

Living Our Mission¹
Rev. Myke Johnson
October 24, 2010
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Brief excerpts from our Readings for today:

XXXI From *The Book of Questions*, by Pablo Neruda

Whom can I ask what I came
to make happen in this world?

“To Be of Use” by Marge Piercy

I want to be with people who submerge in the task,
who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along...

Sermon

Once upon a time, about 800 years ago, a traveler came upon a group of workers and many huge boulders of stone. He approached one of the workers and asked, “What is it that you are doing here?” The worker answered, “What does it look like I’m doing? I am cutting this stone, and breaking my back to do it.” Rebuffed, the traveler moved off and approached another worker, “What are you doing here?” The worker replied, “I am a stonecutter and traveled here from the north to earn some money. As you can see, this is a large operation, so I hope to be able to earn enough to bring back to my family after some months.”

The traveler thanked him, and then approached a third worker, asking once again, “What are you doing here?” The third stonecutter looked back at the traveler with shining eyes, glanced up to the sky, and replied, “I am building a cathedral. You may not be able to imagine it now, but I had heard about the vision for this beautiful place of worship, and knew I had to be a part of it. I have been told it will not be finished in my lifetime, but I am honored to be a part of this great endeavor. Perhaps one day my child or grandchild will live to see it completed.”²

The other night I happened to see part of a PBS story about the great cathedrals of Europe. They were talking about the details that found their way into the plans—how tall the structures were, despite the engineering challenges of that time. Researchers determined that the height of several significant cathedrals were 144 units of common measurements of their times, the Roman foot, or the Royal foot. 144 turns out to be a significant number: in the bible, the walls of heaven are said to be 144 cubits high. The cathedrals were designed to be a kind of heaven on earth—manifestations of beauty and grandeur that countless travelers still appreciate in our day.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are not trying to build huge physical cathedrals, but we do have our own dreams of building heaven on earth. We interpret it differently—We imagine heaven on earth as kindness, acceptance, justice, love. We seek to build a world of compassion, equality, and freedom. And when we gather here together at A2U2, we are hoping to create a small circle of heaven on earth—a place where love and justice come alive in the here and now.

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2 Traditional story, retold.

It is in this context that we say: ministry is everything we all do in the service of this vision. One part of our mission for this congregation is to empower our members to share their gifts to build a world of compassion, equality, and freedom. Each of us are the stonecutters for this vision. This vision of community, and this vision of a world, can only exist if each one shares their gifts to make it happen.

Henri Nouwen tells a story of being interviewed during his days at Yale Divinity School by a young journalist named Fred who seemed very apathetic about the task. He was moved, after the interview was done, to ask the young man, “Do you like your job?” Surprisingly, the young man responded honestly—he did not like his job, but he needed to do it for the money. Nouwen saw in him a beautiful heart and mind, on the verge of surrendering his dreams—he dared him to leave his job and pursue his desire to write a novel. The young man sarcastically quipped, “Sounds good to me.” But Nouwen backed up his challenge—“Come to our Divinity School as a scholar in residence—we’ll find the money somehow.” Though initially suspicious, the young man did take up the offer. The story wouldn’t work in Hollywood—he never finished a novel—but eventually he found a way to use his creativity for something meaningful and true—he found his way to an authentic life.³

In our ministry, in our vision, we are inviting each person to live from the heart of their gifts and dreams. We are looking into each others deep souls, and seeing the treasure that each person holds. That may seem hopelessly romantic in a time of high unemployment and economic hardship. But that is what we aspire to, in our deepest visions.

There is a personal aspect to this vision—to recognize and affirm within each individual the spark that enables them to develop and share their gifts with the world. But there is also a community side to this vision—some sparks can only be ignited in collaboration. A sculptor might be able, individually, to create beautiful art by cutting stone. But one stonecutter could never build a cathedral alone—with many others, with architects and engineers and priests and funders and other stonecutters, together they achieve the impossible.

I am reminded of another marvel of vision and collaboration which has captivated the world in the last few weeks. On October 13th, thirty-three miners were rescued in Chile after being buried a half-mile under the ground. They had been trapped deep in the earth for sixty-nine days. The whole country pulled together to bring them out from what might have been their graves, back to life and back to their families. The president of Chile welcomed them. The whole world was cheering as they emerged one by one from the rescue capsule.

We have such potential as human beings. Each one of us, each adult, each child, has so much beauty, so much wisdom, so much talent. And when we bring our abilities together in a common purpose, we sometimes can achieve miracles. That is what we remember when we gather in spiritual community.

It is not always easy to remember the spark of our purpose in this world. I have been feeling discouraged these past weeks. Perhaps you have been, too. When I look at what is reported by the news media in our country, I feel sad and scared. It seems like people in the United States have lost a common vision, have forgotten a spirit of working together for the benefit of all. So many people are struggling to find work. So many people are angry, and full of hatred and blame.

³ Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, pp. 12-17.

It is as if a whole bunch of stonecutters have thrown down their tools, and taken to throwing stones at each other, and at the larger work. Will it end in the ruins of any common well-being?

I ask myself, how can we keep hope alive, how we can continue our audacious attempt to build heaven on earth? As we face an election here in Maine, the values of compassion and equality for all people are at risk. Will the basic sense of caring for the vulnerable be cast aside, with every person left to fend for themselves—more guns, less welfare? What do we do if the political powers that emerge do not share our most basic values?

Dorothy Day, a great champion of the poor, and of the power of love, used to say "Don't worry about being effective. Just concentrate on being faithful to the truth."

Bill Cane wrote in *Circles of Hope*⁴:

“There are long periods in history when all we can do is nourish a tiny spark. And that spark may look hopeless in comparison to the cold and the dark all around us. But nourishing that spark, against all odds, keeps our spirit alive and gives our lives meaning. When the time comes, the igniting of many sparks gives history a meaning....We have been taught that the past and present create the future - that trends and statistical projections tell us where the world is going - but that simply is not true. The future is created by people who go against trends and projections and begin to form creative circles of life and spirit - by people who begin to live out a new story before that story becomes history.”

When I look back at the strong spirits of people who nurtured the values of compassion and equality and freedom, I see that they kept up with the work, whether the political climate was supportive or menacing. They kept speaking and marching, reaching out to others, feeding the hungry, living their vision in whatever way they could. They kept on with it, through dark and light, through thick and thin. They found hope in the very beauty of the vision that guided them.

This weekend, members and friends of our church gathered together to reflect on how we are living the mission of our church—We asked how we are doing now, and what we might do next on our journey. We had a lot of fun together, and generated a lot of ideas—now the Committee on Ministry and the Board will sort out what was generated, and shape some next steps.

Not everyone was able to participate in this day for visioning—so I want to give you a chance today to share what is on your hearts and minds. There were certain questions that challenged us in our dreaming—I will share three of those questions, so you have a glimpse into what sparked our creativity, and then I will invite you to share your own ideas and questions.

Question #1: Imagine that in 25 years A2U2 is featured on the front page of the Maine Sunday Telegram—what might the story be about?

Question #2: External events might alter the way we do church—what could be the impacts and how might we deal with such a thing as gasoline jumping to \$20 per gallon?

Question #3: Society has changed already, and people have much less time to volunteer—yet churches are very dependent on volunteers—what might we do differently?

4 New York: Orbis Books, 1992.

Here is a question for all of you: What ideas and suggestions do you have that might help our church to grow and thrive in the next five years?

Congregational Conversation

Ending:

Henri Nouwen said: “We cannot change the world by a new plan, project, or idea. We cannot even change other people by our convictions, stories, advice, and proposals, but we can offer space where people are encouraged to disarm themselves, lay aside their occupations and preoccupations and listen with attention and care to the voices speaking in their own center.”⁵

This is a time for listening—to the still small voice within that nurtures our hopes and dreams. To the voices of those around us, who take risks to share what they will.

Closing Words:

Howard Thurman said, “Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

5 H.J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, 1975, p. 76.