

"The Free Church"©
Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society, Woodbury, CT
The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, Minister
February 28, 2010

ORDER OF SERVICE
February 28, 2010

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote . . . a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support. (UUA Principles & Purposes)

PRELUDE¹

(In the spirit of peace, we invite you into silence and quiet reflection while we listen to the prelude.)

CALL TO GATHER

Come, Come Whoever You Are, #188

"Come, come, whoever you are;
Man, woman, parent, child
Whatever your religious journey,
Whatever your skin color,
Whatever your abilities,
Whomever you love-
You are welcome here this morning.
You are welcome at our table.
You are welcome in this religious home."

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good Morning! Welcome to the Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society, affectionately known as MUUS. I am The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, and it is my great pleasure and privilege to serve this wonderful congregation. We welcome all of you.

- If you are a newcomer, and haven't signed our guest book in the entryway, please do so before you leave so that we may send you a newsletter listing our activities. Newcomers may look for people with gold nametags. These are members of the Membership Committee, and they will be happy to answer any questions you may have. If you have been attending our services for a while

and would like to join the society please see me or a member of the Membership Committee.

- Our time together continues with coffee, tea, and conversation after the service, and we invite you to join us.
- To parents – children are always welcome to stay in the service, or join the other children in our religious education classes.
- Later in the service newcomers will have an opportunity to introduce themselves and we hope that you will do so. It is optional, but we would like to give you a proper welcome.
- Since our Sunday services offer a variety of worship experiences, including ordained clergy as well as brilliant lay speakers, we encourage you to come back often.
- So that we may maintain our spiritual space, please place your cell phone in a meditative state of being.
- The flowers this morning are given in honor of _____. Please consider making an offering of flowers for this sanctuary for various Sundays throughout the year, in honor of a special event or in memory of a loved one. You can sign up at the back table.
- Our fellowship time after the service is an important time for all of us, and food and drink always make that time ever so much more nourishing to the soul. Please sign up to bring and serve simple but wholesome snacks on the sign up sheet at the back table.
- Ask people to raise their hands if they helped provide a Sunday Service in the past two months; attended a church meeting; helped provide a children's class; worked on the building. Have I forgotten anything? Offer thanks & applause.
- Give status report for my condition.
- Important parts of our community life are the invitations we give to one another for activities beyond our morning's service. Please note the announcements in your order of service. I have these additional announcements:
- If there are any other MUUS related announcements, we ask that you line up to my left to share them now and please use the microphone."

"Here end this morning's announcements."

And, now: I invite everyone to relax your body, come into this natural space in beauty & light. Take the next few moments to focus on your breathing. Breathe deeply. Relax. We welcome you into this place made more sacred by your presence.

SOUNDING OF BELL

CHALICE LIGHTING & OPENING WORDS

No. 498 (Howard Thurman)

In the quietness of this place, surrounded by the all-pervading presence of the Holy, my heart whispers:

Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve, that in good times or in tempests, I may not forget that to which my life is committed.

Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve.

*** HYMN # 145** *"As Tranquil Streams"*

NEW MEMBER WELCOME & COVENANT

(see insert)

New Members: Dawn A. & Lisa Q.

MATTITUCK UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY

WELCOME OF NEW MEMBERS

Minister: This morning we are pleased to welcome those who have expressed their desire to take the next step in deepening their relationship with Mattituck Unitarian Universalist Society, that of joining the Society as a member. Since 1980, people have been called forth to sign this membership book over and over again. By that act, they have formed and continue to form a community of religious tolerance, reason, and love.

President, Board of Trustees:

This public act is a tangible demonstration of our commitment to one another. As you sign the Membership Book, we pledge our support to you on your personal spiritual path and we look to you to further strengthen this community with your active contribution of your time, treasure and talents to the life of this congregation. If you are ready to join this congregation, please step forward to sign the Membership Book.

Signing the Membership Book

President, Board of Trustees:

Let us pledge ourselves once again, to one another by re-committing ourselves to our Mission Statement.

***ALL: MISSION STATEMENT**

We, the members of Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society, covenant to:

- celebrate diversity as a strength,
- nurture one another's spiritual growth,
- inspire ethical action,
- and work for positive change in this world.

Guided by our collective inspiration, we invite each other to participate fully in congregational life and to grow and learn together in faith and love.

Gifts in Remembrance of this Joyful Occasion

Minister & President of Board of Trustees: Welcome to Unitarian Universalism and to Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society.

**please rise in body or spirit*

OFFERTORY No. 429

"As we take our collection, we invite first time visitors to let the basket pass them by, you are our guests today."

For this place of peace, and silence that heals our spirits, we give thanks.
For this place of memory and history that warms our souls, we rejoice.
For this place of prophecy and its vision that changes our hearts,
we offer our life's treasure so that others, too, may know these gifts.

SHARING JOYS AND SORROWS**

"If you are visiting for the first time, or have come back after a long time, or if you are still getting to know us, we would love it if you would introduce yourself to us. It is purely optional, but we'd like to give you a proper welcome. Please raise your hand so we can bring you a microphone."

PAUSE

Let the congregation say, "Welcome!"

As we begin the sharing of our joys and sorrows, please remember to tell us your name before sharing.

And, now, if you woke this morning with a sorrow so heavy that you need the help of this community to carry it; or if, in the spirit of thankfulness, you woke with gratitude in your heart that simply must be shared, now is the time for you to speak.

"Please wait for the microphone so that all will be able to hear."

Sorrows & Joys

For the joys and sorrows that have been spoken, and the myriad of experiences, thoughts, joys, and concerns which remain in the silent sanctuaries of our hearts. All of these joys and concerns weave us together in the fabric of community.

Amen.

SINGING THE CHILDREN ON THEIR WAY

*As you go may joy surround you, as you go, go in peace;
know our love is with you always, as you go, as you go.*

PRAYER AND MEDITATION

In Words

❖ #493 by Hildegard of Bingen

Fire of the Spirit

Life of the lives of creatures
Spiral of sanctity
Bond of all natures
Glow of charity
Lights of clarity
Taste of sweetness to the fallen
Be with us and hear us

INSERT personal joys/concerns

Composer of all things
Joy in the glory
Strong honor
Be with us and hear us.
Amen and Blessed Be

In Silence

In Song—Spirit of Life, #123

READING

Monica B.

Stewardship Testimonial 2010

After years of working with children, hopefully you will indulge me that my stewardship testimonial is a folk tale. I must warn you that it is a tale without an ending so I apologize if you don't like cliff-hangers. The good news is that every single one you will get a chance to play a role in the next part of the tale.

A Little Church in MUUSville

Once upon a time, a long time ago in the early 1980's, there was a lovely little New England town with beautiful old houses, white steepled churches, and rolling fields. It was a special place but like all places, it wasn't perfect. MUUSville was very conservative. There were lots of churches and civic groups for conservative-minded people but almost none for the more liberal folks. In fact, some people thought that liberal minded people didn't exist in MUUSville and the surrounding towns. Then a few of the liberal minded people got together and started talking about starting a Unitarian Universalist church in MUUSville. At first it was a very few people meeting in each other's home but gradually the group got larger and more organized. Soon the group didn't fit in a house anymore and they started meeting at the local high school and the

firehouse. Eventually, they got a part-time minister and a permanent meeting location and people could no longer deny that there were liberal minded people in MUUSville.

But like all groups, things didn't go perfectly for new UU's. As the group got bigger, there started to be some disagreements among the members. The disagreements got so big that in the early 1990's the group split in two. But, the group affiliated with the UUA weathered the storm and slowly started to grow again. They were so happy when they finally could afford a full-time minister. But they were so excited to spread liberal ideas and thinking in conservative MUUSville, that they started spending more and more money. Soon the little church was only staying in the black by spending money people had left to the church. Finally, in the early 2000's all that extra money was gone and it looked as if the little UU church in MUUSville was done for.

But those liberal minded people wouldn't let it go. They had to give up a lot – they had to go back to a half-time minister, give up some of their meeting space, re-double their fund raising efforts, and increase their pledges. They did it. They saved their liberal church and for several years they operated a budget in the black and started to build up steam again. They were providing liberal religious education to the children; participating in local interfaith projects like the Food Bank and Americares; and becoming a stronger voice in MUUSville.

Then they came to another crossroads. The little UU church had a part-time minister who was very good fit for them. She helped them get better organized. She helped them gain a better understanding of who they were and who they wanted to be. The MUUSville church had the opportunity to increase her hours to almost full-time but it would really stretch them financially. They wouldn't go back to overspending like they had in the 1990's but they seemed better positioned than ever to grow and make a large liberal voice in MUUSville. It would require sacrifice. Committees would need to continue with bare bones budgets and members would be asked to increase their pledges fairly significantly in a tough economic time. Would they do it? Could they do it?.....

Stay tuned until after the 2010 Canvass for the next installment of "The Little Church in MUUSville".

SERMON "The Free Church"¹

Rev. Jeanne Lloyd

When stepping into a pulpit, I try to do no harm. Such is my responsibility as a minister. And, so, I try to remind myself that how we use religious language today is not how it has always been used, nor intended to be used at the beginning. As such I hold a certain responsibility to tenderly explore the meanings and context of words that have been used like weapons to hurt and oppress people. Usually, it is not the language that is destructive, but the actions that come with the language that is destructive.

And so, I offer you an explanation on the use of the word, "Church," in this sermon. In ancient times when the word "church" was first used, it did not mean a building, nor did it mean a denomination. It certainly did not mean the Catholic Church. What it meant was the "gathering" or "fellowship" of a people into a religious community. In the times of Jesus, the man who was born Jewish, who lived a Jewish life, who taught and read in a synagogue, and who was called "Rabbi,"² this word "church" was used to refer to a Jewish temple³ or a "synagogue"⁴ as a gathering place.

In thinking about the power of words, I am reminded of an incident at the [Unitarian] Universalist Church of West Hartford, where the chancel holds a 14 foot stain-glass window of Jesus as he gives the Sermon on the Mount. One day, a man with a Catholic upbringing came to an orientation class on Unitarian Universalism given by the minister. The man said, "from the first day I walked in the door, I have felt that at last, I have discovered my spiritual home. I feel at home here." And, then he sighed with a lengthy pause, and said sadly, "But my wife was raised Jewish. However will I get her to walk in the door when she sees that big stain glass window of Christ?" This Unitarian Universalist minister answered directly and gently, "You do know that Jesus was Jewish?" And, in that moment, you could see on the man's face liberation from a language that had, for centuries, been used as a vehicle of oppression. You could see in his face that this was the start of a new beginning, as he began to understand religion from a different and reason-based perspective.

I tell you this because though I try not to use the word "church" in this congregation, I know that my use of it today may be uncomfortable for some people, seated here. But, today, I cannot easily avoid its use. The concept we are exploring today is named "the free church" and to change the name in this case would be to undermine the context of its history. What we can do, however, is acknowledge that the word "church" was not originally intended to mean a word describing the abuse of power over people.

¹ The sermon draws historical references from a book by Alice Blair Wesley, *"The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant."*

² http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Is_Jesus_Jewish_or_Christian, February 27, 2010

³ <http://www.brainyquote.com/words/ch/church143947.html>, February 27, 2010

⁴ Achtemeier, Paul J., Editor. *Bible Dictionary*, Revised Edition. (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1996) 183.

Originally, it meant a gathering or fellowship of people coming together to form a religious community. Not dissimilar from who we were when Mattatuck Unitarian Fellowship was formed, and not dissimilar from what Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society is today . . . a gathering or fellowship of people coming together to form community.

PAUSE

So now, let's move on to talk about two other words. I ask you to focus on the words "covenant" and "free" as I read to you these portions of the our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes:

"We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote [among other things] a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; . . . the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large . . ." Our principles continue on to say, "as free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support."

Covenant

Free congregations

Promise

Mutual Trust

Support

What do all these words have to do with one another?

How do they relate?

What does it matter?

History

Our Unitarian Universalist congregations are grounded in the free church tradition that goes back to the reformation, and which formed the democratic foundation of this country.

Though the American Unitarian Association was only formed in 1825 our covenantal theology, was explicitly formed 200 years earlier, when people in England and elsewhere came to heretical conclusions about the governance structure that the Reformation and before that, Catholicism, had imposed upon churches.

The governance structure we follow today is called "congregational polity". It is a form of polity that is grounded in democratic principles, assuring that each member of the congregation has a vote in democratically determining the shape and vision of the congregation. Thus, this fellowship of people is a membership owned organization, religiously and politically, according to our theological history and, even, according to the IRS.

Our polity was profoundly shaped by the reformation which demanded that the Catholic Church shift its focus from who "owned" the church, that is from the priest, to the laity. It is a challenge that continues today. When change did not come swiftly enough, the reformation inspired a new split from the Protestant (or protesting) churches, and our ancestors became part of a movement called the "*radical* reformation." Our theological ancestors were a people who protested the protestant tradition of continuing to interpret FOR the people the scriptures. For once the Gutenberg press placed in the people's hands a Bible that they could reason about and interpret for themselves, a church's control over a person's theology became tenuous at best.

Those of the radical reformation include such faiths as Unitarians, American Baptists, the Amish, Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren, Congregationalists, and several others. All hold in common this two-pronged belief: that each person not only has direct access to that which they call Holy, they have the capacity to reason for themselves their relationship with the Holy. Upon this philosophical and democratic belief rests the concept of the free church.

Today

Though we, as Unitarian Universalists, may not cling to a specific dogma, we still believe that (a) each person is capable of reasoning and interpreting for themselves, the meaning of religious texts, and (b) that therefore no one person or institution controls another's religious beliefs. Whatever authority we give to a leader to minister to us, is given only by the people who own the congregation, not by the denomination. This is why ministers in our faith tradition are ordained and called by the congregation, not placed here by the national office. It is why lay leaders are elected and entrusted to make decisions on behalf of the congregation. And, why really major decisions that will shape the future of the congregation are made democratically in congregational meetings. This is what we call congregational polity, and if ever there were a defining principle of Unitarian Universalism, this is it.

Upon this principle of "The Free Church," rests all that we do as individuals in the name of seeking our personal truths through our spiritual journeys and governing ourselves by

the use of democratic principles where each person has one vote, and can vote their own conscious, when making decisions about the future of this congregation.

History

The dream of a Free Church is what certain people in England were striving for in the 1600s, but did not yet have. A small group of lay people, mostly lawyers, came up with a novel solution. They decided to incorporate as a business corporation, called the Massachusetts Bay Company, for which they had to get a charter from the King. And, if they could get that charter, they would be allowed to be a self-governing and self-selecting organization, by law. And, so, our Euro-American history of America began. They got their charter, and a royal grant of land in North America. And, they did what they had intended to do all along which was to set up a colony, or, as Alice Blair Wesley says, "they set up an independent government only nominally under the King's jurisdiction, and far enough away from London that English laypeople who wanted to could settle in the New England colony and here establish a whole community of free churches without bishops. As these laypeople put it, they had a charter not from the King but from the Holy Spirit of Love to gather themselves into corporate bodies of faith. These 20,000 laypeople pulled off a very clever – and very expensive legal scheme . . . ⁵

Now, we may look upon the Puritans as being hyper rigid, over-worked, and too judgmental. We may look upon them as insensitive to the rights of Native Americans. These perceptions are grounded in truth and fact. But, the work of a whole people in all their permutations is difficult to assess and label in dualistic terms, good vs bad, saintly vs evil, etc. Few can deny that at least part of their motivation for leaving their lives behind in Europe, was to create a new society where they could practice religious freedom without the fear of imprisonment or death. No matter what flaws existed in their idealism, and behaviors that followed, they, also fled the oppression of institutions that sought and demanded the right to control the people's capacity to reason for themselves their relationship with that which they deemed Holy . . . ⁶

Today

Four hundred years later, another group of like minded people, seeking religious freedom and support, decided to establish for themselves a fellowship in the town of Woodbury, CT, called Mattatuck Unitarian Fellowship. A handful of people, who by their own conscious and desire for religious freedom would form this congregation, claiming their own minister, gathering together each Sunday, just as we do today, to listen to the word of reason, tolerance and justice as interpreted by both clergy and

⁵ Alice Blair Wesley.

⁶ Alice Blair Wesley.

laity. Their's was the free pulpit, the free pew, and, though they may not have named it as such, it was a fellowship built on the religious and democratic cornerstone of "the free church."

So far, I have stressed the principles of freedom and democratic processes that undergird the principle of the free church. But, there is one thing missing from my description, and that is the principle that freedom also requires thoughtful choices. It is by our choices in life that we shape our lives and communities. It is what we actively seek and strive for that gives our lives direction. And it is by our efforts to choose wisely and in ways that are not destructive to one another that our members enter into covenant with one another to create safe communities for spiritual exploration.

As it was on the Mayflower, when its leadership understood that there was no longer a King to tell them how to behave with one another, that they therefore needed to mutually craft the Mayflower Compact for this purpose. So too, when our Unitarian Universalist principles start with the words, "We covenant to . . ." it means we enter into our UU communities freely and by choice, promising to do what we can, to create safe space for religious toleration and action. The concept of the covenant into which people enter freely and by choice, is the principle, the glue, that holds an Association of over 1000 free congregations together, even when we disagree with one another. It keeps us at the table, even when it would be tempting to leave, because we know that it is by the comparing and contrasting of different perspectives that we each learn, grow, and craft together safe communities.

The founders of Unitarian Universalism 400 years ago and the founders of this congregation 30 years ago, believed the words scrawled on his prison wall by the 16th century Unitarian, Francis David. "We need not think alike, to love alike." "We need not think alike, to love alike." It is a revolutionary and inclusive statement that says that it is a worthy goal, and use of our lives, to enter into a covenant to love one another even though we may each have different beliefs. Even though, at times, our ability to understand another's point of view may be mind-bending and supremely frustrating. It is the grounding by which we can move through conflict, learn from one another, agree to disagree, reach compromise, and always ultimately know that we need not think alike, to love alike.

It is the way that we are with one another, that is our theology. Not the dogma. And, within this context, no member of a free church may be "cast out" merely for dissent on some theological proposition. Rather, only when there is a persistent and ongoing behavior that is deeply destructive to the congregation or abusive of another person, as well as an ongoing refusal to engage or reason with others in such a way so as to bring healing to the situation, only then do we question whether there is indeed a *mutual*

commitment to the covenant to work together to provide safe space for spiritual exploration.

Thus, to join a free church is to aspire to live with all the integrity we can together muster, for all the years of our lives. No simple matter this. And, when we make mistakes, as we, as human beings, inevitably must do, we are called simply to try again. To try again, to live by our highest aspirations. It is the repeated stretching of ourselves to live by our ideals, that allows each of us to grow toward those ideals.

Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society celebrates its 30th year of living and loving together, this year. It celebrates a history of support to one another and of presence in the community for 10 and then 20, and now 30 years. We, who understand that, come here precisely because we choose to be in relationship with each other; we who are here, freely and by choice; we have the awesome and power-filled responsibility to live this congregation by our hands, and hearts, and souls, into the shining model of liberal religion that others are desperately seeking.

May it be so.

PERSONAL REFLECTION (congregation)

(In these moments we share a common responsibility to offer safe space for those reflecting on today's topic. We therefore encourage speakers to make "I" statements--speaking only for oneself--and to avoid language that is argumentative or critical of other viewpoints.)

I invite you to reflect on this question, "Of all the words you have heard today, what most resonates with you?"

*** HYMN # 358** *"Rank by Rank Again We Stand"*

CLOSING WORDS No. 706 Kathleen McTigue

May the light around us guide our footsteps, and hold us fast to the best and most righteous that we seek.

May the darkness around us nurture our dreams, and give us rest so that we may give ourselves to the work of our world.

Let us seek to remember the wholeness of our lives, the weaving of light and shadow in this great and astonishing dance in which we move.

EXTINGUISHING OF THE CHALICE

"Please join hands for the extinguishing of the chalice."

"We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again. Let the congregation say AMEN."

Minister: The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, M.Div., M.A.
Director of Religious Education: Denise Pedane
Choir Director and Pianist: Charlie Batchelder