

Author Stephen Covey writes:

“You have to decide what your highest priorities are and have the courage—pleasantly, smilingly, non-apologetically—to say ‘no’ to other things. And the way to do that is by having a bigger ‘yes’ burning inside.”

Have a bigger yes burning inside. Today we are talking about mission – about the bigger yes burning inside this church that guides it through the rough waters of congregational life.

In Christian, or Muslim, or many Jewish congregations that burning yes is God. It may be differently understood by the folks in the pews, but an external source of wisdom can be named and pointed toward in understanding what binds them together. They serve God.

What do we serve?

In my seminary there was a wise professor, Rev David Bumbaugh who said there were 3 questions we had to answer when going in to ministry:

What do we believe? Who or what do we serve? And to whom or what are we responsible? A Christian can answer all three of those questions with God – but what can we answer with?

I know the ease of having God as the answer because I grew up deeply engaged with my Roman Catholic faith of origin. I don't call myself a recovering Catholic because I know I was shaped and formed into the person that I am today by that experience.

I came to deeply believe that all people are beloved of God, that we should turn the other cheek and love our neighbors as ourselves. I trusted that the universe is good and that compassion should be our guide. I believed deeply that it is in giving that we receive. I came to recognize the mystery and wonder of this gift of life.

All those things, those values, are still a part of who I am in the world. I have set aside belief in the supernatural miracles and the God that demands reparation for sin. I've left behind the exceptionalism of being the only right way to be.

But my faith of origin left me a rich legacy that I am very grateful for – and sometimes miss.

Do you know how much easier it is to preach in a Christian church? There's a whole layer of defining and explaining that you can skip entirely and just talk directly to the message.

But what I found here was so wonderful and amazing that there would be no possibility of turning back. I found a community which translates ancient wisdom into present day realities.

I found people who affirm the worth and dignity of every person – and try really hard to make that lived reality in both their congregations and the world.

I found a people who love the earth and work to save it. Who love justice and work to make it real in the world.

I found people who celebrate and appreciate life in this world rather than accepting suffering and waiting for happiness in some promised heaven in the future.

I found people who have seven values that speak to my heart and offer me a guide and a support for my life.

As UU's we affirm:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

These principles are a good and solid way of articulating the things we value and hold dear. They are not as succinct as saying “God” but they hold open a way of being in relationship and living that offers an aspirational blueprint for our lives.

They are broad enough so that everyone can feel ownership of them and find a way in. But that same professor from Meadville who offered up the questions often said that the principles were so broad you could drive a truck through them.

That statement puzzled me for a long time. The principles are great – what’s the problem? I’ve over time figured out his point.

They are great. No one would disagree with them. No one. Any catholic, or Jew or Muslim or Mormon could read those and say yes – I agree to them too. Maybe number 4 – a free & responsible search for truth and meaning might hang up some of them – but I know in my Catholic upbringing the right of conscience was upheld. It might be buried but I knew it to be a true part of my faith.

Our principles are much like the golden rule – which can be found in one form or another in almost every major faith tradition. Ancient inherited wisdom says we should be good to one another. But within that being good there is a lot of wiggle room in what that means.

Fundamentalist Christians believe they are loving their homosexual members when they chastise them and tell them to stop being gay – they are trying to keep them out of hell. They are expressing their ‘love’ in hurtful ways, but doing it in the service of saving their immortal souls.

They would claim they are following our principles.

And Muslim fundamentalist who are waging holy war to bring Sharia law to the world may truly believe they are helping people find a faith and way of living that helps them be in right relationship with Allah. They are affirming the worth and dignity of every person by helping them find the joy of submission.

Our principles are good but how are they unique to our faith? What is the glowing coal at the center of this church which keeps us coming in each week?

Many ideas were presented in the search packet I read when considering coming to this congregation. You were proud of your intellectual heritage, you were proud of your long history, beautiful building and grounds and you spoke highly of your accomplished musicians and your excellent religious education program. You value your freedom to think for yourselves.

Those are some of the values I read in your packet and have experienced since I've arrived. You live your values in the world as well. You are a designated green sanctuary, a welcoming congregation, and the first official respect for life congregation. You've escorted women safely into the abortion clinics for over 20 years and you've provided space for educational and informative movies and lectures.

There is much that is good and worthwhile and laudable – but there's also a lot of loss.

You've lost Ed Searle, your friend and minister for 30 years. You've lost his quiet wisdom and intellectual prowess. I've had a couple people say that they loved Ed but often had to go home and dig out their thesaurus to look up some of the words they'd heard.

He gave a sense of continuity and connection with the past through his scholarship and appreciation of history. He was someone you could be proud of .

You also lost your musician of 25 years, Chris Garofalo. He was a Steinway artist and gave a sense of dignity and excellence to this community. He was a friend and mentor to many and his departure leaves a residue of sadness behind.

You've also lost your known and familiar polity structure. While the transition to Policy Governance had been being discussed for a couple years, it came into being at the same time as all of the other changes were going on.

By design interim ministry is supposed to move you out of long established patterns in order to be open to new ways of being. But at a certain point, it can just feel like too much. So the change in governance was one more change in a sea of moving parts and it's understandable that some folks might feel it was too much to take in all at one time.

And here I am- brand new, excited with new things to try and new ways to be in the world – an order of service that changes almost every week and great big ideas about where we might go and what we might do.

While there's excitement – there's also a feeling of wait. Can't we just stop and catch our breath a bit? Can we find the solid ground of church community that we had for such a long time?

I've been listening and pondering about what is needed in this moment and I hope you will too. All change – even good and exciting change – is loss. Loss has to be given space to adjust and accept before even the best new things can be absorbed.

Do you remember the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of the desert? This church is a lot like that story from the Hebrew Scriptures. They were out wandering the desert for 40 years. You've left your homeland – with Ed & Chris & portfolio governance – but have not quite arrived at the Promised Land.

Things are still shifting and changing, still in flux waiting to settle down into a permanent configuration – and that feels uncomfortable.

But what is the Promised Land? Where are we heading that can draw us forward?

This is where the mission of the church – that glowing coal - becomes so important. This is where an articulated vision of the center becomes not some goofy corporate exercise, but an essential naming of what is real and true and important to this community.

Each of you has your own reasons for coming to church. I hope you will continue to make appointments to come in and share them with me.

But what is the collective reason for being church? Because that collective reason is the glowing coal; the guiding light, the answer to David Bumbaugh's questions: to whom or what are we responsible.

The leaders of the church are responsible to that vision – and that vision has to be articulated by the larger community. That's the theory behind policy governance. The church members decide together who they are and what they want to accomplish. You, together, in a process that invites everyone in, decide the glowing coal at the center of this church.

The reason it exists – the things that would be sorely missed if UCH suddenly disappeared and wasn't here anymore.

It's that thing that we say 'Yes!' which allows us to say no to all the calls on our time and attention.

My own vision of this faith is a place where I can work to make the world a little better. Where I can work for justice, where I can offer love and compassion, where I can grow into the best self I can possibly be.

This is my vision. What's yours?

We talked last week about the concept of soul – what Parker Palmer named that tough and resilient part of us.

A mission is like the soul of the church. It keeps us on the right track.

a. Place we can make a difference

i. Different levels

1. Presents for kids
2. Values in public
3. Legislative change

b. Communicate that message

- i. Website
- ii. Social media
- iii. New sign out front
- iv. Promotions club work

2) Both / And people

- a. Both exceptional and part of the unity of humankind
- b. Both creedless and united in common mission
- c. Both reverent of past and looking forward to taking our mission to the future

3) Mission is the soul of the church

- a. That guiding voice
- b. the soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: Parker Palmer

In our first reading, UU minister Marilyn Sewell said that as Unitarian Universalists “we are not afraid to be insecure. We are not afraid to search, to go deeper, to find the truth, even when the truth is unpalatable.”

So how do we do that?

How do we open up our deepest hopes and fears? How do we talk about our very real differences of belief, very real differences in theology?

One answer is by focusing on our common goals and intentions. Our differences, our unique insights and perspectives bring a richness to the conversation, but it is our common hopes and dreams which bind us together.

Wheatley gives an example of a junior high school that works by agreeing that all behaviors and decisions are based on only three rules:

“Take care of yourself. Take care of each other. Take care of our place.”

These are the common commitments agreed upon by everyone entering the school. They are open enough for different interpretations but focused enough to create a cohesive society.

In a story told by the principal, one time when the building had to be “evacuated during a rainstorm, he returned last into the building to find 800 pairs of shoes in the lobby. The kids had decided, in that particular circumstance what it meant to ‘take care of this place.’”

“Take care of yourself. Take care of each other. Take care of our place.” Would that the planet could agree on such a simple, clear, and sustaining mission!

It may be a while for the planet, but our churches can certainly lead the way.

Two weeks ago the board and circle coordinators gathered to outline priorities for the year. We’ll go into them more at the Town Hall meeting but basically they were:

Support the new minister –me – as she begins her ministry – including helping get people more engaged in the process.

Create a mission statement process for the church which invites every voice into the discussion.

Improve communication in the church.

Continue working to get the church on solid financial ground.

I believe the most important is #2 – Develop a mission statement – come up with the why of church. Why do we gather? What called us to this place? What do we hope to accomplish that we cannot do alone?

These are lifelong questions which help us live into the paradox of independence and interdependence. They help us move beyond our own small selves, while still retaining the beauty and grace of our individual gifts.

Please stay for the meeting after service today so we can begin this work of being in relationship, of living out our values and our principles, of listening to the soul of the church – and of charting a course to the Promised Land.