

**Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: A Stewards' Celebration
September 26, 2010**

I've been thinking. Maybe I'll make it a tradition to always begin my annual stewardship-campaign-launching sermon with this qualifier: "Visitors, if this is your first time here, or maybe even your second, do me this one favor, and make a commitment in this moment to come back again next Sunday. Because today, I'm going to be talking about money, and I'm going to be asking members and friends of Wildflower Church to once again commit, or pledge, generous amounts of their money to this community, in order to sustain and nourish this community."

I'm thinking of providing such a qualifier because I know that if I walked into a religious community for the first time seeking welcome or solace, and the preacher was talking mostly about money, I might get just a little itchy. And, speaking of money, I will *bet* money (at least figuratively) that there is a member of the membership committee, or some other Wildflower who is mindful that there are visitors sitting among us, and is thinking, "Shoot! This visitor's first experience of Wildflower Church is the minister asking for money! Argh, the all-crucial first impression, down the drain!" If you are one of those such people, I promise: I shall do my best to prevent such damage.

So, visitors, if you're out there, please know that while--from Wildflower Church's inception a little over ten years ago--while money *has* been a necessary means of supporting our programming and special events, of paying for the sanctuary and religious education space, and of providing for our small but growing staff, money always has been and is just that: a means. To paraphrase Ann Odin Heller, whose book we heard Peter read from earlier, "A healthy percentage of giving...is desirable, not because the church needs our [healthy percentage]"--that would be money as the *end*--"but because we need to give [a healthy percentage] so that we know our lives are focused on what we value and so we can accomplish what we are called to do in church." That is money as the *means*.

Heller's clarification raises the question, of course, of just what our values are, and of what, in church, we are called to do. As for our values, I would hold up our seven Unitarian Universalist principles and the many sources from which our living tradition draws--both of which can be found, by the way, among the beginning pages of the grey hymnal. So as not to leave you distracted and shuffling through the book as I proceed, let me at least share the seven Unitarian Universalist principles with you. (For those of you who know them already, a refresher never hurts.) The statement proclaims:

We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- * the inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- * Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- * Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- * 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;
- * The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
and
- * Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

I would also hold up as central to the values of Wildflower Church in particular, our covenant of right relations. While I won't list every item of the covenant this morning, for the sake of this morning's message, I will share two: "We, the members of Wildflower Church, covenant to extend the welcome, hospitality, and acceptance at Wildflower Church that we would wish to receive," and we covenant "to practice mutual responsibility and shared leadership."

Because I don't *think* we would covenant to uphold something we do not value, I am going to take the liberty of believing that we value welcome, hospitality, and acceptance here at Wildflower Church. Am I right? In fact,

we value it so much that we covenant to *extend* welcome, hospitality, and acceptance, rather than to simply wait to receive such things. I think that's beautiful. Because every time we follow through with that covenant, someone *does* receive these very things. Just for the fun of it, let's do it. I know we've already had our greetings, but just turn to your neighbors and extend a little welcome, hospitality, and acceptance.

Not so bad, right? In that gesture alone, you exemplified not only welcome, hospitality, and acceptance, but also mutual responsibility and shared leadership. Really, beloved people, that's what I *love* about this community. Yours is by far my favorite kind of warmth that I have experienced in my three years of living in this Texan climate!

Now, getting back for a moment to Ann Odin Heller's thoughts about stewardship, she reminds us that our giving is a means to help us focus on our values, *and* she says it is a means of our being able to accomplish what we are called to do in church. So, just what are we called to do? Our mission statement sums it up pretty nicely. You heard it woven into the prayer, but I'll say it again:

Wildflower Church is a deliberately inclusive, open-minded religious community in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. We joyfully nurture one another in our lifelong spiritual journeys, and we commit to

transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice.

It's just two sentences, but when I read it, my mind and heart travel all over the community of Wildflower Church, all over the community of Austin, and further still, to the Gulf Coast where for three years in a row we have done hurricane relief work, and even to Ecuador, where several of our Wildflowers traveled this summer to serve those in need. I still hope, with the help of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, that service work in Haiti is on our horizon.

But before getting global, let me start in the much more local circle of Wildflower Church itself. Let me start with our beautiful, beautiful children. If you are like me, you delight in watching these children not only grow *up*, but grow *into* beloved community. If you are like me, you sit in awe when from the mouths of babes--and five- and six- and eight- and eleven-year olds--comes amazing curiosity and creativity and care and wisdom. Lay leaders often say that people's favorite part of the service is the greeting, and I really like it, too, especially as it holds up our covenant. But for me, one of *my* favorite parts of the service is Time for All Ages, because in that moment I get to interact with these children and see their minds working and witness their own free and responsible search for truth and meaning

right up close. Parents, let me say, I am honored to serve as minister to your *children's* church.

And I am honored by the ongoing commitment of our Director of Religious Education, Penny Burnette, and of our volunteer teachers in providing thought-provoking, heart-stirring, soul-searching faith development for our children. I am honored by the decision this summer of Rose Schwab, our new youth group director and a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, to move to Austin, specifically to work here at Wildflower Church so she can provide continuing religious education for our teenagers. This year, I am honored too by *non-parental* adults like Patty Ryan, Katie Landolt, Laura Wills, and others who have said yes, I want to give some of my time to teaching and being with our young ones.

And if you're not quite that young, but still would like to learn, and in learning, get to know others, or would like to get to know others, and in doing so, learn, then Wildflower Church, thanks to its Adult Programming, provides plenty of extraordinary opportunities for you in your own *lifelong* spiritual journey. There are, thanks to Joan Harman and Mary Ober, as well as several fabulous facilitators, Connection Circles, a kind of small group ministry, in which people commit to meeting monthly for focused conversation and community building. There are, thanks to Gerry King, Dee Adams, and many others, wonderful classes to take, both on Sunday mornings before worship, and on various nights of the evening. Just as I

love Time for All Ages for the reasons I stated, I love teaching adult religious education classes, because it's there I get to witness people's hearts and minds at work, and connections being made that go much, much deeper than the small talk of so much of our daily lives.

Then there is Wildflower Church's commitment to justice. Every year, in the spring and in the fall, my heart is moved when I get an email from Bill Walker, reminding me that it is time for the congregation to sign up for, in the spring, the Pride Parade, honoring Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender people, and in the fall, the Day of Remembrance for Transgender people who have been victimized by hatred, ignorance, and violence. There are our monthly second offerings, which go to such important organizations as Communities in Schools, SafePlace, The Phoenix Academy, Out Youth, and the YWCA. There is our ongoing work with Austin Interfaith, in which we organize with other faith communities, schools and unions, to empower the citizens and residents of Austin to create positive change.

And of course, there is our commitment to compassion and to love, in the form of caring for one another. One of the most poignant, sometimes *bittersweet* gifts, or givens, of living intentionally in beloved community is that we become witness to both the natural life cycles of others, and to the unexpected twists and turns that illness, accidents, financial downturns, divorce, addiction, and other trials bring to those we love. By reaching out

to our own in need, whether through a phone call, a card sent, a ride given, a meal delivered, a visit made, or a hug offered, we show that we are not just fair-weather Wildflowers, but those whose companionable beauty and perseverance can shine even in the roughest of storms.

And as with the wildflowers of Texas, it is essential to remember that none of this beauty, none of this diverse and unified collection of flowering and growing could be here today, without the seeds and the sun and the rain and the soil that began it all. If Wildflower Church had our own story of Genesis, it might begin something like this: “In the beginning, Carol Knight had an idea, and it was good.” For Carol’s vision of a Unitarian Universalist congregation in South Austin, some eleven years ago, was indeed the beginning of the creation of this sacred community we share today. And because Carol was and is not just a dreamer, but a doer, she followed through with her good idea. She, and others joining her, began to water it, feed it, nurture it, and soon there were gatherings, and soon there were worship services, and the hard work of beginning a budget, and writing bylaws, and finding spaces in which to do the work that we, in church, are called to do.

Nothing, absolutely nothing you see and experience at Wildflower Church today would be here if it were not for the hard work, sacrifice, and creativity of *all* the yesterdays that have brought us to this moment. Every single one of us, I’m betting, including today’s visitors, were drawn to

Wildflower Church, because we heard or read or saw something about it, already made manifest, that piqued our curiosity enough for us to come see it for ourselves. For me, one particular early memory I have is my friend Lucy calling me from Austin when I was still in Chicago, in search and finishing seminary. She put the phone up to her computer, where she had gone to the Wildflower website and had found a recording of a worship service. The Peace Train Band was singing “Closer to Fine” by the Indigo Girls. Aha, I thought. Something good is happening there.

And something good *is* happening here. Here, as the choir sang this morning, we are standing on the side of love. Here, to paraphrase the responsive reading we all shared earlier, we are finding that religion can “be to us hope and purpose, and a discovering of opportunities to express our best through daily tasks.” Here, we are finding that religion can be, in Vincent Silliman’s words again, “a voice of renewing challenge to be the best we have and may be,” that religion can, and needs to be, “a call to generous action.”

My particular call of generous action to you today is to continue feeding and nourishing the body of this congregation so that this body, this beloved community can indeed sustain itself. Anne Odin Heller asks, “What sustenance do we need as a congregation every month, week, or day to stay healthy? What is each member’s share of responsibility for that health?” I cannot answer that question *for* you. Especially in these difficult

economic times, I cannot know what you are able to give as far as numbers or percentages. But I do know this. You can give to our annual stewardship campaign as generously as you are able. For that is what has brought us here, from our moment of Genesis, to this point right now--each and every one of us giving of our time, energy, and wealth as generously as we each are able, day in, and day out.

Now, speaking of the actual stewardship campaign, when you study the proposed budget for 2011, you will see that the proposed budget includes five percent raises for all of our staff, including Penny, Rose, our brilliant pianist and choir director, Elke, our wonderful office administrator Dotti Sizer, our gift of a bookkeeper, Jennifer Almond, and yours truly. In my own desire to give as generously as I am able, along with my increase in pay will come an increase in my pledging. Thus I maintain a giving of about five percent of my annual income. I share that so you know I am doing my best to practice what I preach.

Also in the proposed budget is a new item of \$3,000 year which will automatically go into our building fund. In our years of meeting at the South Austin Senior Activity Center, we have been, might I say, a bit sheltered when it comes to paying realistic rent. In order for us to get used to paying rent, or a mortgage that reflects the market out there, we need to start acting as if, and paying as if we owe that money now. That way, when the

time comes for us to indeed move into a home of our own, temporary or permanent, we will be more prepared.

I know that our desire for a home of our own is there. Now, we need to work toward that preparedness. Again, the reality of the economic times may mean that our journey (that's the exodus part of our story) to a home of our own is going to be a longer one than we wish. But our choices are to move forward into tomorrow with every step that we can, or to stay pitched in the desert, or to simply slip our way back to the days when we only wished for a home, for a staff, for the kind of worship and programming that would feed our souls and the souls of our children.

So what can you do today? What can you do to proclaim that you loved Wildflower Church yesterday, that you love it today, and that you will love it tomorrow?

“Imagine,” says Anne Odin Heller, “you’ve been exercising all day. Gardening. Running. Working hard. Hungrily, you sit down to the perfect meal. You are filled with appreciation--wonderful aromas engage your senses and you are grateful for the bounty before you. You are filled with anticipation--your body will be nourished. You eat, each bite delicious and nurturing.”

In this feast, it's true that you are the recipient. But you are also the host. You are the one--you, together--are the body that extends the welcome, the hospitality, and the acceptance to all who hunger for beloved

community. In the words of the hymn, in this beloved body, this beloved community, “We believe in life, and in the strength of love, and we have found a need to be together. We have our hearts to give, we have our thoughts to receive, and we believe that sharing is an answer.”
So let us give, so let us receive, so let us share, so let us sing.

Amen.

#354 We Laugh, We Cry