

---

Sermon  
***Yours, Mine or None of the Above***

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant  
Hope Unitarian Church  
June 13, 2010

---

First Reading: Chuck Colson. "Whose Church Is It, Anyway?"

I was once invited to give my testimony at two Sunday services in a well-known church. The practice there was to videotape both services and then release the better tape for broadcast.

I discovered that our ideas of what makes a "good" service reveals some deeply mistaken beliefs about the church.

During the first service that Sunday morning, something happened that can be explained only as an anointing of the Spirit. I lost all track of time—yet somehow finished exactly when the cue card was raised telling me my time was up. As I closed in prayer, people were actually kneeling at their pews, tears streaming down their faces.

A holy hush fell over the congregation.

Later, when the second service was about to begin, the pastor—whom I'll call Dr. Showforth—walked up with his assistant. The assistant coached Dr. Showforth to step up beside me this time during the closing prayer, put his arm around my shoulder, and beckon people forward to the altar.

But the second service was nothing like the first. Aware that I was expected to repeat the "performance," I was self-conscious, watching the clock. As I closed in prayer, the pastor stepped up next to me and gestured dramatically toward the congregation (and the camera).

Nothing happened.

The whole thing was too obviously staged.

Later I urged the assistant to use the first tape for the broadcast. "No, no," he insisted. "The second tape was much better, with Dr. Showforth in the picture."

I pressed the point; he continued to resist. Finally he raised his hand, like a cop holding back traffic. "You don't seem to understand, Mr. Colson," he said. "This is Dr. Showforth's church."

Whose church?

How often have you heard a pastor or a board of elders or deacons refer to "my church" or "our church." Most congregational squabbles arise over precisely this point: Who should make the decisions? Who should wield authority?

Whose church is it anyway?

Jesus answered that question decisively in the book of Matthew when He said, "On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

The church is not my church or your church—it is the church of Jesus Christ.

Second Reading: Chuck Colson. Henry Thoreau.

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

### Sermon

I think it's a safe assumption that all of you have heard of the Tea Party movement. It's hard to avoid hearing about it. I've been particularly conscious of one statement I've heard repeated over and over by its supporters. I'm sure you've heard it, too. It's people saying, "We want our country back." That's "THEIR" country. Not your country, not my country, but "THEIR" country. It's a claim of ownership. It is a claim of ownership heard not just in the political context. It is often heard in churches. The reading I used this morning is a good example. Charles Colson is not someone I think of as one of my "Go To" people. His history and theology do not speak to me. But, I was immediately drawn to his words. They were a reminder that there is an element – a substantial element – of what goes on in churches – as well as politics – that transcends any particular theology or faith tradition. It doesn't matter if you're a religious liberal or a religious conservative, it doesn't matter if you're Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Unitarian or none of the above. A fundamental element of human social organizations is always this question: How and why do we come together? Is it for you? Is it for me? Or is it for something that transcends you and me? Listen again to Mr. Colson's words:

I pressed the point; he continued to resist. Finally he raised his hand, like a cop holding back traffic. "You don't seem to understand, Mr. Colson," he said. "This is Dr. Showforth's church."

It's "Dr. Showforth's Church." There's no doubt about that.

But sometimes it's not the pastor's church. Consider this example from an article by Suzanne Guthrie in "The Christian Century".<sup>1</sup> She's talking about something that happened in the church she serves.

The Parish liturgy committee decided to adopt the contemporary version of the Lord's Prayer for use during worship. From now on, at least at one of the services, we'd be "sinners" instead of "trespassers." The next Sunday a distraught man cornered me. "You've taken the Lord's Prayer away from us!"

Such words are claims of ownership. I've frequently heard it said that one should encourage a sense of ownership in the church. If what is meant is a sense of responsibility and justifiable pride in the church as an institution, then I agree with the thought. I hope all of us – you and I – claim ownership of this church in that sense. But all too often something else is meant. It's the notion that someone literally owns the church and that it exists to further their personal interests. Sometimes it's the pastor –

---

<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Guthrie. "Repentance". *Christian Century*, June 1, 2010. Page 12.

as in the case of Mr. Colson's Rev. Showforth; and sometimes it's a member of the congregation as in the example given by Suzanne Guthrie. Both display a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of what it means to be a church.

It is reasonable and appropriate for a member or visitor of a church – of this church – to have certain expectations of it. It is reasonable and appropriate for the minister of a church to have certain expectations of it. But in that larger sense which is the true mission and purpose of the church, the church is not mine and it is not yours. To be a church is to be committed to something greater than either. That is why I believe the congregation is not the church. And the same is true of the minister. Neither is the church. Both of us are here to serve that something greater which the church represents.

Now you may fairly ask, "What is the something greater which the church is supposed to represent?" A few years ago I read an article by a well known church consultant. He described his first Sunday in the pulpit of the United Methodist church he had been called to serve. He said he told the congregation that morning that he had not been called to serve them, he had been called to serve God in their midst. I suspect his Methodist congregation was shocked. But whether you agree or disagree with his theology, I believe he had the right idea.

I believe this church exists for a purpose greater than any of us. Some people may say that purpose is to serve God. Others may say it is to institutionalize freedom. Still others may speak of creating a place where we can practice what it means to be human or to transform lives or to create the beloved community. The vision statement of our church says we are here to seek truth and share love, within, among and beyond. Whatever words you choose, there's nothing about what a church is supposed to be that is small.

Ministers come and go. So do members of the congregation. Your time and my time are temporal and transient. A hundred years from now none of us will be remembered if all we are concerned with is preserving the status quo or promoting our personal ends. Well, maybe we will be remembered, but I don't think kindly. On a grand scale that exceeds any of us, it is the Martin Luther King's who will be remembered, not those who said, "Let's don't make waves."

There are benefits to being a part of this church. But the greatest benefits are in proportion to which you are willing to give to something beyond yourself. As William P. Merrill said,

Respectable men and women content with good and easy living are missing some of the most important things in life. Unless you give yourself to some great cause you haven't even begun to live.

I believe that last line of his touches directly on what a church is supposed to be – and what our relationship to it – both yours and mine – ought to be. It is not to be part of a special club, a group of people who are better than others or saved while others are lost. It is to be a place where each of us is offered the opportunity to commit ourselves to some great cause that we might truly come alive. The church, the temple, the synagogue, the mosque – call it what you want – that offers people that opportunity will

be a place that transforms lives and transforms the world around it. In different times, in different places, for different people it will take different forms. But the essence is the same. It is the transformative power of committing oneself to serving something greater than the self.

The danger, the omnipresent danger, is that one will mistake what is personal or petty or selfish for that which is transcendent. Mr. Colson's Rev. Showforth and Ms. Guthrie's parishioner are examples of that, as are those who strap explosives to their bodies and blow themselves and others up in the belief they will be rewarded with seventy-odd virgins in heaven. A church, this church, exists – on one level – to serve the needs of its members; and that it should do; but what makes it worthy of being a church is that it exists to lead all of us to serve something greater. That is why we give away our morning offering. That is why we have programs such as Feed the Homeless. That is why we have our Christmas giving tree each year. That is why we offer summer camp programs to enrich the lives of children. But those programs in and of themselves are temporal and transient and the same is true of the church itself. It is, I believe, good to remember a Buddhist saying: "The finger that points at the moon is not the moon." The institution of the church and its programs should not be made into idols. It is, I believe, what prompted Conrad Wright, one of the great historians of our movement, to say,

It is altogether too easy to mistake the denominational machinery, with its administrative policies and procedures, for the denomination itself. The Unitarian Universalist Association is not the denomination, but an instrument created to serve it. The UUA is entitled to support; it is to the larger religious community that loyalty is owed.

Dr. Wright was speaking of our national association of congregations, but what he said was also true of our individual churches. What he said was true of all churches and all programs. We must not mistake that which is temporary and transient for that which is eternal and transcendent.

It is in that spirit that I have come to believe that this church is not yours and not mine. It is in that spirit that I have come to believe that the boss of the church is its vision. It is a vision that should compel us to attempt the impossible, to commit our lives to something truly great that we might come fully and completely alive. It is a vision that must inspire us to live up to Robert Ingersoll's description of real religion:

Real religion means the doing of justice. Real religion means the giving to others every right you claim yourself. Real religion consists of duties of man to man, in feeding the hungry, in clothing the naked, in defending the innocent, and in saying what you believe to be true."

Such a goal may seem impossible. It is easy to be convinced that we should settle for something lesser. But I think not. To paraphrase Thoreau, the church, this church, calls for us to imagine castles in the air and then to spend the rest of our lives building foundations under them. That is the challenge. The work is up to us.

Amen.