

“The Ministry of All Believers”

UU Church of Palo Alto

February 6, 2005

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The Quaker educator Parker Palmer writes that he searched for decades
to find a career path that was true to who he really was.

Palmer had worked as a community organizer, then as a professor.

He had been an activist and a freelance intellectual.

But he had never felt fully at home in any of those worlds.

Once while at a conference, a friend decided

he had pinned down Parker Palmer’s identity.

He introduced Palmer to a crowd as a “recovering sociologist.”

Taking a hint from this story, I thought it would be appropriate

to introduce myself to you today as a “recovering fashion designer.”

Yes, it’s true.

For much of my childhood and youth, I dreamed of being the next Versace.

I could always be found with pen in hand,

conjuring up pictures of fancy ladies in outlandish hats.

I stockpiled the latest issues of Vogue and Elle.

I even enrolled in a summer program to help me prepare for this new career.

But despite my best efforts at planning other people’s wardrobes,

it became clear over time

that fame and fortune on the runways of the world

was not my destiny.

Indeed, my vocational life took quite a different turn.

I can’t even imagine what the fashion designers of the world

would have to say about ministerial robes...

It was in southern California, six years ago,
when I experienced a call
to the professional Unitarian Universalist ministry.
Perhaps like some of you here today,
I walked through the doors of a Unitarian Universalist church
one Sunday morning and felt that profound sense of coming home.
I had grown up in this tradition, and to return to it as an adult felt deeply right.
To weave together a whole self
that would be in service to our liberal religious tradition –
that was my vision and my dream.

Perhaps some of you, too, have made a journey of vocation.
You have made the journey from work that doesn't quite fit
to work that calls you and inspires you from deep inside.
And you know that this journey is not always an easy one.

Parker Palmer, the Quaker educator I mentioned earlier,
has spent much of his life trying to understand what it means to be “called”
to one's path in life.

This idea of being called is related to vocation,
since the word vocation comes from the Latin word for “voice.”

“Vocation,” Palmer writes, “does not mean a goal I pursue.

It means a calling that I hear. [...]

I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity.”

This exhilarating, risky feeling of hearing and answering one's calling
means being drawn deeper into one's authentic being.

Palmer writes, “the deepest vocational question is not ‘what ought I to do
with my life?’” but rather “Who am I... really?

What is my true nature?”

How can I be most authentic and at home in the world?

This morning's Story for All Ages is also a story about vocation.
The quiltmaker challenges the king to stop
 trying to grasp onto things outside himself.
She challenges him to start listening and paying attention
 to what could make him deeply happy.
She tells him that if he wants to be at home in the world,
 he needs to let go of all he has been clinging to.
He has to release all he has been hoarding for so long.
If he wants one of her magnificent quilts,
 he has to give up clinging to the very things
 in which he has invested so much energy and time
 for all these years.

She challenges him to do the impossible.
She commands that he give away his stashes of velvet robes
 and silken garments.
She orders him to divest himself of his dazzling supplies
 of rubies and emeralds.
He even has to give up his favorite waltzing blue Siamese cats.

At first glance, we Unitarian Universalists
 may not seem to have much in common with the king,
 at least as he starts out in the story.
He is selfish and greedy. Not much fun to be around, that's for sure.

But if we look closely, we can see that remnants of the "king"
 remain in our congregations, even if they are hidden in the shadows.
Like the king, we may not realize that giving of ourselves
 is what could bring us joy.
Or we want to give, but we need to be shown the way.
Even more likely, maybe we do not fully appreciate
 the gifts we could bring to our religious community.

Maybe we need to be shown that we have gifts to bring, in the first place.

I recently had an experience that taught me what can happen
when members of the congregation recognize
and share their gifts with one another.

A year ago in January, another minister and I created a workshop
we called "Living with Loss."

We invited those in the congregation
who were grieving a serious loss of some kind
to join us for several evening sessions.

One snowy Wednesday night,
my colleague and I turned up the heat in the old church parlor,
laid out the folding chairs,
and placed a chalice in the center of the circle.

As folks arrived, we welcomed them into the space.

After inviting people to share their hopes for the workshop,

We led a silent meditation and a reading.

Then we invited the group to reflect
on the many kinds of loss that were represented
in that room.

I remember the hush that fell, as people began to share their stories.

They began to open up the most vulnerable parts of themselves to one another.

Few members of the group knew one another well
before that first meeting.

But, an atmosphere of reverence and mutual respect grew
as they began to speak, and listen deeply to one another.

My co-leader and I invited participants
to bring to the next session an object
connected to someone they had loved and lost,
something that honored a major loss in their lives.

The next Wednesday evening, we covered a long low table
with a dark velvet cloth, and placed candles in the center.
As soft music played, we gently invited each person who wished
to come forward to place his or her object on the altar.
Soon the altar was covered with photographs, letters,
even a shawl that one congregant had brought
from her mother who had died.
When the music stopped and the altar was finished,
one by one people began to tell the group
about the objects they had brought.
As the candles flickered and the group shared tears and even some laughter,
the space was made holy by those stories of loss.
When we ended our session that last night, few people wanted to leave.
Members of the group continued to support one another
long after they stopped meeting formally.
This fall, John, one of the group members,
told me that he wanted to facilitate a new “Living with Loss” series.
I am now supporting and mentoring him as he continues to minister
with those who are grieving.
John felt called to use his gifts as a social worker
to make sure there was a space for those in the church
who were experiencing loss
to learn from and support one another.

This experience opened my eyes to a different way of doing ministry.
In this way of doing ministry,
the professionally trained minister becomes
a person in whose presence the ministry of others appears.

In the group “Living with Loss,” ministry appeared –
in the form of wounded and yet gifted people caring for one another,

Ministry appeared, in the form of the trust that was built in community.

There was something remarkable that happened in that group –

an experience of healing beyond our shared effort.

Some good came into our life together,

a movement of the spirit beyond our control.

Perhaps you have felt it, too.

Perhaps, in a religious education committee meeting,

you are checking in,

sharing for a few moments what is going on in your lives.

Someone resists the temptation to slide by with a customary “I’m fine”

and shares her heartbreak at a family relationship

that has become painful and difficult.

The committee members reach out, making time and space

to hold this person in love and support,

to share wisdom from their own lives.

And you feel a presence there –

something initiated by your actions, but something more than that, too.

Something that makes you want to kneel down

and declare that this time has been made holy.

Some good has come into your life as a community, a good beyond your control.

And you realize that ministry is happening.

Ministry must be rooted in this sense of vocation –

a call that comes from deep inside,

not something imposed on us from outside.

Frederick Buechner writes that vocation is the place

“where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”

Not only individuals, but also entire congregations

are called to find their unique vocation

in meeting the world’s deep need.

We need to first understand the shape of our “deep gladness” as a people,

and then see how that connects to what the world needs.

A number of Unitarian Universalist congregations on the West Coast
have pioneered vital lay ministry programs like Worship Associates,
Pastoral Associates, and Small Group Ministries.
In many ways, these congregations have modeled what it means
to share the ministry among those who are ordained
and those who do ministry without the “Rev.” before their name.

But as a movement, we have yet to meet the challenge
of building what James Luther Adams called
“the priesthood and prophethood of all believers.”
Adams, whose words we read earlier today,
reminds us that at the heart of the Protestant Reformation
was the conviction
that the divine speaks not only to those who are ordained.

Our religious ancestors fought to affirm the truth that anyone,
regardless of gender or creed or status, can be a vehicle for the spirit.

But Adams cautioned us that this was not enough.

He warned religious liberals that the great promise of the Reformation
would remain unfulfilled if we did not also take up another task –
the “prophethood of all believers.”

To be true to its great heritage, the liberal church
would need to empower its people to interpret the signs of the times
and act for justice.

The liberal church would need to equip its people to be both priests and prophets
– to be ministers for a new age.

Answering the call to become a “prophethood of all believers”
would mean a big change for many of our churches.

It would mean moving from a model

in which social justice is done only by a few activists,
or perhaps only by the ordained minister,
to a model in which justice work
is an extension of everyone's faith.

I have had a glimpse of what that could look like.

I come from Massachusetts, and I'm proud to
be able to say that the church I serve in Cambridge
has been one of most outspoken advocates of the right to marry.

I had the honor – with thousands of others from all over New England –
of standing at Cambridge City Hall on May 17, 2004
when the clock struck midnight.

I had the joy of shouting and singing and blowing bubbles
as Susan and Marcia,
the first same sex couple in the state
to be granted a marriage license,
came down through the crowd.

Susan and Marcia are members of First Parish in Cambridge.

In the days that followed, they were interviewed until they were hoarse,
and their story was beamed around the world.

On May 18, from Ireland to Australia, people knew about Susan and Marcia.
They had waited all night on the steps of City Hall
to get their license.

Susan and Marcia had carved time out of their busy lives
to take a prophetic stand, to stand up on behalf of all GBLT people.

They knew they were taking some risks by going public.

All week the State House had been a battleground.

Security was tight as supporters and opponents of marriage equality
faced off.

And as they came down the stairs of City Hall that night, a vocal minority
held large signs attacking those who defended the right to marry.

Susan and Marcia have been together for 27 years.
They built a household together, raised a son together.
For many of those 27 years they stayed in the closet,
not to their closest friends and family, but to many of their acquaintances.
And many of these acquaintances were hockey moms and dads.
Their son Peter is a gifted hockey player, and he grew up on the ice,
supported by his two moms.
But ever since Peter could remember,
at the hockey rink Marcia was Mom and Susan was Sue.
All the other hockey players were coached by their dads.
And on the ice, traditional gender roles prevailed.

But after May 17, Susan and Marcia were so far out of the closet
there was no way they could be forced back in.
Hockey moms and dads saw their faces on CNN and heard their voices
on National Public Radio.
And then, something remarkable happened.
The support poured in.
Hockey moms and dads sent flowers, cards, and loving emails.
The hockey community had been looking for some way to support them,
to recognize their relationship,
and Susan and Marcia's public stand
had made it possible for them to do just that.

In the weeks that followed, Susan and Marcia stood in the pulpit
at the UU Church in Cambridge,
looked out over the pews,
and told us that they would not have had the courage
to do what they did
without the support of the congregation.

They were not only talking about the support of the ordained ministers.

They were talking about the hundred congregants who
voted to hang a banner from the church door declaring,
“Support Marriage Equality – We Do!”

They were talking about the supportive emails
sent daily by church members and friends.

They were talking about the hundreds of signatures on petitions,
the nighttime meetings,
the harrowing pilgrimages to the State House.

They were talking about the gifts that people in the congregation
had shared with them –
the beautiful wedding cake made lovingly
by a church member,
the special worship service
in honor of same-sex couples.

This had truly been a ministry of all believers.

It was a ministry that flowed from the “deep gladness” of a congregation
that was overjoyed to be making history
by standing on the side of love.

A ministry of all believers will take the form of public witness,
like the support for Susan and Marcia.

And it will also take many other forms.

It will take shape when a congregant starts a men’s support group,
because he sees an unmet need for young and old
to learn from one another.

It will take the form of a college student with a vision of a campus ministry,
who is burning with excitement about spreading the good news
of Unitarian Universalism.

This ministry can flourish when we are attuned to see not only our needs,
but also the tremendous strengths and gifts

that are the undiscovered jewels of our faith communities.

Being part of a Unitarian Universalist community must mean asking oneself:

“how can I live from my vital center?”

“How is the spirit calling me to live a fuller life?”

And, just as important, “how can my deep gladness
meet the world’s deep need?”

The church will need to help us all find ways to do this.

Many of you will find that you are already doing ministry –
you just have not yet claimed it as such.

Maybe you are the chair of the Building and Grounds committee,
and your ministry is to help make the church more accessible to all.

Maybe you have made it a ministry
to help newcomers feel welcome each Sunday.

Maybe you play the piano so beautifully it makes people cry,
and you offer your musical gifts to those in the congregation
who are terminally ill.

All these are ministries, when they affirm human dignity,
when they invite us into deeper, more constant, reverent relationships.

All these are ministries, when they help us to be witnesses for love and justice.

The enlivening force for this ministry of all believers
will be not an authoritarian God, not a kingly figure.

The enlivening force for this new ministry of all believers
will be something closer to the ancient Hebrew notion of the Shekinah –
a mysterious power and force
that moves among the people
and leads them to fuller possibilities
for a shared life together.

In the story that I told earlier this morning.

The quiltmaker challenges the king to give up grasping.

She challenges the king to be willing to be “grasped” –

grasped by the joy he finds when he shares his gifts with the world.

And what about you, and the people sitting next to you today?

Where does your deep gladness meet the world’s great need?

How can the Unitarian Universalist church help you find that place,

and live from that place?

When we learn how to discover and share our gifts of ministry in community,

we will find that we have ourselves created a quilt,

in which we piece together our many gifts of ministry.

We will find that this quilt is more beautiful and more powerful

than we could have imagined in our wildest dreams.

May It Be So.

Sources used in the preparation of this sermon include:

Jeff Brumbeau, *The Quiltmaker’s Gift*

Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*

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