

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

What's in a Name

Rev. Sara Goodman

Sunday October 6, 2019

**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
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Readings:

Our first reading is the lyrics from the song **Water from Another Time** by John McCutcheon

New mown hay on a July morn
Grandkids running through the knee-high corn
Sunburned nose and a scabbed-up knee
From the rope at the white oak tree
Just another summer's day on Grandpa's farm
With Grandma's bucket hanging off my arm
You know, the old pump's rusty but it works fine
Primed with water from another time

Chorus:

It don't take much, but you gotta have some
The old ways help the new ways come
Just leave a little extra for the next in line
They're gonna need a little water from another time

Tattered quilt on the goose down bed
"Every stitch tells a story", my Grandma said
Her mama's nightgown, her Grandpa's pants
And the dress she wore to her high school dance
Now wrapped at night in those patchwork scenes
I waltz with Grandma in my dreams
My arms, my heart, my life entwined
With water from another time

Newborn cry in the morning air
The past and the future are wedded there
In this wellspring of my sons and daughters
The bone and blood of living water
And, though Grandpa's hands have gone to dust,
Like Grandma's pump; reduced to rust,
Their stories quench my soul and mind, Like water from another time

It don't take much, but you gotta have some
The old ways help the new ways come
Just leave a little extra for the next in line
They're gonna need a little water from another time
The second reading is **The Church Is A Body**, By Victoria Weinstein

The church is a body.
May this body breathe and be together in the spirit of hope
May it feel held by comfort.
Those who seek consolation, may they find it in the solace of this moment.

The church is a body.
It is as strong as all the people who have ever gathered within its walls.
It is the power of all they dreamed and all that they have done.

The church is a body.
It is as vulnerable as the most newborn and untried of its members.
It is ancient, and it is ever new.

The church is a story.
It is the story of lives that are interwoven,
brought together in this place and this time
for the simple purpose of caring for one another,
and helping one another along the arduous path from birth to death.

The church is a vision.
It is a vision of unity amid diversity,
It is a vision of reverence for all of creation,
It is a vision that beckons us beyond the concerns of our own skins.

Sermon:

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet. Romeo would, if he were not Romeo called, retain that dear perfection which he owes without that title. ”

What’s in a name?

We are called a church, and have been since the very earliest years of our founding. We are White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church. And yet I have heard from long-term members and from new folks and some others that calling this place a church makes them uncomfortable. Etymologically it does relate to a gathering of Christians... and one of the usages of the word Church is as the larger religious body. Maybe we don’t like the word church because it is hard to break away from the connotations our culture has for the word.

Growing up I used to say “I go to church, but not *that kind* of church.” “It’s not what you’re thinking,” I would say “I’m not going to try to convert you.” I would hem and haw and tell them that we are not like the kinds of churches they think of when they think of church. For a while I told people what I thought was the truth at the time: “You can believe anything you want.” Which of course isn’t true, because we actually promote **Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning**. Responsible being the keyword.

It's odd to live in a society that thinks it knows what we mean when we say church – they see their own experiences and reflect them. And we liberal religious folk don't want to be clumped in with others' negative experiences. But, in fact, we all make assumptions based on a name, a word. When I was a kid, I assumed that people I talked to had negative experiences of church and reflected that in my responses. I probably offended plenty of evangelical friends who understood from my answers that I didn't approve of their religion. There was a lot of anti-Christian rhetoric in my home congregation, and in popular culture in the 90s. I didn't realize how biased I was until I went to seminary, and found myself telling people I was going into social work, so that they wouldn't assume I was going to be a Christian minister.

There were two main reactions when I told people I was going into ministry, both based on the assumption of Christianity: the first was the conversation would just stop: "Oh." Or the infamous "Interesting..."

The other reaction would be that their faces would light up and they would start to tell me all about their religion and how exciting it was that I was going to be serving the Lord. I got tired of explaining what it really meant.

Maybe don't like using the word Church because we are tired of explaining to people the difference between who we are and what others expect us to be. Or maybe we let our own biases get in our way, assuming that other people won't understand us before finding out how they react.

Maybe we don't want to say "I'm going to church" because we don't want to have to do the work of saying "Yes, church, and here's what we do, and how we act, and our seven principles." Maybe we don't want to say "I'm going to church" because we haven't yet perfected our elevator speech.

You all know what an elevator speech is, right? It's the one minute, max two sentence speech that you can give to someone who asks "What's that?" about Unitarian Universalism.

Maybe you do have yours all set, but if not, you can use mine if you want: "We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and value a responsible search for truth and meaning." If you want to make your own, you can use two of the principles, as I did, or you can consider what it is that makes this church your home.

A church is a building, an institution, a group of people that worships together. We aren't a church like many other Christian churches -

And yet what else would we call ourselves that speaks to what we do? – we can try to rename ourselves, many UU churches are called Fellowships, some are called Societies, some go with Congregation, and others just go with a name, no identifiers. But none of the other names mean precisely the same thing. None of the other names have simple shorthand about them.

Do all of these places host gatherings of people on Sunday mornings? Do all of these places have speakers who give a message that moves the people? Do we expect

them to have music as part of what happens in their space? Do we gather with intention, do we gather with compassion?

What other institutions have these things? Not schools, not sporting events, not theater or concerts. Not the movies, not talking a walk in the woods. Not doing art – alone or in a group. Not playing games with our friends on a Saturday night. Not in our government, not in our national parks. Where else would we have this kind of gathering, but a church?

We may not be a Christian church anymore, but we are still have Christians among us, and a very protestant form of worship - words and music, rituals, candles, one hour on Sunday, teach our kids the lessons in at the same time. We come to this place to be with these people to learn something, to grow, to serve, to feel connected to something beyond ourselves.

Synagogues, mosques, temples, sangas, other places of worship do this too. People gather, children learn, lessons are sometimes taught, songs are usually sung, religion is practiced. But would you call them a church? No, because what they do is different in a unique way to each religion.

So what is it that makes a church? It is the ritual? Is it the building? Maybe a different kind of building: Rev Meg Barnhouse writes in her essay about a brick layer and what it means to be a church: “Brick by brick, story by story, we build a church, seeing the patterns, the symmetry, the plain joy of setting one story on the other, sustained by the strong and beautiful structures they make. [And] We will never be finished.”

It’s the people that make the church – its our stories, our lives, our presence that make this church what it is. It is the history we hold together, the gifts of the past that help us to imagine the future that we make by dreaming together. What can this place make, what can this place do as a church, a place of stories and love and challenge and compassion?

What dreams can we hold together if we live into our best selves? This month and next we will be holding a number of sessions of small group conversations in what we are calling Creating Belonging Together.

It’s an opportunity for each of us to think about what we love about this place, how has it been important in our lives, and then imagine what it could be in 5 years, in 10 years and beyond. Be you a newcomer with a hope in your heart, or a long-time member who has always loved this church, we want to hear from you. Because you make this church what it is, YOU give us the vision that we can all dream together.

“The church is a vision.

It is a vision of unity amid diversity,

It is a vision of reverence for all of creation,

It is a vision that beckons us beyond the concerns of our own skins.”

The church is a body made up of the people who come through its doors, made up of the people who think about the future of the church and plan for it. People who leave

a little water from another time. By Erica Hewitt “In 1637, the white settlers in what was to become the town of Dedham, Massachusetts, wanted to start a church. What they longed for was sincere religious association based in love, and founded in freedom. The idea of a free church took shape among the people—a church whose individual congregations were controlled by no outside authority; a radically lay-led church gathered by mutual consent rather than by mutual belief, founded in covenant rather than creed, and governed by the congregation itself. Ten years later, this basis for gathering and governing was described in the Cambridge Platform, which remains a defining document for the people of faith, including Unitarian Universalists, who continue to practice congregational polity.”

We have been given this gift of a free church, of congregational polity, of a church based in love, by our Christian forebearers. And yet, they couldn't dream then of what our church would look like today. They wouldn't have been able to imagine the love and openness that could come from the vision they held for so many years.

We are an offshoot, we are an expansion. We are a part of an ever growing, ever evolving expression of their vision and dreams. Imagine what can grow from our vision, our dreams. We can't really, but we can hope that is as expansive and loving as the church we inhabit, only moreso.

What is church? What's in a name? Nothing and everything. It is a start, a beginning to finding belonging. It is a place where we grow our souls and serve the world. It is a signpost that signals home.

The church is a spot on a map, a GPS coordinate pinned to the home page. The church is a place to come back to when your heart is broken, or you have the most wonderful news to share. The church is a place to know that you are known and belong and have something to give back. The church is a tether to the shore as we swim in the uncertain waters of the world that surrounds us, the tumultuous storm can rage, and we still have a way home.

“It is as vulnerable as the most newborn and untried of its members. It is ancient, and it is ever new. The church is a story. It is the story of lives that are interwoven, brought together in this place and this time for the simple purpose of caring for one another, and helping one another along the arduous path from birth to death.”

Would this church smell as sweet by any other name? Of course it would. But the word is a symbol, a shorthand, an easy way to say what we are without too much explanation. Church is a place, an institution, a group of people worshipping together. It is, and it is so much more than that. This church is what we make it. So let's make it great.