dreams for ourselves and those we love are not simple. To be forced into boxes, to be made to march to some one else's drummer may lead us astray and we may miss our own lives. Not knowing our own lives, how shall we know whether we lived someone else's?

If then we build our spiritual community not around someone else's demands, if we demand to follow our own spiritual journey, how shall we be in religious fellowship?

Ours is a religious community based not on answers but on promises we make, a community of faith based not on authority but on equality. Describing our religious community as covenanted congregations, Dennis McCarty said in our reading from the UUWorld ,

We make promises to one another, we do the best we can. Even to make a serious promise is a real expression of faith, not only in the person we promise to, but also that the future is worth saving—that, at its best, the future can and will be better than the past. To make promises calls forth the best that is in us. But we are human and we make mistakes. Promises get broken. So we try again. Covenantal faith does not ask us to be perfect. It asks us to look at our own mistakes and shortcomings, and try earnestly to correct them.

Through our promises, we are faithful to the future, faithful to our hopes. Promises are ethical, spiritual decisions made in the midst of the on-going complexity of our lives.

When someone sits in a chair at St. John's for the first time, these are the promises she hears at the opening of our worship:

St. John's has a rich history of being a beacon of liberal religious thought here in Cincinnati, working for social justice and celebrating diversity. We are pleased to be designated a "Welcoming Congregation" by the Unitarian Universalist Association, and as such we honor and value the racial, economic, religious, cultural, physical ability, sexual orientation and gender diversity of our members and visitors, young and old.

If you decide, such promises become guides in your decision making in our complex lives.

Allow me to close with a story from the pacifist Leo Tolstoy that may help you with your decision making.

A king determined that he would be able to cope with any occurrence only if he had the answers to three critical questions:

What is the best time to do things?
Who are the best people to listen to?
What is the most important thing to do?

Many educated men attempted to answer the king's questions, but they all came up with different answers. The king decided that he needed to ask a wise hermit in a nearby village. The hermit

would only see common folk, however, so the king disguised himself as a peasant and left his guards behind to see the hermit.

The hermit was digging flower beds when the king arrived. The king asked his questions, but the hermit went on digging rather laboriously. The king offered to dig for him for a while. After digging for some time, the king again asked his questions. Before the hermit could answer, a man emerged from the woods. He was bleeding from a terrible stomach wound. The king tended to him, and they stayed the night in the hermit's hut.

By the next day the wounded man was doing better, but was incredulous at the help he had received. The man confessed that he knew who the king was, and that the king had executed his brother and seized his property. He had come to kill the king, but the guards wounded him in the stomach.

The man pledged allegiance to the king, and he went on his way.

The king asked the hermit again for his answers, and the hermit responded that he had just had his questions answered.

Remember, said the hermit, that there is only one important time and that is Now. The present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. The most important person is always the person with whom you are, who is right before you, for who knows if you will have dealings with any other person in the future. The most important pursuit is making that person, the one standing at your side, happy, for that alone is the pursuit of life."

<http://www.yuni.com/library/docs/200.html>