

Sixty Years!

sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered April 10, 2016

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I want you all to imagine something with me for a moment: close your eyes and imagine that it is, right now, 1956 – sixty years ago. This sanctuary today likely looks pretty much like it did, but of course there was a different congregation meeting here then. So even though the UU congregation is actually meeting, at this point, in a small meeting room over at what was then the YWCA, now the Chalet office complex on the corner of Naches Ave and Pendleton Way (itself then called A Street,) I want you to imagine, in this exercise, that you are sitting in this sanctuary with your fellow Unitarian Universalists some sixty years ago. Go ahead, close your eyes and imagine it.

Like I said, the sanctuary looks pretty much the same. As do the people, except maybe they've got some different hairstyles or fashion statements than we do today. But as you imagine these similarities between the days of our founding and now, also imagine what it was like to sit where you are in this bygone era. You don't have a cell phone in your pocket, and you've never heard of anything called the internet, let alone things like Facebook or Google. Nobody has anything like a computer in their house, and you likely might type a letter to a relative this afternoon on your manual typewriter and send it to them via US mail. Or if you plan to phone them, you'll be careful to call during a time you know they are available because long distance is expensive, and they don't have an answering machine. You've probably never been on a jet airplane, and only a few of you on a prop plane. Most of you probably still have milk delivered by the milkman, eggs delivered by the egg man, and buy almost

all your other food either fresh or canned, rarely processed and frozen. And none of you has a microwave.

The social norms of the time are different, too. Most of you, men and women, pretty much know what is expected of you in regards to your gender role, and unless you're willing to be labeled a social outcast or something worse, you pretty much go along with these expectations, even if you don't like it. Very few of you – even in this Unitarian Universalist congregation – would feel safe revealing that you've ever had sexual attraction to someone of the same gender as you, or probably even revealing members of your family who reportedly do. In one of the few physical differences you notice in this church building is we don't, of course, have “whichever” signs on our rest rooms. No, we have rooms marked exclusively for “ladies” and “gentlemen.”

We could go on, of course, noting many more superficial and some not-so-superficial differences in life sixty years ago and now, but one thing I want you to notice is not a difference but a similarity: how *you* are the same person, and how this congregation is made up of the same people. Despite all the differences in technology and societal norms, we are *at heart* the same people, and, even more to the point, this liberal religious congregation is *at heart* the same. We are still, sixty years ago, very much human beings with human needs for connection and meaning and strength and compassion. We are still a liberal religious community in which we engage in a free and responsible search for truth, we gather each Sunday for worship and fellowship and coffee, we sit in this building or one like it, and do most everything the same.

As most of you know, leading up to our visioning process which we'll begin next Sunday, I've been doing some sermons on the history of Unitarian Universalism – the tradition we inherit from those who have gone before. I've shared a sermon about our Universalist heritage and one on our Unitarian side, and intend to deliver one on our 50-year-old shared tradition of Unitarian Universalism soon. But the challenge in this is that these are pretty broad brush strokes with which to paint history or tell a story. There is so much detail, so many telling stories, so many real, individual lives that are affected by these broad strokes that we risk losing any real meaning when we focus solely on them. So today, in part acknowledging our sixty year anniversary of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Yakima, and in part to set some context for our visioning process when we look to the future, I want to spend some time telling the story of this congregation's first sixty years. I do this with the same caution in mind – that even looking at one congregation for a relatively brief period of time risks losing the forest for the trees, the “trees” being real people whose lives have affected and been affected by this congregation. But still, there is a story here nonetheless.

One thought I had as I set out to take on this task, that maybe some of you are having, is: who is he to tell this story? After all, I've only been here for a little over five years. I'm a new kid on the block. And I definitely feel that way – like a new kid – but I was a bit humbled and emboldened both when I charted this congregation's history of Ministers and crunched some numbers and realized that my tenure thus far is actually longer than the average tenure of all the Ministers this congregation has had (not including Interims.) In fact, when I look back on our story it seems that the

two most definitive Ministers who shaped this congregation during critical times of its formation – Glenn Turner in the sixties and Lex Crane in the eighties – both were here for only four years, yet both left a strong legacy during their – to me, anyway – rather brief tenures.

Still, I am rather new here nonetheless, so the first thing I did as I set about to do this sermon is I talked with a number of you – particularly those who've been involved for several decades. I was not able to talk to any of our seventeen original founding members, which says something about where we are at in our story. None of us have been here from the very start any more, which makes it all the more important to tell and hear our story over and over again. I did talk to some of our long-term members such as Dan and Jeri Baris and Joyce Dennison, who've all been around for about fifty of the last sixty years. I dug around through our archives a bit and found the original membership book, which the first seventeen members signed on the first page, along with Jack Lines, who was involved in our founding but was apparently out of town on the day everyone signed. Reportedly, he was disappointed he wasn't there.

One of the most interesting things I found in our archives, though, was a sermon by the aforementioned Rev. Lex Crane, delivered in early 1986, titled "The Story of Yakima UU: the First Thirty Years." Maybe because that sermon would mark the halfway point of where we are now, I read it with some interest.

Lex began by describing a feature of what was then the Yakima Republic newspaper called "This We Believe." Each week a representative of a church in Yakima would write a short description, presumably, of what each community believed. He cited entries from the Lutherans, the Church

of Christ, and the Christian Scientists. Then, in early January 1956, another entry appeared, but it was titled “This / Believe” instead of “We.” Under this title was a headline “Unitarians Emphasize Freedom of Thought,” authored by a man named Don Northrop. It could very well be that Mr. Northrup – or the series editor – chose the singular pronoun because there wasn’t, at that time, an actual Unitarian Congregation, so Mr. Northrup was probably only speaking for himself. But Lex goes on to quote Don as saying “I used the word ‘I’ rather than ‘We’ because no one is in a position to tell you what Unitarians believe. The very basis of Unitarianism is freedom, not for the sake of freedom, but in order to search for the truth through the use of experience and reason.” Thus began the Yakima community’s long befuddlement with our somewhat enigmatic tradition.

In any case, Don’s article did generate some attention, and soon after it was published a small group of people began meeting on a regular basis at the YWCA having coffee and conversation. By the end of the year there were thirty-one members. In the Fall of that year, they began to have more formal services; retired Congregational Minister Dr. W.D. Robinson (in the window) preached once a month, as did Maxwell Morris, a former Unitarian minister who taught at YVC. It was formally dubbed the “Yakima Unitarian Fellowship,” and at the time of the merger of the Unitarian and Universalist national bodies in 1961, it changed its name to Yakima Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. By then we had 58 members and 43 kids in Sunday school. Our growth continued in the subsequent years, as we moved from the Y to the Woman’s Century Club, and we became known for bringing a number of prominent speakers to Yakima, perhaps best

exemplified by our brining nationally-known civil rights activist Louis Lomax to Yakima, and rented the big Congregational Church on 2nd Street for the occasion. That building, of course, is where we sit today.

In the interest of time, I'm not going to go too deeply into the rest of Lex's fine sermon or our first thirty years, but I have made some paper copies of it that I'd encourage all of you to read. What I want to do is to build on that story by focusing more on the second thirty years, a part two of his sermon, if you will. What I will acknowledge from that first thirty years, that was confirmed by those of you who were here during the turbulent late-60s, is that this congregation was not immune to the conflicts permeating just about all of our institutions during that revolutionary time. Here at UUCY, our congregation became bitterly divided and almost broke up over the question of whether to advocate against the war in Vietnam. The division would lead to the premature departure of Rev. Turner, our first full-time professional Minister, as well as a considerable portion of the membership. Lex quoted Rev. Turner from a sermon he gave shortly before his departure in 1967, "For the past couple of years, our small church has allowed itself to become restricted in the scope of its interests. For that I bear most of the responsibility... We have done a great deal and missed a great deal. Our attention has been called to the narrowness of our vision and the possibility of a renewal of the larger spirit of our faith." I'm going to come back to that quote in a minute.

Like I said – and I must emphasize that this is only my impression – Revs. Turner and Crane seem to have each defined their respective eras serving this congregation in particularly poignant ways. Glenn working to establish us as a formal institution during a time of upheaval of all

institutions, and Lex kind of redefining us and our vision as a community during a time of pullback from the extreme individualism of the seventies. People tell me that Lex helped usher in an era of community spirit that lasted well after his time with us. People “showed up” I’m told, and showed up regularly and not just on Sundays – with a rich array of young people all vying with each other to get the coveted front-row seats – but showed up for all sorts of picnics and barbeques, discussions and parties, rituals and events. Lex helped establish a structured LRE program by hiring our first Director of Religious Education, Belinda Gaudette (who still volunteers with us once a month in Children’s Chapel and our Preschool.) Others kept this program alive and vital for many years, including people like Betsy McCann and Linda King – both of whom also spent some time working in our church office, a coincidence that I find at least a little curious. (Ask me about that if that piques your curiosity.)

In the nineties we had two fairly stable Ministers back-to-back (in fact, our two longest-serving Ministers) Rev. Greta Crosby and Rev. Chip Wright (with an Interim in between them.) Both Greta and Chip served about eight years each, which, in the scale of UU ministries would probably constitute the short side of an average tenure. That tidbit of context may not be particularly important, but I do think this era represented the longest period of relative stability this congregation has had; stability that goes beyond just who is in the pulpit on Sundays. It was the era when, just around the turn of the century, after renting this space for a number of years, we made the decision to purchase this facility from the then-stretched-thin United Church of Yakima. It was a bold move for us, one that couldn’t have happened if we didn’t have faith that this congregation would be around for decades to

come. But purchase it we did, and by using some innovative financing techniques – and through the generosity of many of our members – we did so without incurring any significant debt. We made this purchase, incidentally, against the advice of some of the UUA staff who advise congregations on these matters. They thought, I've been told that we didn't have a strong or stable enough membership base as well as staff to make the purchase of a building this large a wise strategy. This advice seems to make some sense to me, for I know the textbooks say that a congregation should not make such a significant real estate investment if it has little other capital funds or leverage. But I imagine that the people who might have dispensed such advice never saw this beautiful sanctuary when the sun shines in in the morning – nor would they have known that if we hadn't purchased the building, it likely might have fallen into the hands of a developer who might have taken the wrecking ball to it and this fragile downtown Yakima might have lost an historic treasure. So even if it wasn't the most logical thing to do, it was done with the best of intentions and a noble mission.

So all seemed to be going well. We had a good Minister, a dedicated staff, and a beautiful new home that we could call ours right in the heart of downtown Yakima. But a few years into the new century, some trouble emerged. After many sometimes heated discussions, Rev. Chip finally decided that it was time for him to move on. The conflicts and the aftermath of this rather unpleasant series of events caused a rift among many in the congregation, a rift that may still be percolating under the surface today. Although we did what we needed to do in order to heal and

move on, including the development of our healthy relations covenant which is symbolized by this sign in our choir loft:

We promise to:

- Treat each other with kindness
- Celebrate each other's spiritual growth
- Listen deeply to others
- Speak with courage and humility
- Share the ministry of this congregation

Simple sounding words, but often surprisingly hard to put into practice. This remains one of the hallmarks of why a religious community is important – by walking together in a common spirit, we learn to be our better selves more often.

As I said a couple months back in my “State of the Congregation” sermon, for the last fifteen years or so – ever since the purchase of this building or the departure of our last full-time Minister, we’ve been gradually shrinking in numbers and vitality. Gone are the days when we regularly populated this sanctuary to something that looked like capacity, and gone are the days when a dozen or more church families structured their family activities around the church calendar. By no means does that mean we don’t have any vitality or numbers – and, I believe, our strength in affecting lives and the community of Yakima has never been stronger. But we just don’t have as many people participating as often as we used to, and that’s a reality that I’m communicating often with our Board and other leaders as we envision the best strategies for moving forward. Some of this trend

may, as I've implied, be fallout from some of the decisions we made fifteen years ago. But I also think there is another reason for it – and that is why I began today with the visioning exercise and asked us to consider how things in our society have changed and haven't.

One of the biggest differences that sociologists see between our world today and the world fifty or sixty years ago is that people just don't have as much time for civic or community engagements as we used to. Of course there's a dozen or more sermons in why this is so and what we can do to change it, but the truth is this trend has been affecting most mainline religious institutions for a number of years now, maybe even decades. Here in Yakima, we've also experienced a pretty stark shift in demographics over the last couple of decades, which I believe has also affected this congregation. To me, it's rather remarkable that I can claim that the congregation is at heart the same – I don't think a Minister sixty years from now will be able to make the same claim. I think the church – this church, all churches, including Unitarian Universalist churches – are changing in some fundamental ways that few of us understand. That is one reason why I'm pushing for us to do this visioning now – in some sense, it's not about this congregation, but about how we see ourselves fitting in in this community, and with the wider world of Unitarian Universalism and spiritual communities throughout our country in the coming decades. We'll need to figure out, to paraphrase Frederick Buechner, where our heart's deepest desires meet the world's greatest needs – even as that world is changing rapidly.

So I'm going to close by repeating the words of Glenn Turner cited by Lex earlier: "Our attention has been called to the narrowness of our vision

and the possibility of a renewal of the larger spirit of our faith.” These words jumped out at me when I read them because of his perception that our “vision” has been “narrow,” a problematic premise for a congregation about to embark on a visioning exercise. But I’m grateful for this reminder, for we often think of our vision – either our own personal vision or our collective vision as a congregation – as something grand, optimistic, and forward-thinking. But Rev. Turner reminds us that this can be a deceptive illusion. Often our vision is not as comprehensive as we think it should be. None of us can see the future with any certainty, and we all have our own preconceptions and biases to which we are uniquely blind. That is part of the human condition, and it is one reason why a free and responsible search for truth and meaning undertaken in isolation is not sufficient – it needs the context of community, religious community. This is why it is not sufficient, on its own, to talk of “This I believe,” we need the “This we believe” as well. This is, I think, what Glenn was getting at – what is more complete than our vision is “the larger spirit of our faith.” It is perhaps more nebulous, and harder to put words to, but that is what we are here to do; that is what our ancestors set out to do sixty years ago, and that is what our grandchildren will continue to strive to do in forms and institutions and with tools we cannot even dream possible.



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