

Why We're Here: Nanaimo
A sermon by Steven Epperson
October 4, 2009
Nanaimo

With gratitude, I welcome the arrival of autumn; it's been almost two weeks now., and it's not that I don't love summer, don't get me wrong. No, the gratitude arises from recognition of the fidelity of our imperiled earth to us, whether we deserve it or not. Its axis tilts. Season succeeds season. Darkness wells up ever earlier one evening at a time; a bite, a chill is in the air, corn stalks wither, colours reweave on nature's loom in the myriad hues of fall. Summer's end, autumn's advent: welcome Okanagan apples filling produce stalls; clusters of grapes weighing heavy on back alley vines; ripe pumpkins pebbling the fields near the bird sanctuary on Wenham Island. Signs of harvest home, of Thanksgiving, lay all around us.

Gratitude, that's what I'm feeling today, and harvest time; and with it the reckoning of blessings, of gifts carried, received, given; gifts in which we take deep delight. That's what I'm feeling and thinking this morning, that, *and* the need to explore and express: what it is truly that gathers us here; *why are we here and not someplace else?*

We are the fruits of various experience; growing, ripening, seasoned on the vine of life. And here we are gathered in to this place, this hour; and to this place we return again and again. Why would that be? Consider the following thoughts as a kind of harvest reckoning, a naming and praising of the fruits of our religious life, our cornucopia.

First of all, it seems clear that we join this fellowship and abide together in order to share and enjoy the bounty of community, of a distinctive kind of community. We are

social creatures, we humans, who band together in innumerable forms of solidarity communities that cater to our interest and need for enrichment, friendship, and pleasure. And yet, as essential as each of these may be to address our need to overcome isolation, to enjoy the pleasures of group participation, we know that there is something distinctive and valuable about religious community and our role in creating it, cultivating it, and harvesting its fruit.

This became clear to me about a dozen years ago, when for the first time in my life, I left the rhythms, duty, and community of the religious tradition into which I had been born and raised, and to which I had given heart, thought, and means. The horizon of a life unencumbered by formal, institutional religious practice beckoned; weekends and evenings would be free from religious duty for the first time in memory. What a relief!

But then, *and this is really hard for me to convey*, I felt...I knew...that *for me*, the kind of freedom that expresses itself *only* within the family, the company of friends, and the confines of daily work, as satisfying as those are, they just weren't enough. Insufficient due to something I couldn't shake or elude, come what may—sometimes we call it “that transcending mystery and wonder,” what Unitarian philosopher James Luther Adams has called “our ultimate dependence for being and freedom [grounded in and nourished by] a creative power and upon [transformative] processes not of our own making.” [hereafter, reference to Adams—JLA] That sense, that experience, has profound consequences. It calls us to renew our spirit and resolve. It calls us to be open to that which creates and upholds life itself. And then, crucially, we sense and see that this transforming reality—that mystery and wonder—finds its “richest focus in meaningful human history, in free, cooperative effort for the common good” [JLA]; a cooperative

effort for the common good that I find embodied in liberal religious communities. I believe that, here, Unitarian minister Mark Morrison-Reed has it right: “religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.” And so, about a dozen years ago, I put down the Sunday paper and walked into the doors of the 1st Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City.

The distinctive nature of religious community announces itself once you step inside: it has its unique choreography of worship and ritual, its distinctive language of music, covenant and high resolve, its affective expression of compassionate solidarity; and its dedication to service, service that strives to be present to each and all across the everyday and traditional boundaries of class, race, status of health, party, gender and generation; it has its work groups and committees, its mobilization efforts to sustain its vision and translate its values into concrete action and outcome. “This,” as someone recently remarked to me, “this is how we do church.”

Countless gestures, memories, words, deeds and kindnesses weave the rich fabric of religious community; they are the hallmarks of religious faith and moral life. They can be found and experienced in many faith communities; we have no monopoly on them.

And so why are here and not someplace else?

A striking reason for our presence here is manifest each time a Unitarian minister is ordained. Who ordains a Unitarian minister? Who has the right, the authority? There’s no presiding bishop. Senior ministers don’t conduct this rite. To be sure, the minister to be ordained has studied and qualified for ministry; but the sole authority, the power to ordain, is vested exclusively with the congregation. And thus, we rise up

together, fellow church members, and true to the vision and the 450 year tradition of our faith, we ordain and charge our ministers to serve with us in the spirit of truth, freedom and love.

Power is with the people and that's why we're here.

We're here and not someplace else because we claim that for us, *religion publicly begins with a human covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.* That is the criterion of our moral and religious community. In distinction to so many religions, Unitarianism does not begin with affirmations about the existence, attributes, sanctity and authority of gods, prophets, priests and texts. Though it may be imprecise and imperfect as a guide and standard—the worth and dignity of the person—at least it honours the truths that the human body, mind and heart know intimately.

It's the kind of principle that promotes social action. From a Unitarian king in 1568 making religious toleration the law of land (the first such proclamation in human history), to Dorothy Dix's field research and political work in New England that led to decent housing and treatment of mental patients in the 1840s, to Nanaimo Unitarians who made room in this building as a shelter for the homeless—a temporary, safe, warm place where they could escape from the brutal rigours and cold of winter.

Unitarian women and men have asserted and worked for the inherent worth of every soul, and supported efforts to secure conditions that make for human dignity.

We're here and not someplace else in order to provide opportunities for children, youth and adults *to experience a progressive religious and moral education.* We welcome questions and ideas. We encourage thoughtful, respectful learning about other religions, as well as our own. Our philosophy of education rejects the twin pillars of the

fundamentalist mind with its absolute allergy to doubt and its binary vision of a world divided into black and white. We support our RE directors and volunteer to be teachers ourselves because we know by experience that: “A free person does not live by an unexamined faith.” (JLA) Belief worth having is worth discussing, testing and exploring; and that’s why we’re here.

We’re here because of our advocacy for the right of conscience and the guidance of reason. No person should be made to submit to one-size-fits all dogmas or centres of power. And thus, Unitarians have been averse to doctrines, creeds and hierarchy; we impose none of these as conditions for membership in our congregations. Nor, may I add, are they shy about talking back to their minister.

This stance toward the life of the spirit and mind has enabled Unitarians historically to be open to the methods, insights and results of science. Not that we’re unthinking cheerleaders of each theory, each scientific and technological innovation, still, it is important to acknowledge that the revelations of reason and science, even if they contribute to fundamentally alter our picture of the cosmos, nature, and the self, these up-endings don’t have to throw us into a dithering panic. Rather, this stance, this openness to the life and methods of reason and science, should enable us to be flexible, supple, critical, and, I would hope, *humble* about what we know and what we don’t know. Whenever the communities of science actually look for and reach out to communities of faith, and it happens, they should know that we are here: critical but welcoming friends, neither cheerleaders nor foes; but willing partners in dialogue, a bridging community between the sciences, secular humanism, and religion.

Authority vested in the members of each congregation; the worth and dignity of every person as a first principle of our covenant; progressive religious education; advocacy of the right of conscience and the guidance of reason as guards against idolatries of the mind and spirit—these are some of the fruits of the free and questing faith that we gratefully acknowledge at this time of advent of the harvest season. None of these practices or attitudes, taken in isolation, is unique to us; together, though, their combined presence and vigorous expression provide a compelling portrait of a distinctive religious community; the kind of community which gathers us here, the kind of religion—perhaps the last—to which I can belong without apology, evasion, or a kind of fated gloom.

And yet after having said all of that, perhaps what really counts here, finally, is *the experience of fellowship*. Lord Chesterfield said that “congenial society is, in the end, the greatest joy in life.” And when I see us meet, embrace, share a cup of tea, extend sincere and compassionate feelings and service to one another, I feel that if nothing else happened here, making room and time for “congenial society” would be enough to justify the work you’ve done securing and renovating this building on Townsite Road.

And yet, as important as congenial society may be for the enjoyment of life, as important as all the characteristics I’ve listed above are for gathering here, still, there remains something *unique* about us that compels my presence here, something that warrants our devotion of time, thought and resources to this place, and not somewhere else. There are three unique attributes about Unitarianism that, in conclusion, I want to recognize and celebrate this harvest season; and they are the Unitarian story, our radical diversity, and our principled commitment to doubt.

Nothing in life is as important as discovering and participating in a meaningful story. Whether we have a life partner or are single; whether we are old or young, gay, straight, female, male—you name it—no matter what walk or style of life, finding the right story into which we can write our lives and where we can fruitfully live, means all the difference in the world between joy or despair. Most of us are here because we discovered sometime in our lives, that we were characters in the wrong story, with the wrong people, going in the wrong direction, and that we had to bust out of it or our souls would truly perish.

The Unitarian story is not perfect, no human tale, no cast of characters can be; but of all the options I know of out there, when it comes to religious community and its story, here I can abide and write out the remaining chapters of my life in good faith. It is the tale of a vanguard religious community that possessed the vision, people and tools to smash one religious idol and shibboleth after another; thus making it possible for other religious people more risk averse to follow suit, to change and grow. Radical advocates for a unitary view of the divine and nature, revolutionary scholars of religious texts, leaders in the movement to ordain women and GLBT persons to the ministry, post-Christian religious pluralists...it's an extraordinary story. And I encourage all of us to learn it and discover how *we will contribute* meaningfully to its unfolding now and years to come.

Radical diversity—another reason why I am here and not someplace else. People outside this community have a hard time getting their minds around just how diverse a collection of religious views and practices are embodied and present in a Unitarian church on a Sunday morning, no matter how patiently I try to explain it to them. Don't

take it for granted! Think about it! Under one roof, we are openly pagan, humanist, mystic, and agnostic; we're hard headed atheists and tender-hearted spiritual souls. The whole realm of religious life and humanistic disciplines are open to us as valued sources of our living tradition; and we bring them here and try our best to make them work in community and in solidarity with one another. There is something so exhilarating, so defiantly saucy and courageous about the endeavour to fashion and practice a radically pluralistic faith. In a world dividing up into grim, panicky, or distressed religious communities variously troubled, palsied, walled off, or reveling in apocalyptic fantasies, we are a crucial experiment in the possibility of peaceful, frank cohabitation of diverse religious, spiritual, and secular beliefs and practices. Don't forget for a minute how important this living experiment of ours may yet prove to a troubled, divided world. There's nothing quite like it; and I celebrate it. May it flourish!

And finally, finally...in Sunday school, I was taught that there was something fundamentally flawed with Thomas, the disciple of Jesus. Yes, that "doubting Thomas," a goat among apostolic sheep, who gets a very bum rap in the Gospel of John. His so-called "defect"? Insisting on tangible proof that the claims by his fellow disciples that Jesus has risen bodily from the grave were not just irrational exuberance. For Thomas, this was too important a matter to be taken merely on hearsay. And for this stance, he has been tarred with the brush of calumny ever since; a negative stereotype, a cliché, as though there's something wrong with being a "doubting Thomas."

Well, today I'm just going to say that Thomas's demand for tangible fruit made him the most faithful of disciples, faithful to the young itinerant rabbi who said: "beware

of false prophets...you will know them by their fruits...[E]very sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit.”

For 450 years, Unitarians have embraced this pragmatic test of truth. We have not and will not rest content with a faith once given. If our pagan community can deepen our ritual life, we embrace them; if our humanists can steer us clear from wooly thinking, we thank them. If our children can remind us of the sweetness of youth, and of our responsibility to be wise stewards of the future, we honour them and follow their lead. If our mystics accompany us to the sweet well of the great mystery of life we will drink deep drafts and quench our thirst. If our Christians and Jews remind us of the deep historical roots of our faith, in sacred literature and culture, we will bless them for this gift and faithfulness.

By our fruits we will be known; fruits tried and tested, claims frankly weighed on the scales of doubt and verified by experimentation; for grapes are not gathered from thorns, nor figs from thistles. Thomas was right, and believed only when he could see and touch the living fruit himself.

The harvest we name, see and honour this day is rich indeed. Sufficient to the season thereof, and to our abiding need for a living, credible religion to which we can belong. May we be mindful and grateful for it, and for each other: for this our “congenial society,” for the story we inhabit and claim as our own, the diversity we enjoy, the loyal, crucial doubt which lights our journey like a star in the night.