

Share the Faith: Turn the World Around

Homily Delivered at JPD Soulful Sundown

April 28, 2007

Candles glowed from the center of the circle, surrounded by people who huddled together despite the August heat. We were there to pray for the Gulf Coast in that summer of 2005, bringing our fears and our hopes and our outrage about hurricanes Rita and Katrina.

Each of us processed the disaster in a different way. Before the service began, a preschooler told me about how the Big, Bad Wolf blew all the houses down. The elementary-age kids couldn't deal with the thought that adults might be vulnerable, so they focused on the animals in need of rescue. Some people lit candles for loved ones in the Gulf Coast who had yet to call. Some lit candles to express the slow burn of anger against a system that couldn't do more to prevent tragedy. Some lit candles in sad silence. Each person brought something different that evening, and each person's gift of presence was valued. We held the vigil together.

One of the things I love about Unitarian Universalism is that it makes room for so many paths, so many ways of dealing with monumental events in our personal lives and in history. When hunger and poverty were getting worse in my town, my congregation gave me a way to do something about it. When September 11 happened, UU worship on campus offered a sanctuary. When the Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated in flight, we lit a candle in church. When my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, UU community offered comfort. Just when global warming seemed hopeless, I went to the UU Youth Con and learned about ways to make a difference. While the Iraq war churns on, the on-line Church of the Younger Fellowship is there for us to share our thoughts 24 hours a day. When violence claimed the lives of 33 students at Virginia Tech, I was grateful to have a UU community who understood grief without platitudes.

At no time did my faith community insist on simple answers to complex questions. I never heard a word about how tragedy is in the Divine plan. Each time a monumental event happened, UU communities were there. Far from being asked to accept what we were told without even thinking, we were encouraged to challenge, to comfort each other, and to take action. We sang. We lit candles. In smaller groups, we shared our questions and our emotions. We listened. That was transformative. By NOT telling me what to believe, Unitarian Universalism gave me something to believe in.

There was a time when I didn't believe that such a community was possible. I thought that people had to have some kind of unshakable creed in order to gather as a religious community for mutual support, spiritual rituals, and faith-based action for justice. That was a failure of imagination on my part. Nevertheless, I walked around with a huge chip on my shoulder, convinced that I was all alone in the world as far as my religious framework was concerned.

I remember explaining to a friend in high school that I thought there was something Divine out there, call it God or Goddess or whatever. I felt that there were lots of ways to approach the Divine, and that what was important to the Divine was that you approach, not which direction you came from. "You would get along really well with the Unitarians," my friend said. "You should talk to Kristen. She's a Unitarian." I thought about that conversation for a long time.

I remember when I was 21 a friend telling me about the newest of the 6 sources for Unitarian Universalism, “Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.” I was still a solitary Pagan at that point, emphasis on the solitary. I played it cool at the time, still attached to the image of myself as someone who didn’t need religious community. But I thought about that conversation for a long time.

My friends didn’t know it, but those conversations changed my life. It took a long time before I was able to add up their subtle hints and identify that, actually, I really did need a religious community and had always needed one. I was conceited enough to think that I was too unique, too much of a free thinker, to be religious. It was comforting to believe that both I and the world were hopeless, because that meant that I was relieved of the responsibility for a search for truth and meaning. It’s just not true. I wasted a lot of time on a failure of imagination. Luckily, the conversations with my friends eventually sank in and I became a Unitarian Universalist. My world turned around. I believe that, together, we can turn the world around.

Unitarian Universalism has saved my soul over and over again. I don’t think I’m the only one. We’ve reflected together this evening about what drives us to seek community, and about the good things we’ve found in community. Unitarian Universalism can give us a framework for spiritual search, ways to channel our energy into justice and compassion, and a community that nurtures transformation. Isn’t that something worth sharing?

Some people think that religion has to be about conformity. Together, as a loud and proud UU community, we can turn that misconception around. Some people have given up hope that there’s anything to be done about the broken world. Together, as a loud and proud UU community, we can turn that around. Some people feel alone and in despair, worried that they will have to pretend to believe something they don’t believe if they want companions for their healing and recovery. Together, as a loud and proud UU community, we can turn that around. This is a transformative faith. Let’s not waste it. Let’s come together as a Unitarian Universalist community, loud and proud, and in so doing we will turn the world around.

So be it. Blessed be.