

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 18th April 2010

A Sense of Mission

Hello everybody and welcome to Essex Church, on this beautifully sunny Sunday morning, Essex Church where this gathered community of Kensington Unitarians meets for worship each week. This community is made up of all those who walk through our doors and we especially welcome visitors. Do stay after the service if you would like to for a cup of tea and there is a point in the service towards the end where we invite visitors if you want to say hello and introduce yourselves.

Let us take a moment now to calm and centre ourselves, to notice consciously that we are here today at this moment, in this place, together. We have arrived here with our own concerns, our own particular version of the human life story; yet together we create a community of fellow travellers, seekers, explorers of the spirit. May we each this morning find something of that which we are most in need - may the burdened find their load lightened, may the weary find rest, may the troubled know peace once more, may the joyful find ways to share their happiness with others - may our spirits be inspired and uplifted and may the divine light that shines throughout our universe shine now upon us and upon this place and may our worship here be illuminated by all that is great and good.

Prayer:

Let us join now in a time of prayer and reflection,
As I call on the divine spirit of life and love to be with us here today.
We need these quiet times of prayer and reflection, even when many of us are unsure who or what we are praying to,
And for some of us the word 'prayer' itself has lost its meaning and its power.

Yet still we sit quietly and turn our attention inwards
And focus our thoughts
And what we focus upon is different for each of us.
For we are unique beings and each of us has our own unique sense of that which we hold to be divine.

Yet we share a common humanity
And it is this common humanity
That brings us
Our concerns and anxieties
Our hopes and fears
Our gratitude and our joy.

For this is what it is to be human:
We care for others – both those close to us and those whose lives we hear of only in the news,
We delight in the natural world with its rich gifts for our senses – the sounds, sights, smells, tastes – the very touch of it all,
We have an idea that we can be greater than we often are – that there is perhaps something of the divine in each and every one of us,
We sense mysteries beyond our comprehension as we look at the stars or gaze upon a flower.

As we enter a time of shared silence together now, let us focus our thoughts and prayers on all those who are facing challenges in our world – earthquake, volcano, private, personal difficulties ...

May the peace and the stillness of this time and this place stay with us and strengthen us for the task of living our lives, now and always, amen.

Address:

The attitude of various religious organisations towards same sex relationships has been hitting the headlines again hasn't it these last few months and I heard a Christian woman priest on the radio the other day saying that she has experienced more intolerance recently from within the church than she had in the previous twenty years for the fact that she has a woman partner. One of the things that hurt her the most was the use of words from the Scriptures as the supposed 'word of God'. There are words in Leviticus that speak of the abomination of same sex relationships and these words are quoted as the word of God yet in the same book are rules about how to make animal sacrifices and the need to stone adulterers to death – words which are never quoted. People tend to pick and choose when it comes to identifying the so called word of God.

Mind you, we Unitarians can also be found quoting the Scriptures when it suits our cause. Over the last year a number of us have attended various workshops on congregational growth and at several of those we heard quoted 'without vision the people shall perish' – presumably to encourage our congregations to form lofty goals for the future. Our dear David Darling remarked quietly at one of these events that there was in fact another version of this ancient saying – 'without vision the people breathe a sigh of relief'.

Anyone who has ever worked in an organisation that is in the midst of re-organisation or re-structuring – where management consultants are brought in from on high to help with the so called strategic planning – if you've been in this situation you may well have experienced the pain – and also perhaps sometimes the sense of futility that such exercises can bring. Wise management consultants go about things differently and ensure that everybody is involved in such a process. One such consultant is Peter Hawkins, a long time Unitarian and friend of this congregation – Peter wrote a book called the Wise Fool's Guide to Leadership in which he collected short spiritual stories to assist the process of organisational and personal transformation. Most of the stories star the Sufi holy fool Nasrudin, who does such a good job in pointing out our frailties and stupidities to us.

You might remember that a few years ago now mission statements were all the rage – every organisation was meant to have a clear statement of what it aimed to do – the best school in Scotland, the cleanest hospital in England, committed to customer satisfaction etc etc. Peter Hawkins tells of the senior management team that had spent two days in a hotel conference room creating their new Mission Statement. They were now anxious to issue it to all the staff on high-quality glossy paper. "I would recommend that you use cheap paper and make it in the shape of a paper airplane," replied Nasrudin. The managers were all rather perplexed and asked him to explain himself. "Well" said Nasrudin, "It will increase productivity by saving the staff time when they receive their copies of your mission statement".

I heard of another wise consultant who was working with a large corporation and was encouraging managers to allow staff more time for creative thinking. He mentioned in passing, as an example, that most people have their best creative ideas in the shower rather than at their office desks. An anxious chief executive came up to him later and said – "about the showers – I'll need to give my staff instructions – so how long do you recommend that they stay in the shower in order to have those creative ideas?"

The message is clear – that a sense of mission in any organisation needs to be created through a shared process; it cannot be simply dictated from on high if it is to truly express the essence of that organisation. But for us as a Unitarian congregation, a liberal religious community, there are additional dimensions to explore. The very word 'mission' raises theological questions. Most churches find expressing a sense of mission a straightforward thing to do. They have a spiritual truth and their mission is to share it with others. Quite literally they may describe their work as 'saving souls'. This for them is evangelism.

What problems does this have for Unitarians, religious humanists, liberals, agnostics – however we might choose to describe our faith position?

A colleague of mine Stephen Lingwood wrote a very useful dissertation on the subject of Unitarian evangelism and he started by reclaiming the very word evangelism – describing it as the 'process of promoting the basic tenets that hold us together'. Described in this way – evangelism is what we do whenever we tell people about this congregation or about our own spiritual searching. Evangelism then ceases to involve telling others that we have a truth that they lack but rather that we are in a community that encourages us to explore life and its meaning – a faith that is a process, an active verb, rather than a static noun. Community becomes important because it is the place in which dialogue occurs and it is through speaking to one another that we can more deeply explore our own individual sense of purpose in life.

This of course raises one of life's existential questions – does life actually have meaning and purpose? We have all to make up our own minds about that. But I'll never forget the sense of liberation I gained years ago now on some personal growth course – on which we were taken through a series of exercises that led us to the conclusion that life was empty and meaningless. It sounds rather ghastly when I say it like that – 'life is empty and meaningless' – but at the time it was a moment of Zen Buddhist like liberation and enlightenment – a truly life changing moment. Because along with a realisation that life is empty and meaningless came an accompanying thought – that if life is empty and meaningless then we can, and therefore might as well, make up the meaning and purpose of life – and that to make up the meaning and purpose of one's life is a hugely empowering thing to do. It puts us at the helm of the ship so to speak.

And to continue with the sailing analogy - good though it is to be at the helm of our own ship of life, it can still be a lonely business to sail those seas alone and in one small boat we may be ill equipped to deal with the times when we are clearly not in command, when the storms of life assail us or we lose our way. We humans are relational beings – we need one another.

There is a Unitarian Universalist theologian called James Luther Adams who wrote that people come to churches for "ultimacy and intimacy." "Ultimacy" is a term coined originally I think by the Christian theologian Paul Tillich to express our ultimate commitments, our ultimate values, our ultimate concerns. It seems to be a human urge to want to explore such ultimate issues

and we do this so much better in the company of one another. Any of us who have experienced being in small groups perhaps here at Essex Church or in other settings will know how special it can be to hear other people expressing something from deep within and how special it can be to experience being listened to in this way.

If we are to have a sense of mission it needs I think to be based on a strong foundation, both for us as individuals and as a community. From that we can start to look outwards with a sense of transcending purpose, of commitment to something larger than ourselves, with the hope of making a difference in the world, taking part in the healing processes – even if it is just as the story earlier on said – one starfish at a time!

Put in this way a church community such as ours becomes a setting in which individuals can more deeply explore their own lives, their own sense of meaning and purpose, and can work in community to deepen connections, strengthen dialogue, and so look outwards in order to give something that we value back to the world, passing something that we truly value on to the wider world.

I'll close this morning with words from UU minister Mark Morrison Reed:

“The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The 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.

(from The Unitarian Life: Voices from Past and Present ed. Stephen Lingwood p.38)

Benediction:

We receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, moments of insight. Let us gather them up for the precious gifts that they are and, renewed by their grace, move boldly, together, into a beckoning future, amen.