

“Who, What and Why”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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Who do we think we are? Who do we think we want to be? Who do we think we can be as a congregation, as First Parish Unitarian Universalist on but beyond Cohasset Common? These are questions that have engaged many of us over this past weekend, as you have gathered and focused on our mission.

We're each called by a name, and so is our church. Yet those names have changed over the centuries. From First Parish, a tax-supported institution founded in 1721, to First Parish as a Unitarian church in the early 1800s, to First Parish as a Unitarian Universalist congregation a mere 46 years ago, we are a congregation of evolving identity. I empathize. I started out as Jan Marie White, actually Janice Marie White. Then I chopped the ice off Janice and become Jan Marie White. Then I married and became Jan Marie Flesher. Then I was widowed and then remarried and became Jan Marie Adelman. Then I divorced and took my maternal grandmother's name and became Jan Marie Carlsson. Then I remarried and became Jan Marie Carlsson-Bull. That is quite enough of name changing for one person, not even an institution. You will not know me by any other name!

Our names and, yes, our identities change over time. In the reading of our founding covenant, there are some among us who may find ourselves in sympathy with the verbiage chosen by the long deceased Rev. Nehemiah Hobart. There are also some among us who wince at the gender exclusive language of “brotherhood” or of “Father” as an apt reference to God. Sisterhood wasn't so powerful in 1721. Yet we sing about a God of many names, so why should we be surprised when we find in our own covenantal history the conventional reference to Father?

We are ever stretching into identities to which we aspire. We are ever tending to notions of divinity that inspire, while reflecting the pluralism of our theologies. It's not as if we've reached the pinnacle of enlightenment in 2007. We are a learning congregation of faith and practice, ever in transition. We are a religious community of faith and doubt, grateful that doubt is borderline sacramental in this faith that we share.

Much as we take heart in proclaiming our shared principles and purposes as Unitarian Universalists, these emerge from our recent history, crafted a mere twenty years ago and adopted by a General Assembly that gathered a quarter century after the merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America into our Unitarian Universalist Association. Even now these principles and purposes are being re-considered by our Association's Commission on Appraisal. Do they reflect who we are and who we are becoming in these dawning years of the 21st century? How would the Nehemiah Hobart of 1721 or the Jacob Flint of 1821 assess them, or for that matter Joseph Osgood, who served this congregation as minister for the entire last half of the 19th century and who brought to this church strong political and abolitionist views, even serving in the Massachusetts legislature during his tenure as minister? Who we are is as ephemeral and dynamic as the flame that burns in our chalice, itself an icon of the mid-20th century.

Who are we now as we worship and learn and confer and gather and disperse and reach out and reach in and aspire to be who we can be?

“Roots hold me close; wings set me free,” we sing.

What is this church? I love the etching done by JoAnne Chittick a few years ago. You’ll find it this morning on the cover of your order of service. Take a look. What do you see? Kids cavorting? One small child straining perhaps to run free from the clasp of her father’s hand? A woman holding a baby, with two youngsters looking on. Diversity of hue. Not all the folks are white. This Meeting House with the front door wide open, and just inside the vestibule a woman, your minister maybe, welcoming one of you, or maybe greeting one of you as you exit after a service. What I love about this rendition of who we are is the “meeting” in the Meeting House.

What is this church? This church is you. This church is our children. This church is our guests and our neighbors. This church is an open door in worship and fellowship and how we do outreach and how we do justice and how we know wonder and how we go forth into the rest of our lives taking this church with us, living it and being it. To sustain this church is to tend to the cleaning and the painting and the boiler repairs and what goes where; but these matters are for the purpose of opening our doors and welcoming and celebrating and learning and sharing. This church is you.

As I read yesterday of the stark warning embodied in the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, I envisioned what would become of this slice of the continent if we don’t curb our appetites as consumers of fossil fuels and then reap the consequences of sea levels rising “7 to 23 inches by 2100” and continuing to rise year by year. We know from the ravages of Hurricane Katrina, exacerbated by rising surface temperatures in the Gulf, that an entire city can be wiped out. We know that churches are part of that community and the folks who formed them are largely in diaspora. What will happen to communities like Cohasset and Hull and Scituate and Hingham and Boston too if hurricanes and rising sea levels ravage this coastline? What will happen to this church?

What is this church as we open our doors to news of global warming and climate change, war and peace, and more? What are we as a church presumably prophetic, presumably progressive, presumably liberal and open in our theology and variably liberal and open in politics that describe how we are in community? I think of those words of 20th century theologian James Luther Adams, writing 60 years ago in the raw aftermath of a world shattered by war and devastated by the demonic hubris of world leaders whose crescendo to power was not stopped in time.

“The prophetic liberal church,” proclaimed Adams, “is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it.”

What is this church, our church, our faith, in a time whose historical winds we cannot deny, however protected some of us might feel in the exquisite beauty of this coastal village?

Who we are is what we are, and what we are challenged to be may or may not be who we are becoming. In the spirit of this weekend in which mission is in the making, the words of Margaret Wheatley ring:

“There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about,” she observed in her poem so aptly titled “turning to one another.” In this Mission Weekend, we are turning to one another. In our Circle Ministry, we are turning to one another. In our religious education for our youngest, we are turning to one another as we implement the buddy system in which older children are partnered with younger children in alliances of care and attentiveness. In our worship together, we turn to one another as we hear joys and concerns and perhaps notice the occasional sighs and silences that transpire on a not so simple Sunday morning, as we perhaps notice who’s not here, who’s been away for awhile, and reach out through a phone call or a note. In our outreach and our justice making, we turn to one another with the growing realization that we are all on this planet together and are all vulnerable to the shifting winds of wellness and illness, prosperity and austerity, celebration and grief, birth and death.

Why are we? Why is this church? Why would someone want to engage with this church? How are we welcoming across habitual boundaries of gender and gender preference, across social constructs of race and class, across generations, and across habits of belief both rich and raw. I think of that core question that drives our conversations on *Soul Work*, conversations that will continue this afternoon as we participate with two neighboring Unitarian Universalist congregations to discern how we as people of faith can do anti-racist work as spiritual practice, as soul work. Why would someone want to engage with this church if we are not ever more open, more mindful, more anti-racist, more anti-oppressive, more liberated in our spiritual understanding and behavior, more ready and willing to live the principles and purposes we espouse, more responsive to the Spirit of Life that moves through us all, more game for those wings that set us free.

Why is this faith? How is it that so many find it accidentally and remark, as I did when I first entered a Unitarian Universalist congregation, after seminary no less: “I didn’t know there was a faith like this, or I would have been here long ago!”

How can this church be increasingly faithful to the call of Unitarian Universalism and make a positive difference in our individual lives and in spheres that extend well beyond Cohasset? How is it that we want this church to thrive? What are we willing to do? Who are we willing to be? How are we willing to walk the words that honor the roots that hold us close and inspire us to don the wings that set us free to be kinder and more mindful and generous and loving than we could possibly be were it not for this congregation and our Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations of which we are a part?

Who are we? What are we? Why are we? I await the gifts that emerge from your conversations, gifts of word and deed. In faith and thanksgiving for all you are doing and all you are and for all you might do and all you can be, know that I love each and all of you in this blessed here and now. Amen.

Sources

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