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Sermon  
***Fish or Cut Bait***

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant  
Hope Unitarian Church  
March 28, 2010

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First Reading: Nehemiah 7:33-8:6

When the seventh month came—the people of Israel being settled in their towns— all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen’, lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

Second Reading: Mary Oliver. “Wild Geese”

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting--  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

## Sermon

"The time has come," the Walrus said,  
"To talk of many things:  
Of shoes--and ships--and sealing-wax--  
Of cabbages--and kings--  
And why the sea is boiling hot--  
And whether pigs have wings."<sup>1</sup>

Pigs do not have wings. And I am not here this morning to speak of shoes, ships, sealing-wax, cabbages, kings or the temperature of the sea. I am here this morning to speak of this church – to speak of what it means for you and for me to say that this is a church and to confront what that requires of us.

For several months your board of trustees has been wrestling with questions about the church's fiscal and physical condition. There's nothing new about that. This church has long struggled to raise money for operating expenses and maintenance of this building. I know this from my time here the last eight years as the minister and from the nine years in the 1980's when I was a lay member.

From time to time the church has received financial windfalls that helped carry it forward. Those include the sale of the property below the road in the 1980's, a lump sum payment for the cell phone tower and a large donation about ten years ago. Consistently, however, the church has come up short on operating funds. This is evident in the fact that there is a backlog of deferred maintenance items – serious deferred maintenance items such as the roof. Those deferred maintenance items reflect the reality that notwithstanding what appears on the face of the church's financial statements, Hope has actually been operating with substantial, but unrecorded deficits that total 300 to 400 Thousand Dollars.

A number of individuals over the years have forthrightly spoken about this. From time to time temporary fixes have been found, permanent solutions have not. I believe this is evident in something I noticed when I returned to Hope as the Minister. I noticed that instead of one Vice President – which is what the church had when it had almost three times as many members as it does today, the church now has two – one is Vice President for Programs, the other Vice President for Finances. I asked someone why. I was told the position of VP of Finance was added a few years ago in response to financial shortfalls the church was confronting. I believe the change was well intentioned, but did nothing to change the underlying financial situation. I believe it was an empty gesture that recognized the need to do something about the problem without actually doing anything. I am sorry if anyone takes offense at that statement. It is not my intent to offend. It is, however, my intent to confront the reality that juggling the organizational chart may make one feel good, but it achieves nothing of substance. I say it because our circumstances and dreams for the future dictate – as the old saying goes – that it is time to fish or cut bait. We can no longer defer dealing with the substance of the financial issues the church faces. Thoughtful consideration is

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll. From "The Walrus and the Carpenter" in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, 1872.

required, but substantive action can no longer be deferred. I cannot say all that is needed to address the financial issues, but I know two issues that must be confronted. First, is a greater overall commitment to financial support of the church from those of us who are here now. Second, is a commitment to growing the church in numbers. With our present location we need to at least double – perhaps triple – our average attendance and membership to have an adequate financial base. Any number of practices and behaviors have held us back from growth – including a tendency to operate as a social club instead of a church, as a retreat from the world instead of a place to change the world. That has to change.

Now, having said that, I do not see the church's finances as being at the heart of what I want to talk about this morning. That's an important issue. If we don't solve it, the future of the church is sharply circumscribed. But I believe the financial issues are a symptom, not a cause. I would speak of something deeper – which is why I chose the reading from Nehemiah this morning.

Nehemiah may be the least known book of the bible – but I think it is one of the most important books, because without the events it describes I believe there would be no Judaism, no Christianity, no Unitarianism. It tells the story of the return of a small group of the Hebrew people – the worshippers of Yahweh who did not yet have the characteristics we recognize as Judaism today – from the Babylonian exile. The temple Solomon built had been destroyed. The walls of Jerusalem had been torn down leaving it defenseless and open not only to the elements, but to their enemies. Nehemiah describes first how the people repaired the walls and second how the people then heeded a call from the priest Ezra to a public gathering. They sang songs, read from scriptures and heard an interpretation of the readings. Read the complete description carefully and you will see the basic framework of the service we conduct today. Other meetings and events were held in the days that followed. The description of those events concludes with these words: “Because of all this we make a firm covenant and write it, and our princes, our Levites, and our priests set their seal to it.”<sup>2</sup> The followers of Yahweh did what had to be done – they repaired the walls of Jerusalem – and then they made a covenant to one another that they would be a people and in doing so, the historians tell us, became more than worshipers of a local desert God known as Yahweh – they became the Jews. Instead of fading into history as just another short-lived tribal religious group, they became the Jews and changed history.

Our situation is not that dissimilar. Our walls are intact, but our roof is in jeopardy. It has not yet collapsed, but those who have looked at it are not happy with its condition. It has always been a problem because it suffers from a basic design flaw in its construction. The time has come when something must be done beyond patching. But fixing the roof – even restructuring it, which is what needs to be done – is not sufficient. The People of Nehemiah had to fix their walls, but that did not transform them from worshipers of Yahweh into the Jews. It was their decision to “make a firm covenant”. It was their decision to commit themselves to being loyal to something greater than themselves. It was their decision to commit themselves to a course that transformed their lives and the lives of their descendents and all of western civilization –

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<sup>2</sup> Nehemiah 9:38

right down to us. What they did is proof positive of Margaret Mead's words: "Never doubt for a single moment that a handful of thoughtful and committed men and women can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever did."

Rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem did not create Judaism. Fixing our roof will not make this a church. For that to happen requires something more – a something that is often hard to grasp and I do not mean just for us. There are a lot of buildings that have the word "church" out front. The word alone doesn't make a church. A couple of weeks ago I listened as some of you that are here today had a discussion about needed repairs to this building. Someone said this community was more important than our building. I was glad to hear that said because as much as I love this building and the beauty of the hill, this building is not the church. That's hard for some people to admit and I am not just talking about here at Hope. I know of several church communities that struggle to understand if they are churches or building preservation societies. I agree with the remark about the importance of community. I believe the community of this church is more important than the building. But I would carry it a step farther. As important as our sense of community is, the community itself is not the church. It is important, but it's not the church, although it is a part of what the church creates. Again, the church is something bigger than any of us, something bigger than all of us. Nor is the church the congregation, although you won't have a church without one. And the minister is not the church anymore than the choir. None of those by themselves make a church. You may have a wonderful community – but all you may have is a social club. You may have a wonderful choir – but all you may have is a music ensemble that puts on community theater performances. You may have a minister who is a good speaker – but all you have is a lecture series. You may have a beautiful building – but all you have is a building. It is only when the people gather together and "make a firm covenant" that they will walk together for a higher purpose to transform lives and to transform the world – that one begins to get a church. The idea of a firm covenant, means commitment. It means a willingness not just – as the saying goes – to talk the talk, but to walk the walk. It means making a commitment to take seriously the words we speak each Sunday morning proclaiming our covenant:

Love is the spirit of this church  
and service its law.

This is our great covenant:  
To dwell together in peace;  
to seek the truth in love;  
and to help one another.

I am committed to the idea of church. Whether we repair this building or another, whether we stay here or relocate, whether we have a choir or just instrumental music as we once did, whether we stay the same size or double or triple in size – all of these are important questions and I will seek answers to them on the basis of what will be best for the idea of the church because that is my firm commitment. And I am firmly committed to this church because it is a special kind of church. It is a church where you are not asked to check your intelligence at the door. It is a church that stands against superstition and fear. It is a church that does not saddle children with fear and guilt, but teaches instead that religion is something for joy and comfort. It is a church that says

people are more important than creeds. It is a church that recognizes the struggle within each human heart between good and evil. It is a church open to all men and women regardless of color or race or gender, gay or straight, native born or immigrant or any of the other categories that so needlessly separate us from one another. It is a church with a free pulpit and a free pew where you will hear sermons that would cost a minister his job in any other church and where those with honest doubts are welcome. This church offers no spiritual insurance policies collectible after death; instead, we offer a beloved community to support and nourish people in this life because we cannot be certain there is a life after death, but we know for a fact that there is life before death.

All of this requires a firm commitment. All of this requires that we walk the walk. It is why Lynn and I pledge just over five thousand dollars and make other contributions throughout the year that bring our total near seven thousand dollars. This may be a free church, but the free church isn't free. It requires – as do all endeavors of great value – commitment and discipline. As Conrad Wright once said, “Even the freest of free churches needs . . . discipline if it is to last long enough to accomplish anything of value in this world.”

I accepted the call to Hope because I believed this to be a church capable of accomplishing great things. I believe that today because it is our purpose and our potential to be the place where the spirit strikes people free for joy, where the dream of freedom becomes reality and where the oppressed are lifted up. Ours is a church that challenges us to enter into covenant with each other and with the ground of all being and gives us charter to worship together in the face of life as well as death. As William Ellery Channing said so long ago, our is a church that “recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God's children, and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind.” That is a church worthy of our support, worthy of our firm commitment.

Amen.