

A RELIGION FOR OUR TIME...AND FOR THE FUTURE

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

March 7, 2010

Religious Communities are places of healing and hope.

A vital, spiritual church, a generous congregation takes in all those who need healing, all those seeking hope. Our intention, as religious community, is to offer unconditional healing love and transformative hope. To make a place for all who enter here.

There are hundreds, no thousands, of stories of men and women and youth and children finding their way to the door of a UU congregation...or starting one when they needed it.

There is a gay man I know, raised catholic, but estranged from his church of origin- there were years when he found community and meaning for his life outside of the walls of any religious community. In his young adulthood he lived in NYC and was active in the sorrow of the "dying times" of the early HIV/AIDS epidemic there...

moving west, he grew into a deeper spiritual practice and joined a Hindu monastery- which he loved...but he could not become a monk for they did not accept homosexual people – filled with doubt, but a strong call to ministry, he entered Unitarian Universalist seminary...and there among UUs, he felt, for perhaps the first time, acceptance for his full self. Two years ago, he came to UUCR as a student, our intern minister, this past October, he was ordained by this congregation- I'm speaking, of course, of the Reverend Stephen Sinclair.

We try to make a place for all to enter here. We try to create a healing place...for the spirit.

In difficult economic times, in times of war and fear and high anxiety the world needs communities of healing and hope...we need religious community more than ever.

When we are born, when we are lost, when we lose a job, when we have lost all hope, and when we die, the place people turn to is a church, a temple, a mosque, a cathedral...for more than 50 years, people have turned to UUCR.

The Unitarian Universalist church of Rockville is a healing place; we are a community of hope. Our presence in this corner of Montgomery County matters to a lot of people. Not just to those of us who are here most Sundays.

Last year, our student minister, Seanan Holland, came to us with a deep calling to serve as a UU minister within the military. As a UU marine, he sometimes wondered if he was welcome in UU circles. As someone who had served in Bosnia, Iraq and other war torn countries, Seanan's vision was to take our principles and purposes, our tradition, our understanding of world community... to those places where words and deeds of healing and hope were sorely needed...When he completes his training in Navy Chaplain school this summer...he will return here in the fall to be ordained by this congregation. And then he will return to active duty as the Reverend Seanan Holland, chaplain.

The ministry we create here carries its blessings far beyond our walls...far beyond our expectations.

As Jake has told us, the ministry of UUCR matters to future generations.

All of us here this morning have come from somewhere else...and here we have been taken in...here we have been accepted and offered healing love and profound hope.

The core commitment of our free faith is to always draw the circle larger...From the origins of our anti-trinitarian forebears, to the dissenting congregations of Colonial New England, to our free pulpit and our theological pluralism...we have covenanted to leave no person outside the circle.

As a liberal religious movement we have practiced this covenant imperfectly...but with dedication.

This is truly our great covenant...to require no creedal test, no single image of God or the Divine...no adherence to one form of prayer, no recital of empty doctrine. No exclusion by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, class or belief. And someday, no exclusion by education level, vocabulary, cultural background, or political affiliation.

Elizabeth Marsh, our student minister this year, our intern, hasn't told you much yet, about her class background, it was one of the things that drew me to her...and her to UUCR. Growing up in Duluth, MN in a loving family, but one of modest means...Elizabeth sometimes feels on the outside of UU culture, especially among some of our ministerial colleagues, who represent the blessings of New England privilege.

Moving from outside to inside the circle is, for Elizabeth a spiritual journey and one to which she brings great compassion and deep patience. We are fortunate in her young wisdom and her clear commitment to be a minister in our movement.

By our radical inclusion, we practice a generosity of the spirit.

Last week, I said that we UU's have everything we need to be a great religious movement. Remember, how you said "amen" to that?

In a global society where diversity of all kinds is becoming normative – we are, perhaps, better prepared than other faiths, to transform our congregations toward even more inclusion. But we are also at risk of becoming mainstream or worse, being left behind.

For it's hard work to be generous. It's hard work to make room for the new. It's hard work and a bit uncomfortable to keep changing, keep trusting unconditionally.

Many faiths are hard at work drawing their own circles larger...being more inclusive, changing their rules so they can take in people from other faith backgrounds, liberalizing their creeds and practices so more people can join them. The fact is, we UUs are not so unique anymore.

In December, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released a report about the increasingly complicated cacophony of spirituality in America. The report was titled "Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths". The report pointed out that more and more Americans are blending Christianity with Eastern or New age beliefs. The evidence is all around us...there is a trend in many

faiths and denominations to offer something more than the orthodox, something outside the traditional box.

Protestant non-denominational mega-churches are on the rise. There not just Baptist or Church of Christ, or Presbyterian...they are all inclusive Christian Churches.

Progressive Interfaith experiments are also abundant with liberal Jewish congregations worshipping with liberal Christians, and interfaith dialogue and classes in Islam and labyrinths being walked in many religious corners of the world.

Jewish Temples are welcoming spouses without requiring conversion and the Catholics are welcoming back Episcopalians.

The religious landscape is changing, blending, going global.

And this is a good thing, it is consistent with our own pluralism, but it means we can no longer claim the market on diversity, if we ever could.

Which means, we must change.

To be a religious or spiritual person...to be the best human being we can be...we need to keep growing our heart...bigger and bigger...we need to keep practicing generosity and expanding the circle.

Often that means responding to invitations.

On Friday I received invitations from our UU ministers in the District of Columbia. The congregations of All Souls, Universalist National Memorial and the Ethical Society ...all on 16th St. are gearing up for a rush of spring weddings!

As you know the DC City Council voted to legalize gay marriage by a vote of 11-2. And Mayor Adrian Fenty signed the bill into law at All Souls earlier this year. Then, Maryland

Attorney General, Doug Gansler, announced that Maryland law allows recognition of out-of-state marriage licenses.

Our DC UU churches are offering their sanctuaries for any Maryland gay, lesbian or transgendered couples who want to marry now that gay marriage is legal in DC and now that Maryland will recognize those marriages.

So I am invited to officiate at weddings for UUs in our DC churches- if any of you want to get married, or have friends who would like to...let me know. You don't have to be DC residents. This is one way, in these times...to draw our circle larger. What a gift. What a blessing!

What opportunities will there be for our generous hearts in the coming decades of the 21st century? Will we be ready to recognize and respond to the invitations that come our way?

In the current issue of UUWorld, Reverend Rosemary Bray McNatt, asks; "How do we become faithful communities of change?"

As we make our financial commitments this morning, let us reflect on how our generosity will make it possible for UUCR to continue to be a faithful community of change.

Be assured that when you live your commitment to UUCR by giving what you can you make it possible for us to keep drawing our circle larger.

So May It Be/Amen/Blessed Be

