

Sermon of the Rev. Bill Phillips
Unitarian Universalists of Coastal Georgia

“WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT WORSHIP”

Sunday, November 16, 2008
(*First Sunday in New Building*)

Introduction:

Four weeks ago when I began this sermon series “What we talk about when we talk about God” and two weeks ago we discussed “What we talk about when we talk about Prayer.” Today we will be thinking together about “What we talk about when we talk about Worship.” I sort of stole these titles from my favorite short story writer, Raymond Carver, who wrote a book of stories titled, “What we talk about when we talk about Love.” Let me begin today by sharing one of Ray Carver’s poems with you.

The Scratch

*I woke up with a spot of blood over my eye.
A scratch halfway across my forehead.
But I’m sleeping alone these days.
Why on earth would a man raise his hand against himself?
Even in sleep?
It’s this and similar questions I’m trying to answer this morning.
As I study my face in the window.*

As we begin to talk about worship let me remind you that as Unitarian Universalists we do not have one simple definition or one way of practicing worship. We encourage each person to carve out his or her own definition and to develop his or her own worship practices. Some of us are Trinitarian; some of us are Unitarian or deists. Other UU’s are humanists, some are pantheists, i.e. nature worshipers, and many of us simply do not know who are what we worship, if anything. Trinitarians, Unitarians, Humanists, Pantheists, Agnostics, and A-theists are all welcome under the large tent of Unitarian Universalism, there is no one “right way” to worship.

Let’s be open and honest as we explore what we are talking about when we talk about our worship

I. Defining Worship

The word means, “worth shaping.” In the old English worship was a reference to recognizing and acknowledging ideas, concepts, or beliefs which were considered “worthy”, or of extreme value. We come together each Sunday not simply to worship the past or old ideas but to acknowledge the experiences and the beliefs which we find worthy of our commitment and our

energy. Our common language of worship is a language of community, freedom, justice, peace, and love.

Coming together as a congregation is an expression of our common need to feel connected as human beings to our own inner being, connected each other as equals (brothers and sisters), connected to the natural world, and to all every person in it.

This connectedness is not just a concept it is a need and a craving for relatedness.

II. Sanctuary.

We also come each Sunday seeking sanctuary, i.e. safety, peace, and comfort. A house of worship is a “safe house” a place of protection. The Flaming Chalice was first used a symbol placed in the windows of safe houses by European Unitarians during WWII to notify fleeing Jews, Gypsies, Homosexuals, and Religious Liberals that it was safe to come in, the Nazi’s would not capture you here. In 1961 at the unifying conference in Boston the Unitarians and Universalist adopted the Flaming Chalice as the symbol of our denomination. Sanctuary, safety, and security are important elements of our worship together.

III. Humility

A word we don’t talk about enough is humility. In our worship service we implicitly acknowledge our humanity. To be a part of nature is to be a part of creation and to accept that we are not god. To be made humble is simply to accept our place in the evolutionary chain of development. We are one of the creatures on the earth and we are clearly one of the most dangerous. Human beings do more damage to the environment and to each other than any other animal or element on the planet. In our UU Principles we declare that we believe in the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are just a part. As we observe the evolutionary process, the course of history, and the flow of nature we are humbled and in awe of our tiny place in the universe. This acknowledgement helps us avoid grandiosity, delusions of grandeur, and hopefully the desire to dominate other creatures, or destroy them.

IV. Spirituality

Another thing we talk about when we talk about worship is spirituality. This is one of the most vague and misunderstood concepts in religious life. The word “spirituality” by itself is general, vague and passive. The phrase “spirit of truth” is relational, descriptive, specific, and active. I do not understand “spirituality” as a stand-alone noun. But spirituality as a practice of conscience

and action is dynamic and freeing. I want to be a “free spirit”, not bound up, not controlled by culture or conventionality. I believe in the spirit of truth, the spirit of justice, the spirit of freedom, and the spirit of love. I am touched, humbled, and inspired when we sing “Spirit of Life” each Sunday, it is a significant part of our worship.

V. Teamwork

Worship also for me is an exercise in teamwork. I have always loved to play on a team and always been better at team sports. I like all balls, baseballs, basketballs, footballs, tennis balls, golf balls, soccer balls, pool balls, Xmas balls, marbles, ball bearings, beach balls, volleyballs, all balls and all ball games. Creative teamwork is a religious experience to me, and successful team building is an act of worship.

I think of worship is a team sport. It is different for all of us to read together our “Call to Worship” and our “Unison Reading” from each of us to reading it silently to ourselves. I believe that dreaming together, raising money together, cleaning, cooking, and building this building are all acts of worship. It requires an act of faith, a bit of courage, a commitment to hang together, a common hope, and a communal effort to build a church. I believe that our worship space is truly a “Beacon of Liberal Religion in a Sea of Fundamentalism.” We did this as a team.

Conclusion:

Let me finish by sharing some of my favorite worship experiences:

- Walking with someone you love down a wooded mountain trail, a dirt road, a sandy beach, or a city sidewalk.
- Being calm, quite, and even silent with a group of people you trust, care about, and love especially when you feel trusted, cared about, and loved.
- Playing games with family, friends, and colleagues—card games, ball games, word games, dating games, working puzzles, having a picnic, or sharing a fine dinner.
- Sitting alone beside a creek, sitting alone on the beach, lying on your back looking at the stars, a buttermilk sky, a silvery moon, or a storm coming up.
- Walking together in front of the Federal building peacefully voicing our objection to killing other people’s children and blowing up human beings seems like a painful but important part of worship to me.

Being here with all of you on a Sunday morning, reading together, being quiet, making music, sharing our resources, like money, talent, ideas, and love. I like hearing your joys and concerns and sharing mine. I like our friendship circle and singing “bless be the ties that bind”.

I think that all of these are things we talk about when we talk about worship. And I hope we keep talking about them, asking questions, expressing doubts, acknowledging fears, admitting anger, maturing, and growing together for many years to come. Now let’s form a friendship circle and sing together “Bless Be the Tie that binds our Hearts in Hope and Love.”

Peace and Happy Thanksgiving to you all.