UNITARIANS - WHY DO WE BOTHER

Sermon, August 28, 2011, Hope Unitarian Church

This isn’t my first trip to the pulpit on Sunday morning. About 6 years ago, I did a sermon while our minister was on vacation. My sermon discussed the limits of tolerance. I still have that sermon in my files. I pulled, reviewed it, and it wasn’t a bad sermon if I say so myself. Since there’s no chance any of you remember a word of that service, I considered simply reusing it. But I had something else on my mind that prompts today’s sermon.

The genesis for this sermon goes back about 15 years. My law partners and I were at my office at the end of the work day. A friend of ours, who is a devout catholic, came by the office just to shoot the breeze. During our conversation, I mentioned I was doing something at church, and he asked which church. I told him Hope Unitarian. He said, “Oh, Unitarian,” in that tone of voice indicating
understanding but mild disapproval. “I dated a unitarian girl once,” he said. “We would talk about religion, and at one point, I asked her, Why do you bother?” He wasn’t asking me the question. He was relaying a conversation from a prior relationship that for obvious reasons had long ago ended. But I could tell he never got a satisfactory answer to his question, so it lingered in my mind.

Unitarians - why do we bother? I’ve been at this for about 20 years now. I have some idea of why I’m here, and I’ve heard a few of your stories along the way, so let’s explore the question.

We certainly don’t come to church because we’re homogenous. I look across the room and I see Christians, agnostics, atheists, theists, deists, pantheists, panentheists, . . . and other than race, we’re diverse in other demographic areas as well.

Republicans, democrats, . . . gay and straight, environmentalists and free market hydrocarbon explorers, interventionists, isolationists.
All of these elements are factors in a person’s spiritual well being.

What brings us together as a community, particularly on Sunday morning for worship? What is worship? Broadly defined, worship is a process of acknowledging that which one considers holy and transcendent. Its roots are in Old English, where worth was defined as “a condition of being worthy of honor or renown.” The way we worship is just like anyone else, with rituals and sacred music.

So we come together to honor what we consider sacred. We have rituals for when we come together. What role does ritual serve in our lives. Robert Fulghum, a unitarian minister who has written several things you’ve heard of, has also written a book you probably haven’t heard of, called *From Beginning To End, the Rituals of Our Lives*. In it, he says, “as I learn to juggle the parts of my life, I have come to understand that meaningful rituals have a lot to do with gaining that inner harmony and making letting go as much a part of
life as holding on. Rituals anchor us to a center while freeing us to move on and confront the everlasting unpredictability of life. The paradox of ritual patterns and sacred habits is that they simultaneously serve as solid footing and springboard, providing a stable dynamic in our lives.” (P. 265).

Rev. Fulghum makes no mention of adherence to doctrine as necessary for rituals to carry meaning. But we do have our common ways to contemplate the mystery of our lives, to serve as both and anchor, and a springboard. The difference between us and Brand X down the street is, we don’t tell you where or how to drop your anchor. . . . and you have options on the springboard as well.

But heretics need rituals just like the devout. They carry a symbolic, or an emotional value rather than a practical value. And no one can force the meaning of a ritual on you. YOU have to assent to the effect of a ritual on you. If that meaning is imposed, it
is not a ritual, it is an activity, or maybe a custom. If you’re just coming here to see your friends, and going through the motions, that’s fine, as long as that meets your needs. But there’s so much more to claim if you choose to enter into that acceptance. Just like no one can coerce your assent to the meaning of a ritual, no one can prevent you from pouring meaning into any act you choose. AMEN to that.

And we mentioned sacred music as part of worship. Worship has involved music since before David learned to play the harp. For you non-believers, that’s a cultural and literary reference to David and the harp. George Carlin said the only good thing to come out of religion was the music. Religion has been recycling music for thousands of years. That was aptly demonstrated by our first hymn this morning, and my reading of the original words. Both evoked feelings, and I’m guessing wildly divergent feelings, in you. Of
course, the power of music, just like the power of ritual, is in how it makes us feel, rather than the act of singing itself. You place the meaning on yourself, or choose not to. And for those who choose not to, thank you for your patience while the rest of us take it in.

Part of what I get out of coming to church is just taking some time to intentionally slow down. Between the phone, the calendar, email, Facebook, twitter, Google +, and the internet, all of which I have access to in this device I carry with me almost everywhere, it’s nice to have some time set aside where no one expects you to respond instantly. On top of constant electronic access, we’re worried about keeping the house picked up, meal planning, doing laundry, getting the kids here and there, bringing home work and worrying about the fact you didn’t do it. We feel like those plate spinners... you remember the novelty acts, people who would spin dinner plates on long sticks. Their whole act involved not letting the
plates get off balance and fall from the sticks. And we would watch and wonder, how do they keep all those plates spinning without them falling and breaking? I can come to this place, and for at least one hour, I don’t have to keep the plates spinning. Sunday morning is a perfect time to do that. Like the concept of ritual as an anchor and a springboard, this time of intentionally slowing down can be used to put a period on last week, and spring into the next week with some thoughtful focus.

Of course, the competition has rituals and sacred space, too. Remember my devout Catholic friend, who didn’t understand why we bother. His rituals center on a specific deity, God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and Jesus Christ, his only son, our lord, who was born to a virgin, died on the cross, came back to life three days later, ascended into heaven, and sits at the right of God to judge the rest of us, send us to heaven or hell. That’s what
gives his ritual meaning. The meaning in our rituals are more subtle and personal. And I reject the notion that the value I place on my experience here has to be measured by dogma imported from an outside source.

Does this mean anything goes, or that any belief here is accepted as right belief? Of course not. Your beliefs, or non-belief, still have to fall into our values at Hope of freedom, reason and tolerance. If you bring in a belief system that challenges the inherent dignity and worth of others in the community, or preaches exclusivity, or promotes hate instead of love, or ignores scientific proof, you will be challenged. Hope is a crucible where we put our beliefs to the test to further our vision. But we want to have a healthy and open exchange.

So if you’re talking about a church that wants me to feel bad about myself to create a need for its existence, then I’ll say, thank
you, I won’t bother. If failing to attach myself to certain dogma
makes me a heretic, someone with a problem, not qualified for
redemption, then I’ll say, thank you, I won’t bother. If I’m expected
to lose myself in holy oneness to become part of a church collective,
then I’ll say, thank you, I won’t bother.

But if you’re talking about church as a spiritual laboratory,
where beliefs, or doubts, can be expressed openly, and put to the
test in a respectful environment, I’ll be there. If you’re talking about
a church where you and I are welcomed whether Christian or non-
believer, Republican or Democrat, gay or straight, male or female,
whether we like beer and pretzels or brie and merlot, we’ll be
treated with loving kindness, not as someone who needs to be
saved from themselves, I’ll be there. If you’re talking about a church
that reminds me that sometimes the right thing to do is the hard
thing to do, but challenges me to build a better tomorrow for
everyone in the here and now, I’ll be there. And I am there, in the pulpit this morning. That’s why I’m a Unitarian, and I bother to come to church. How about you? If someone says to you, you’re a Unitarian, why do you bother? What will you say? These aren’t my experiences, but maybe they’re yours. Maybe you’re hear to heal the pain caused by your prior involvement in another religious tradition. Maybe you need help learning to cope with the fallout from rejecting the moral imperative of the religious tradition of people who are important in your life. Maybe you’re just hear to learn, or work with us to make the world a better place. Whatever your reason, please join in our ritual of coffee and cookies after the service, and we’ll continue the conversation. AMEN.