

Water up through the Rock

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, March 4, 2018

First Unitarian Universalist Church

Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

A reading from Werner Herzog

The Fountain by Denise Levertov

SERMON

So they busted open the wall,
Julie and Jeff, members here -
and the dust and particles
of a hundred years of lathe and plaster
flew into the air –
and out came this –

The Rochester Daily Bulletin – Monday, June 26, 1916
Grace Church Dedicated in Appropriate Manner –

Perhaps not the most riveting headline in comparison to today's papers,
but then again,
I probably wouldn't argue today's headlines are *better* in most ways.

This was the day after the dedication of our congregation's 3rd building, soon
known as First Universalist Church, after the old Universalist chapel built in 1866
and Grace Church built in the 1877.

The article says –

*The new home of the Universalists of Rochester was planned with a view of
respecting beauty of the old Grace Church...every brick in its walls was loved by
those who had, Sunday in and Sunday out, worshipped within its portals.*

It continues...

*This church is builded of living stones as a testimony of faith –
Ours is a Universalist church pledged to the faith that God's nature is love –
that all souls will find their final destiny in harmony with heaven –
it is a liberal church holding that religion and revelation
must be interpreted and measured in every [person]
and in every age by the light of nature, truth, and reason.*

The article is like the whole front page –
other than June specials for straw hats,
or the ad for three packages of malted milk powder for 25 cents –

It lists all of the previous ministers,
it describes the dedication service,
the general contentment of the city of Rochester that a church was built,
orderly and beautifully in downtown -

it includes a history of the church,
and the names of those serving on the board,
and even on the building committee –
so, *watch out for your name being in publications a hundred years from now,*
George Huston.

This article pulled out all the stops – literally,
by naming every stop, pedal movement, and accessory of the pipe organ –
which was deemed a *great feature*.

And the sermon of dedication by the leader of the Universalist church of the day,
used the words from Genesis in the Hebrew Bible – *this is none other than the*
house of God, and the gate to heaven – saying that Religion stirs the heart, and
puts sunshine in the mind. *Here comes the sun...*

Right next to an advertisement for Dodge Lumber and Fuel to *come and fill your*
bin for the cold rainy days coming...

Right in the walls of Jeff and Julie's home,
little did they know
there was the story of their people –
the story of their church –
like a scroll packed away
in lathe and plaster.

The cost of that new building was \$25,000.

And a few years later, the minister told the congregation that if they didn't increase
their pledges, the *church would go down like a sinking ship*.

And I thought – that's a good reason to choose the theme of *Mortality* for the
month of March and our pledge drive. It may have also been mistake of a minister
in the first year of a new church.

We're not going to go down like a sinking ship, but we are asking for an increase
of twice the cost of that entire building in 1916;
an increase of \$50,000 to bring our annual budget to close to \$500,000.

And so many of you know all about pledging – you have heard lay leaders and ministers speak on it for years – you know that even if you are uncertain of your income, that pledges are the only way we can plan a budget for the coming year, so pledging \$1 for the year is still helpful to our planning, and if you give more, great. Without pledges, we have no church – at least no building or programs or, perhaps, most importantly, no heat.

This church is funded, solely, by all of us – there's no money from out there somewhere, or from some national church. The increase is not some extravagant growth plan, but current needs to do the work we are called to do.

But really it's a pledge of the heart.

Even if it is \$0, I want to invite you to fill out a pledge form, if for no other reason than to say

*I'm pledging my heart to this church –
I'm pledging my heart,
and whatever I can offer to support it in a thousand different ways,
financial and otherwise –
because I want this church to thrive, flourish – because I believe in its values -
I want it to be healthy and strong enough to nourish those already here
and be able to welcome in somebody else who needs this place
as much as I did when I came through its portals.*

We could talk about all the costs, of course - cost of living increases for staff, or a few more hours for some positions – increases for committees and insurance and maintenance – but we all wouldn't come here, and people wouldn't pledge, if it were just about the dollars and cents.

It's about what we do with that.

It's about the cost

of supporting whatever resources, human and otherwise, we need to creating a welcoming, hospitable environment, or communicating our mission and vision to connect members to meaningful service and programming or sharing with someone who has never heard of us before that our church sides with love, and works for justice and practices pluralism and inclusion.

Sure – it all costs money –
the paper towels and cleaning supplies,
the plowing of snow and mowing of grass,
the electricity, the heat,

Perhaps more importantly,
it costs a little money
for the crayons and paper,
the curriculum that sparks the mind of the child,
the books and poetry that invite us into deeper reflection
with other people, face to face, which is a rarity these days -
about who we are in the world and how our soul might heal.

It costs money
to keep the doors open
so that hearts might be open
and together, we find meaning.

Because, deep down,
we know that the cost is too great,
if we don't exist, or if we can't fulfill, fully, our mission in the world.

The cost is too great –
if our doors are only partially funded, partially open,
if our foundation is only partially solid -
and there is not enough water to solace the dryness of our hearts.

Because we know -
Someone, somewhere, right now,
is needing a blessing on their identity –
a reminder that who they are,
and who they love,
and how they break with convention
and push boundaries
is beautiful and good
and how the world treats them is called desecration
because we believe,
and know them to be
holy – beloved.

Someone, somewhere, right now,
someone is in need
of hearing from a place as old school and conventional
as a church with an organ and some guy in a robe
where they read poetry and sing songs and meet in person
at an ungodly hour on a weekend morning –
someone is in need
of hearing, knowing, from that place
that their questions and their doubts
are just as holy as their beliefs and their dreams.

An unexpected place – church –
to hear good news and affirmation and hope.

Someone, somewhere, right now,
is looking for some place,
some people,
some possibility
of what this world might look like,
could look like,
if we loved deep enough
and welcomed authentically enough
and worked hard enough
to be the change we want in the world –

someone is waiting, just outside the doors,
wondering if someone has kept the flame burning –
the one that says love is stronger than hatred,
that hope is more lasting than despair,
that their life matters,
that peace is possible,
and that we are, to each other, family
and we need to start acting like it –

someone is waiting,
just on the other side of the door,
thirsty from wandering in the desert
for how many ever hours, days, and years,
they have felt isolated and alone –

wondering
hoping,
praying,
that deep within the hardened heart of this world,
the heart of rock that greets them each day
in their newsfeed and in the public square –
they just wonder
is there water for my dry heart?

Or have the springs dried up?

A writer from southern Indiana writes,

*“My home in Southern Indiana
is a rolling green land abundant in limestone
and the mysterious rocks called geodes.
Geodes are so copious in this part of the state
that we pile them in our gardens and think of them as commonplace.*

*I am fascinated with these unassuming brown and grey stones
that contain inside them a sparkling center of quartz crystals.*

*They remind me to look deeper,
because often within what may appear quite ordinary
is a core of beauty and mystery.*

*Often, visitors that I show these to while going on muddy walks
will confess that if I hadn't pointed out these unadorned stones
their presence would have been missed entirely.*

*But once familiar with the signature lumpy look of geodes
these friends begin to see the stones everywhere.
This is how paying attention works.
At first I have to look quite deliberately
to find the sparkling center of things,
but eventually I begin to notice the patterns
and come to expect the unexpected.*

This is a pretty ordinary looking place.
We are pretty ordinary looking people – no offense.
And Sunday is a pretty ordinary seeming day.

And there are other ordinary things, too,
like breath – and song –
and words like
hope – and love –
that take on a different meaning.

There is something about this place,
for some,
that saves their lives –
by reminding them they are mortal,
and reminding them there is beauty,
and that ours is to see the sacred in the ordinary –
the miraculous in the common, everyday.

That's how steel doors become heaven's gate,
and four walls, a floor, and ceiling beams
become a Sanctuary for the soul
and within those walls
we sing and meditate and pray and laugh and cry
and we pause and breath and sing together
until the experience of being there
becomes like a cloak,
and we are surrounded by something
hard to describe –
where somehow, our soul, feels held.

For so many entering our doors,
or finding sustenance somewhere –
it feels like
its been a long, cold, lonely winter
maybe on just a hard day, or maybe for months or years or a lifetime.

People come in,
carrying the burdens of the world, of their lives,
looking for something sturdy enough to hold them up –
where they can set it down, for a few moments, and breathe.

We all need those moments.
We all need those places, those people,
that remind our soul,
when it has been the long, cold, lonely, winter –
here comes the sun –
there is a little light within you; let it shine –

When we hold the doors open for each other
and save a seat
and pledge our hearts as much and more than our dollars,
then we keep getting better all the time.

We begin to see the beautiful in our everyday lives,
we begin to experience and feel and know sunshine in the soul –
and we come together –
as in the postlude organ rendition of the Beatle's song,
that I have been probably a little too nerd-like excited about –
The Beatles – on the organ – awesome...

Come together – right now. Right here.
That's what religion is about – come the root word *religare*,
the same root as *ligament* – which means to bind together –
religion is about community – about being together, face to face, heart to heart.

In the very walls of our house,
filled with the dust and the dreams
of over 150 years
of children becoming adults,
and boards taking minutes
and annual meetings
and children learning what it means to be human and of service to the world,
and youth and adults learning the same things –

150 years
of songs and hopes and tears
of blessing our newborn babes
and blessing the love between two people,
regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation,
and blessing and remembering with sacred sadness,
those lives who have left us in body, but not in spirit –

150 years
is living right in these walls –
sitting right next to you in these same chairs –
trying to live lives of meaning, of service, of joy.

The story of who we are lives in the brick –
and more importantly,
it lives in our hearts and in our gathering as we light our flame each Sunday –
and it is ours to keep putting oil in the lamp
to keep the dream alive.

*That fountain is there
among its scalloped green and gray stones,
it is still there and always there
with its quiet song
and strange power
to spring in us,
up and out
through the rock.*

It is up to us to keep repainting the house every year,
to renew our relationships to our house, and to each other,
to remind one another that there is, here,
solace for the dryness of our hearts –
there is a river in the soul,
and water in the rock
there is a light, shining –

You just have to bust a hole in the wall,
and you'll find among what seemed to be only dust of years gone by –
a story of hopes and dreams and visions,
that you are now living in –
and that you must now open to every soul
who is just waiting outside the doors –

because it costs just too much to keep it to ourselves.