

Love Is the Spirit of this Church and Service Is Its Law
January 30, 2011

“All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.” As you may remember, that’s the concluding line from this morning’s responsive reading, written by James Vila Blake. “All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.”

Does that line ring true for you? Think for a moment about a time, or several times, in your life, when you were in need. Maybe you were “in trouble and afraid.” Maybe you were “in despair, in temptation,” and needed, as the reading says, “to be recalled” to your best self again. Maybe you needed someone “in the hour of success,” needed “someone to share [your] triumphs.” Reaching back to such moments, do you remember now how important it was for that someone to come forward and be with you? Similarly, do you remember when you were that someone who came forward because you knew you were needed? We have all been on both sides of the equation.

And, I imagine, we have all been, at one time or another, in the shadow of that exchange, not having anyone in a time of need, or, conversely, not coming forward when we knew we were needed. It is a Pyrrhic comfort, avoiding the role of comforter or supporter. And it is a long, lonely road--or maybe a road all too short--when we reach out in need, and

no one is there to respond. Because the truth is, really, that, “All our lives we *are* in need, and others are in need of us.”

For instance, as we approach the 10-year anniversary of Wildflower Church’s first official worship service, imagine the mutual need that must have been arising when Carol Knight first envisioned a Unitarian Universalist congregation in South Austin, and others began to step forward saying, “Yes, yes, I want to be a part of this, I want to help. I *need* this.” For ten years and more, the interdependent web of each person being in need, of other people being in need of us, and mutual outreach being born out from that need, has strengthened, deepened, and spread wider, to where now we are a congregation of over two hundred adults, youth, and children living in a richly intergenerational, beloved community.

It makes me think, actually, of other Unitarian Universalist congregations I’ve been lucky to a part of and congregational anniversaries I’ve experienced in those places. In California, I was present for the fiftieth anniversary of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis. In Chicago, I was there for the 136th anniversary of Third Unitarian Church, home to the author of today’s responsive reading, Rev. James Vila Blake. And in Massachusetts, I celebrated with others the 175th anniversary of the Unitarian Society of Northampton and Florence.

If we here in South Austin just do what we’ve done so far about 17.5 more times we *too* will someday celebrate 175 years of existence. No

problem. Still, ten years *is* a lot to celebrate, and we who have done and who keeping doing all we can to transform this congregation from an idea to a group to a church-in-a-box to a spiritual home that is big enough and rooted enough and open enough to welcome and sustain all who would come through our doors seeking to share with us beloved community, we are a part of living history. For, should we do well by this church, then some fifty or even 150 years down the road, others will say our names with pride and gratitude as they look back on what we worked so hard to create. If it's fifty years down the road, some of us may even be there to tell the story. Wouldn't that be cool, if two or three generations of a family could stand together in front of the congregation and talk fifty years from now about their own experiences of these good old, hard-working, well worth-it days. It might just happen.

And, in *these* days, when this country, and this world, appears to be growing more and more polarized, more and more divisive even as it in many ways gets smaller, it seems like it would be a pretty *good* thing--a pretty *essential* thing--to ensure that there continues to be a place in our community where people can come and not be required to abide by any one creed, or to hide their sexual orientation or their gender identity, or their belief in more than one god or in no god at all; a place where people can ask hard questions together, draw from the wisdom of the East as well as the West, from women as well as men, from rock and roll as well as

Classical, from children as well as adults. It seems, as with our namesakes, it would be wise to keep ourselves around for a good while longer, so that we Wildflowers can continue to share and spread to the rest of the world the beauty of our rugged, eclectic, colorful community.

Now, frankly, it's probably true that there are some of you thinking, "well, no thanks. I'm just passing through. I'm glad this place is here for me right now when I need it, but I've got big plans, and I'll be moving along." If that's the case, that's OK. I'm glad we can serve as a resting station on your journey. I hope that while you're here, your life will be at *least* a little teeny tiny bit transformed by compassion, love, and justice. That's part of our mission after all, committing to "transform ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice."

But if you're here for the long haul (even if you don't know it yet), let's not forget that another part of our mission statement says that, "We *joyfully* nurture one another on our *lifelong* spiritual journeys." That's like, you know, from birth to death. That's a long time. And it's not like we were all born on the same day in the same year and we're all going to die at the exact same moment, so that there's one beginning and one end. As far as lifelong spiritual journeys go, there is some serious staggering going on in this community. So what I'm saying is that, for as long as we're here, and for as long as joyfully nurturing one another on our lifelong spiritual journeys is part of our mission, and for as long as new people keep joining

our community and new babies keep being *born* into our community, there will be *no end* to the lifelong spiritual journey! There will be no end to that part of our mission. Get what I'm saying?

So then. What do we need to do to *sustain* this kind of collective immortality? What do we need to do to keep this beloved community alive and well and beloved even after we ourselves are gone? As *one* leader in this community, I know one thing I need to do is heed the words of Dan Ebener, whose article we heard Robert read from earlier. Ebener writes, "For the servant leader, it is not about how many followers you lead, but how many leaders you develop." Think about that. Imagine for instance, if Moses as a leader of the Exodus had only had followers. Moses himself didn't make it to the promised land. If his people had only been followers, well, I guess that means they would have followed Moses to his grave. But Moses had among him other leaders as well, including his own brother Aaron. And those leaders knew to let go of Moses and carry on.

Now, I share that story with you not to imply that as a leader I 1) think of *myself* as having Old Testament-like prowess or 2) that I'm going to die an old bearded Hebrew man before we get a home of our own. I share it to confess and profess that I need to model serving this congregation in such a way that others feel inspired to do their own part in serving this congregation as well. I need to reflect the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, verse 45, which reminds me my job is to serve, not to be served; I need to

reflect the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, verses 40-42, which says that a servant leader “is more interested in giving than receiving.” I need to do these things for my own well being, my own best practice, but also to call and to remind you to do the same.

Now, honestly, I would be hard pressed to find even a handful of people in this congregation who do not respond to the needs of others in at least one or two ways. Even someone who’s visiting for the first or second time and participates during our greeting is responding to the need for connection and community and welcome. Even someone who is not strong enough to lift a coffee urn, but who sits and folds orders of service, or chats with others in the lobby after the worship is over, even that someone, maybe *especially* that someone, is doing heart-warming, essential service for this community. You would have to be particularly ambitiously willful not to be there for at least one other person in some way in this community. So good luck, if that is your goal.

Still, while I celebrate and applaud all the service that does happen in this community, I need to make sure I’m getting these words on these pages somehow into all y’all’s ears and into your brains and down into your hearts and souls and hands and feet and say to you *especially* that, in the words of James Vila Blake, “We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose and cannot do it alone.”

Penny Burnette, for instance, has a great purpose, to provide for our children a creative, meaningful, thought-provoking and soul-nourishing liberal religious education. She cannot, however, do it alone. Praise be to the *parents* of those children and a handful of non-parental folk, for stepping up to teach those children, to joyfully nurture our children on this particular stretch of their lifelong spiritual journeys. But wouldn't it be nice if we remembered that it does take a village to raise a child, and that parents want to attend worship services too sometimes, and that more non-parental folks involving themselves in children's religious education would be a wonderful, life transforming experience?

Another example: John Cooper and company have a very great purpose to accomplish, and that is to make sure we all have a place to rest our fannies every Sunday when we come into this sanctuary. I know you know this but I'll tell you again: These chairs, all 170 or so of them, get set up and taken down by Wildflowers every single Sunday that we are here. Does your fanny appreciate this? Might you then get your fanny over to John today and say, "I want to help set up chairs once a month"?

Yet another example: Maybe you know the song by the Ink Spots: "I like coffee, I like tea, I like the Java jive and it likes me." Well, do you like coffee? Do you like tea? Then abstain from jive talkin' and sign up to help make it once a month. In fact, sign up to chair the hospitality committee in charge of making sure this happens. Cara Harrison has done a wonderful

job for a good long time, but she has recently declared herself caffeine free. At least in this regard.

With all those examples, what I'm basically trying to say is, "Love is the spirit of this church and service is its law." Service is not law because an oligarchical few of us got together and declared it so. Service is the law of this church because without it, our aforementioned fannies that appreciate these chairs are back on the street with no place to call our spiritual home. It's that kind of law. It's the law of logic, it's the law of nature, it's the law of beloved community. "All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us."

And speaking of lifelong needs, if you're getting tired of these kinds of sermons, in which you may be feeling guilty or cornered into service, and you're not feeling spiritually fed, let me offer this little warning. As long as there is a need to preach this sermon, I will preach it. I will preach it at *least* once a year. Next year, at this same service channel, same service time, the various committees and teams of the congregation will be out in full color at display tables, with volunteer clipboards ready to be signed. Next year, maybe I'll have a different approach. Maybe I'll sound nicer, maybe I'll sound meaner. Maybe, I will just preach gratitude, because every committee, every team that keeps this congregation running will be thriving. In the meantime, right now, I can tell you we need people for stewardship. Michael Stanbury did an excellent job of chairing that group for two years,

but he has stepped down. We need people for communications. Thanks to Renee Kingsland for all the hard work she has done to improve and maintain communications for several years. As I mentioned a moment ago, we need people for hospitality. We need you.

And, I believe, you need us. By us, I don't mean you need us and only us. I mean, you need community. You need connection. You need love and laughter and questioning and compassion and righteousness and handkerchiefs passed your way, because you're tired of being alone or in chaos or confusion and you're ready to thaw out. If you feel that Wildflower Church can be the community that helps you have all of that, then search no further. Because there are a lot of people here who have discovered, and who live by the wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi, that "the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in service to others." If you want to find yourself, you are welcome to do so here, where "love is the spirit of this church and service is its law." For "this is our great covenant--to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another."

Amen.

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