**“Why Church Matters”**

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**First Parish in Malden**

**October 25, 2015**

This morning I want to you about why we are here. Why are we sitting together in this sanctuary instead of sitting at home in our pajamas, drinking coffee and reading the newspaper of our choice…or watching TV or doing household chores or playing with our kids? You know why you are here and each one of you is here for your own reason or combination of reasons. And so I hope that you’ll reflect along with me as I ask and try to answer the question, “Why does church matter?”

There are so many reasons that we come to church. Some of them are obvious; others, perhaps less so. We come to church sometimes for comfort when we are hurting, whether the pain is personal and private, or whether it is shared with our communities. When a tragedy befalls us, when a young person in our neighborhood dies tragically or when an event like 9/11 happens, we come seeking solace. When we are in the midst of a personal crisis, having experienced the loss of someone we love, or the threat of such a loss, or an illness, we come seeking support.

We come to church sometimes for answers when we are doubting; for courage when we are afraid; for prodding when we are feeling stuck in our lives; and for direction when we are not sure which way to turn.

We come for a sense of community; to be with like-minded, like-hearted people, people who share our values; to feel like there is someplace in this world that we belong. We come so that we might not feel so alone, so alienated. We come seeking sanctuary in a world that can sometimes seem so heartless, so senseless. We come to trade in our sense of despair for a sense of hope.

We come to be cared for. We come to be reminded that we are part of something larger than ourselves, something important, something good. We come to learn and to be challenged. We come to figure out what it is we believe. We come to be inspired. We come to discover a sense of purpose.

We come to get support in educating our children, in instilling in them our values, and in helping them discover a community where they feel like they belong.

These are all good reasons to come to church on a Sunday morning. And if you find any or all of these needs being met at this church over the course of your time here, then you are blessed and so are we!

Now, all of that having been said, I know plenty of people, as do you, I’m sure, who don’t go to church. They are smart, often happy, well-adjusted people who have found other ways to have their needs met. Some of them have been lucky enough to develop close friendships and a strong sense of community through other groups or activities. They’ve found ways to give and get the support that they need.

Some of them have even found other ways of meeting their religious needs, through yoga or meditation, either with others or on their own. They’ve found other ways to meet their needs to serve others in their communities and many of them are very engaged in caring for others or in social justice work. Many of them, frankly, don’t feel deprived or as if something essential is missing from their lives just because they don’t go to church. They have found other ways to be inspired, other ways to learn and to raise their children with their values.

So, why do churches matter? What is it that makes churches different? Or what SHOULD make them different?   As the Rev. Tom Owen-Towle has said,

A church is not a social club, a hospital wing, a political action center, or even a spiritual refuge, although all these disparate components are part of what a church is. Rather, healthy congregations are primarily sites for seeking and spreading the holy…

Often the word “holy” is used to describe something that is purer or better than. But etymologically, the word “holy” simply means “whole.” And there is, or can be, a very special whole-life aspect to church. We worship together, we study and learn together, we sing together, we eat together, we serve together, we play together in a community of many ages and stages of life. And our whole lives can become interwoven with this community of others in a way seldom replicated through our experiences of school or work or social clubs. That is one very special thing about church.

But when I think of the word “holy,” I think also of that which is beyond me – beyond who we are – something toward which we aspire in some way. And so, when I think of holiness – or wholeness, for that matter – I think of the ways in which we are called to grow beyond ourselves.

Much of my experience growing up as part of a religious community helped me like nothing else to grow beyond myself. To direct my attention away from my own needs and fears, and toward the needs of others. Away from what was comfortable and toward what was right. Away from what was and toward what could be. A. Powell Davies in our second reading referred to “the love he owed to others.” “There are things I must do in the world,” he said, “unselfish things.” And church is where he went each week to be reminded of that.

When I think about what makes church – or any religious community of any faith – different from a social club, or any other type of secular organization, for that matter, what it comes down to finally, is this: Churches ask us, invite us, demand of us that we be fundamentally changed in some way.

Some call it “conversion.” Some call it “being born again.” Some call it “doing God’s will.” You can call it “losing one’s sense of self or ego.” Call it “becoming one with something bigger.” We might call it "growing in accordance with our highest values" or even simply, “becoming a better person.”  Basically, in whatever theological language, it seems to me that church is about encouraging and facilitating our transformation.  And that is holy work.

Learning and being reminded to care for others and to carry out acts of compassion in a world and a culture which prefer that we take care of our own interests, mind our own business, and fear the other is holy work!

If your church isn’t doing that for you…if it does not challenge you to grow beyond yourself, to think more of others, to grow in your capacity for compassion and mercy, to long for healing and mercy and justice not only on your own behalf, but also on behalf of others…well then, perhaps it is no more than a social club, a support group, a continuing education center, or a political organization.

To paraphrase Rev. Tom Owen-Towle again…

Church ought to be that place where we are “called out” of our daily routines for a sacred purpose.Church ought to be that place where we learn to embody our holy quest, refine our convictions and enflesh our commitments…to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly in this world.

This morning, following the worship service, the Board and I have scheduled a conversation about BlackLivesMatter in Durgin Hall. I encourage you to grab some coffee or something to eat and find a comfortable spot to listen, learn, and ask questions. This is meant to be an introduction to the topic, and the beginning of what we hope will be a longer, more engaged conversation that will perhaps lead to action of some kind.

I know that to some, this topic can feel uncomfortable. To you I say, bring your discomfort and be part of the conversation.

I know that to some, it can feel too political. I want to remind you that how we treat people in our society, particularly the vulnerable, is a matter of religious values, morals and ethics, not politics.

I know that for some, anything related to race or racism can feel too big, too complex. We don’t know what to do to make it better. But as Christian theologian Walter Wink once wrote,

“We are not commissioned to create a new society; indeed, we are scarcely competent to do so. What the church can do best, though it does so all too seldom, is to delegitimize an unjust system and to create a spiritual counter climate.” (Engaging the Powers, 165)

He goes on to say:

“The church is to be like a bulldog that sinks its teeth into an elephant’s leg. It cannot bring the elephant down, but it can so distract the elephant’s attention that it fails to notice the elephant trap and plunges in.” (Engaging the Powers, 165)

We may not know how to fix racism, but we can delegitimize it and insist that it be eradicated.

Why?

Because as Unitarian Universalists, we covenant to affirm and promote:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person…

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations…

And the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all

Because as Unitarian Universalists, we draw from many sources including:

The words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love…

AND wisdom from the world’s religions which inspire us in our ethical and spiritual lives…

AND Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves

I end this morning with the words (once again) of the great Unitarian minister and civil rights activist, A. Powell Davies, who once said:

“I do not in the least intend that you shall go away from this Church, after telling me that it was an acceptable sermon, or even an unacceptable sermon, or any other kind of sermon, and then do nothing. I am not interested in what you think of the sermon, of the preacher, of the Church, or anything else. I am interested only in what you are going to do.” (From “What Can Anyone Do?”)

May our faith forever come alive through our actions and as we learn to incarnate our ideals and embody our aspirations. So may it be.