



A Faith Made Strong
Rev. Dr. Richard Speck
November 6, 2011

I thank you for the opportunity to worship with you again. It has been a while since I was visiting you. I was last here for the installation of Lori Staubitz in May 2009. You are still a relatively young congregation. In January 2008 you received a Chalice Lighter grant to organize as a new congregation. You chartered with 36 members in March and were officially welcomed as a new congregation at GA 2008. Some of you have been Unitarian Universalists since this time while others have been UUs for a longer period.

I am reminded of the story of the young girl attending the worship service with her parents. The song leader asked the congregation to turn in their hymnals and sing, "Till the Whole World Knows." The young girl whispered, "I think we're going to be here a long time." I hope that you will not think of my sermon as lasting too long.

I come today to speak of our larger hope of which you are a part. You are one of over 1,000 congregations within the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations. All across this country, our churches, fellowships, societies, and congregations will light their chalice and hold worship services just like you. They are a part of a network of congregations that share a common faith even though they may express it quite differently. If you were to go to King's Chapel in Boston you would experience a liberal Christian service using a Unitarian Book of Common Prayer. If you went to Wellsprings UU Church in Exton, PA, you would worship with a praise band and sing contemporary pop songs.

We know that each of us can do only so much alone. But when we combine our energies, we can accomplish so much more. When this congregation was created it took the efforts of many people to build it and sustain it as a worshipping community. No one person has all the skills necessary to do everything that is needed. We all bring our own set of skills and abilities to share with the others in whatever endeavor we do as a congregation.

Some of us are able to put together great programs for our children, others serve as leaders to make the decisions for the greater good of the church, and still others serve on committees that keep the lights on, the heating system functioning, the property maintained, and the bills paid. It takes working together as a whole system for an institution to thrive. I scratch your back, you scratch mine.

A famous organist was giving a recital in an eastern church. The instrument was not supplied air electrically; it had to be pumped by hand. A young boy was engaged to do this for the occasion. Everything was going along fine until the lad put his head around the side of the organ and whispered: "We are doing pretty good, aren't we?" "What do you mean by 'we'?" objected the organist. A few minutes later, in the midst of a beautiful strain, the organ suddenly stopped giving out any music. Desperately the organist tried all the stops. No use. Then again he saw the head of the boy bob around the corner, a broad smile on his face. He said: "Now do you know who I mean by 'we'?"

The Joseph Priestley District is like that organist. We depend upon the support we get from congregations like yours to provide the staff and services that assist you in building a stronger, healthier church. It truly is a partnership. We need to know what you need and how best we can serve that need. Please let me know after the service how we can assist you.

You are a part of a faith tradition that is older than the United States. We trace our lineage through the Pilgrims and Puritans who came to these shores seeking religious freedom. We also come from those who fled persecution because of their spirituality and understanding of God as a loving being who would never condemn people to everlasting punishment. At one time, our Universalist forbearers were called the "No Hell" people because of this belief. In the early part of the Nineteenth Century, it was reported that there were more Universalists than any other religion.

One of the hallmarks of our free faith has been an emphasis on making this world a better one. We haven't worried too much about what comes afterwards. Our Unitarian branch felt that doing good works was part of a healthy spirituality. This call to make the world more fair resulted in a whole host of social justice activities that have carried on until today. Previous generations struggled for abolishing slavery, providing free public education for all, establishing libraries, and championing the vote for women. Our Universalists created the Red Cross, the modern mental health hospitals, the peace movement, and the ordination of women.

The world is in a sad shape today. Our country is still at war after ten years, people are losing their jobs and houses, many businesses in small town America are closing, and life is getting tougher for those at the bottom of our society. While we can't single-handedly solve all of these problems, we can do our bit as part of a larger whole of committed Unitarian Universalists working with others of good will. Many members of our churches are participating in the Occupy Wall Street Movement to bring pressure to bear on our elected leaders and those in business who can address the severe economic circumstances that are reducing the middle class of this country.

Rev. Bob Karnan several years ago wrote words that speak to my message today. "Our church and fellowship buildings and the moments we share within and outside of them point to a sometimes wild and raging visionary courage in the face of all that would demean and destroy and pervert and estrange what is in our hearts. There is no more critical task for our lives than the courage to love and to be there honestly and fully for one another. Deep and good friendship and all the trust and serenity that come with it are transformative. Deep friendship makes a healthy life possible, even likely. It makes for peace and for strength in facing the hardest issues. Doing what we can for what is right, just, and fair here where we live is the most powerful social justice force on earth. Our task as a religious society is not to idolize and love God, it is to love one another in just relationship so that we make the love of God a reality and not a desperate dream or a painful despair."

Unitarian Universalism is the faith for the Twenty-first Century. We lift up the core belief of each person seeking their own understanding of religious truth without having to subscribe to a dogma or creed. We are people who join together in covenant to explore the essential questions of life together while also working collectively to make life better for all. We band together voluntarily to enhance life for each of us and pool our resources so we affect a larger sphere of influence than we could do alone.

Your web site describes what I think Unitarian Universalism is at its simplest. "It is our mission to create a spiritual environment in which people of diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, economic, and religious backgrounds can learn to understand, respect, appreciate, and love one another as well as promote social justice for all and for our environment." Not many other religions have such a broad understanding of how we organize.

Part of creating a spiritual diversity within our congregations is how we share our faith with others. We need not be reluctant to tell others what a joy it is to be within this community. We Unitarian Universalists have been rather good at hiding our light under a bushel basket instead of proclaiming our light for all to see.

A favorite book of mine is *Salted With Fire*, which is a collection of essays by Unitarian Universalist ministers discussing why and how we should spread our message to the larger world. Having grown up in a Southern Baptist church, I feel comfortable with words such as evangelizing and witnessing one's faith. But as a Unitarian Universalist I come at these words with new meanings. My definitions are, I think, compatible with what each of you would say if asked to define the terms in your own words.

To evangelize is to spread our message of saving hope for a hurting world. It means finding ways in which I can tell about why Unitarian Universalism is my religious path to anyone who wants to know.

Be aware that I have not said that I would impose what I believe upon another who was not receptive and tell them they were in error. When a person begins doing that, they have crossed the line from evangelizing, sharing the “good news,” and have begun proselytizing, attempting to convert someone to a particular faith stance. I abhor anyone trying to push his or her religion down my throat and I hope I never do that to anyone else.

The Rev. John Morgan speaks forcefully about his need to witness our faith and proclaim it boldly. He writes, “I am not willing to keep quiet. I am an evangelist. It’s in my family blood, it’s in our spiritual blood, and without it our movement suffers a great loss of power and passion. I believe that spiritual communities grow by evangelism as fire grows by burning. If you light a match and then don’t give it air, it will burn out. That has happened to a lot of our churches and fellowships that tried to hide our saving gospel and keep it to themselves. As a theological student some years ago, I was asked by the UUA Extension Department to take a look at 315 of our churches and fellowships that had died between 1961 and 1983. Again and again, in the records of these groups, I found a familiar refrain: inwardness, focusing on internal questions while neglecting a wider mission, with consequent loss of heart and mission. In short, I found no evangelism.

Conversely, if you light a fire and don’t tend it, it can spread wildly and burn out of control. Fire needs nurturing. So, too, does evangelism. If we don’t know what it is about ourselves that is worth sharing—know and feel the power of hundreds of years of Unitarian and Universalist history—then our evangelism will be rootless and even wither.

A simple definition of evangelism that makes sense to me as a Unitarian Universalist is this: Evangelism is sharing our dream with others in order to transform the world.”

The reading that Linda gave reminds us that we build community for a purpose of helping one another. While David Bumbaugh pokes fun at us through the invention of the back scratcher, his underlying message is that we need one another. If our religious gathering has any meaning at all, it is to provide support and nurturing to each other along the journey of life and to use our talents to ease another’s way.

“In Eden, no one stands alone; each depends on the others. And thus began our wandering, our pacing up and down the earth, scratching our own itches, pretending self-sufficiency, trying to ignore the persistent sense of loss, the vague yearning for a primordial order, a world where you scratch my back and I scratched yours.”

We make a strong faith when we realize our dependencies on others. We make a strong faith when we join together in common cause to make more justice in the world. We make a strong faith when we share the joy of this community with others and invite them into that community.

As Bob Karnan said, our task as a religious society is not to idolize and love God, it is to love one another in just relationship so that we make the love of God a reality and not a desperate dream or a painful despair. A strong Unitarian Universalist faith can bring such a relationship into being. May you continue along that path and expand this congregation and make it stronger in the days and years to come. Amen.