

The Midnight of the Year

Rev. David E. Bumbaugh

The Unitarian Church in Summit

December 6, 1998

We've always known that this day would come. For more than 10 years, I have stood at the back of the room at the end of the Sunday service, silently reading the list of the names of those who have served as ministers of this church since its beginning in 1908 -- each attached to the dates of service. I have often scanned down the list to my own name and the single date, 1988, and the blank waiting to be filled in -- a mute reminder that in the life of a church, ministers come and go, each adding something to the history and traditions of the institution before they move on to make room for new names on the list. Often I have stood there, listening to the postlude and wondering what date would fill in that blank space beside the entry that is my name. From my first Sunday here, I have been keenly aware that the day would come when I would be preaching my last sermon as minister of this congregation.

There is a fantasy that ministers sometimes play around with, you know. If you were preaching your last sermon, what would you want to say? We sometimes imagine ourselves delivering *the* definitive sermon -- an apostolic summing up of all our passions and convictions in one 20-minute masterpiece. But, confronted with the necessity of offering that final sermon, I find that what I have to say is not the masterpiece I had hoped for. Indeed, it is rather ordinary and unimaginative.

To begin with, I want to say this morning how very proud I am of my involvement with this congregation. This church, almost from the beginning, has had a distinguished tradition of supporting and maintaining the freedom of the pulpit, even when it was uncomfortable and embarrassing. When Carleton Doan chose to use this pulpit to announce his opposition to the entry of the United States into the First World War, when the town of Summit was outraged by his position and regarded the Rev. Dr. Doan as a traitor, the Unitarian Church in Summit refused Dr. Doan's offer to resign and insisted that it is not treason for a minister to speak the truth as he sees the truth, even though the majority of the congregation may not share his vision. More than this, it is the minister's duty to speak the truth as he or she understands it, especially when that truth is unpopular.

Because of this commitment to freedom, the Unitarian Church in Summit has attracted ministers who have been strong and passionate and uncompromising in stating their convictions. Powell Davies championed birth control and world government and civil liberties at a time when such ideas were not only unpopular, but were seen as subversive to public morality. Jacob Trapp was open and effective in his efforts to combat racism and anti-Semitism in the Summit community. Dean Starr was vocal and unapologetic in his principled opposition to the war in Vietnam. It is a source of great pride to me that I have served for more than 10 years as the successor to ministers like these.

But more than this, I am proud to have been minister to a congregation which has understood that the church is more than the lengthened shadow of its ministers -- a congregation of lay people who, for the most part, have remained engaged with the congregation even when they did not agree with their ministers and could not fully embrace the vision which they proclaimed.

Certainly, over the years, I have confused, embarrassed, and sometimes infuriated members of this congregation. My politics have been and remain unapologetically liberal; my pacifism has been public even in times of war; my critique of our economic system has been predictable; my revisionist history has challenged many of the sacred cows which are embraced by the national consensus; and my theology has been radical, even by Unitarian Universalist standards. To be honest, some people have left rather than deal with a minister so distant from their own convictions and so hard to explain to family and friends and neighbors. But most of you have stayed and have engaged me in dialogue with an openness and intensity which has enriched and deepened my life and, I believe, the life of the congregation. I have been challenged by you to be clear about what I believe and to proclaim that faith with all the clarity I can manage, and for that, I am eternally grateful to you. I leave this church deepened and enriched for having been part of this remarkable community.

The second thing I want to say is to commend you on your continuing effort to build here a caring community -- one which reaches toward the ideal of the blessed community. It is not easy, in these times, to sustain voluntary community. Individuals and families are constantly being torn in a dozen different ways, as they seek to meet the commitments of job and family and civic responsibility. What is more, our efforts at building community take place without the traditional supports of proximity and shared experience. We come from some 52 different towns and communities. Our children are scattered through dozens of different schools. We do not encounter each other casually at the bank or in the supermarket or at the PTA. Community does not just happen for us. We have had to make it happen.

And yet, over the past 10 years I have been impressed by how seriously you take your responsibility for each other, and work to make community happen. And it does happen, in quiet and informal ways, as people build networks of concern and care. I have seen remarkable examples of people responding to each other's needs and joys and concerns. You have a talent for understanding that a church is not just a gathering, that a church is not just an audience for music and sermons, but rather a people bound by covenant to live together in harmony and to care about each other despite the differences that may exist between them. That understanding -- difficult though it sometimes is to sustain -- is the bedrock of your strength as a church.

And from that foundation, you have had a remarkable history of reaching out beyond these walls to the larger community. Early in its history, the church saw itself as an important educational institution, bringing to Summit a number of significant and diverse voices through its lecture series -- a practice which has been reinstated by the Social Concerns Committee in recent years. Throughout its history, the church has been a place

where fine music has been presented to the larger community. But in recent years, we have enlarged our sense of the community to which we are responsible. For more than 10 years, we have engaged in housing the homeless; we have worked with the food bank; we have funded a transitional apartment for the homeless; we have supported the Summit program for feeding the hungry; we have tutored children and provided for summer programs for children; we have entered into an ongoing relationship with a congregation in Transylvania. And, most important, we have lobbied for humane government policies. We have understood that a community that is turned in upon itself sooner or later must be strangled by its own insularity. Our concern for each other must be a reflection of our concern for the larger world. It is our dream of a blessed community which draws beyond these walls and this immediate community. This church has always had a rich sense of the larger reality in which it is embedded. Most of this work has happened not at the urging of the ministers, but out of the passions and convictions of the members of the congregation. I am proud to have been affiliated with a congregation which understands its mission and its covenant at such an elemental level. You have taught me much about what it means to be a church.

As we pack our belongings in anticipation of the arrival of the moving van this week, I find myself remembering so many special moments -- times when we have laughed together, and wept together, worked together, disagreed with each other, planned and schemed and found ways around disappointments and frustrations. And what underlies all those memories is the recognition of the kindness, the generosity, the openness and support you have given me over these years. You are a truly great congregation and my life has been enriched by the years we have shared.

Having said this, I would not have you think that I am fully satisfied with the results of my ministry here. I am pleased that we are finally moving to resolve the building problems, but it is one of my greatest frustrations that it has consumed so much of our time and energy, and I will tell you also that while I am elated at the response of many of our newer members who have pledged to the capital fund drive, I am disappointed that some of our longtime members have not caught the vision sufficiently; that they have not been drawn to make the kind of sacrificial commitment which I know they could make and I had hoped they would make. I have no doubt that we will one day soon stand in the new building, our program all under one roof, but I had hoped it would be sooner and easier.

I am also disappointed that we have not changed the name of the church. For 37 years, we have been a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association. I had hoped that the Summit Church, which once bore the name All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church, would reaffirm its Universalist roots. I had hoped that the Unitarian Church in Summit, committed to diversity, would replace the word church with the world congregation, thus signaling its welcome to people for whom the term church is a barrier and a painful reminder of oppression and hostility. It did not happen. We chose not to become the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Summit and to remain the Unitarian Church in Summit. It is a narrower identity which denies the reality of our openness, but in a curious way, it is also a sign of our concern for maintaining the community. I still

dream of the day when the name of the institution will reflect more accurately the nature of the institution.

In some ways, it is ironic that we should be engaged in leave-taking in December. This holiday season is a time when our culture seems focused on nostalgia -- on a persistent reverence for the world as it never was but as we would like to think it was. It is a time when we are encouraged to bury all our differences and distinctions, our very identities under a mountain of commerce-driven good feeling. Over the 10 years of my service as your minister, this is the season each year when I have been most tempted to seek an honest line of work. My personal history and my emerging faith have produced in me a strong resistance to this season and its expectations. If you've been here for more than a year, you know that this is when I am most driven to define myself in opposition to the prevailing culture. I have rewritten most of the carols, and I tend to avoid the traditional texts and stories, leading some people to think that I do not celebrate the holiday season.

The truth is that I embrace the aspect of the season which often gets lost in our nostalgia-driven cultural celebration. For this season is only superficially about the past. Its major focus is upon the future. Whether, like me, you celebrate the festival of the return of the sun, or like the majority you celebrate the birth of the new child, both are celebrations which turn us to the future. At the midnight of the year, all the world awaits the turning from darkness to light, from death to life, from habit to hope, from what has been to what will be.

And so in many ways, it is most appropriate that we should be saying farewell at this season of the year. For the church, as for me, this is a season of turning -- a time to assess who you are, who you have become, and who you want to be; a time to shake off old habits and enlist in the discipline of hope; to live in expectation of the new life which, even now, is being incubated. As I have said to you before, that future is yours to determine and not mine to influence, except as the past always influences the possibilities out of which the new thing emerges. But I would not want to leave without a few words about the nature of the religious venture.

First of all, I would warn you to beware of nostalgia. One of the consequences of having strong ministers is that the congregation can become mired in a muddled recollection of the past -- one which smoothes out all the irritations and conflicts and disappointments which are part of any living relationship and creates an ideal that no one can live up to. Jacob Trapp once told me that he nearly left Summit after only a year as minister of the church because he could not live up to the expectations of people who held an exalted memory of his predecessor, Powell Davies. And, of course, after he had been the minister for 25 years, no one could live up to the memories of Jacob Trapp. It is not fair to you or to your minister, whoever that person turns out to be, to measure the present reality against a nostalgic view of the past.

Secondly, I would warn you against the temptation to try to be all things to all people and to expect your minister to trim his or her sails to the current opinions of the congregation. The minister's job is not to make everyone comfortable; indeed, the minister's job is to

make everyone a little uncomfortable. A minister who is not outrageous from time to time is not doing the job. It is my experience that over time, more people leave churches out of boredom than because of controversy. I do not expect you to agree with everything the minister says or does; I do encourage you to engage the minister around your differences as many of you have engaged me. And, by the way, engaging the minister does not mean anonymous complaints and coffee-hour and dinner discussion-group gossip.

Thirdly, I would encourage you to continue to own the ministry of this church. The person you call to be your minister will have a very specific role to play, but the ministry of the church belongs to its members. When you begin to understand your function in this place as a reflection of your own faith, as a means to a spiritual understanding of yourself and all the dimensions of your life, the church will become the vehicle by which you will grow and deepen and enrich your own souls. Ultimately, you are responsible for your own spiritual welfare and for the effectiveness of the church. The minister is there to support and challenge and encourage you in the process.

And finally, I would remind you that integrity is central to the religious life. This means that you need to have a clear understanding of who you are; of the tradition in which you stand; of what matters to you and why. This means that central to your spiritual life is clarity about what is so important in your life that you dare not compromise it lest you sacrifice your own soul. You as an individual and the church as an institution will find that as you are clear about who you are and what you believe and what values you serve and what boundaries you respect, the opportunities for dialogue and cooperation with those of differing faiths will increase and move beyond pious platitudes into genuine respect. There is no place in this world for "religion in general." Religion in general quickly degenerates into one more aspect of the entertainment industry. But religion which is structured around a core of values, around a stubborn integrity, has the power to transform the world. And that, after all, is what religion is about -- the transformation of the world.

The calendar reads December. Except for a few stubborn holdouts, the leaves are down; the hours of daylight are few and night is long. Despite a warm autumn, we know in the back of our minds that the cold of winter will soon descend upon us. This is the season for gathering around the hearth, for sharing memories, for giving thanks for all those women and men whose lives are woven into ours, whose dreams shaped our present reality, whose work made possible our accomplishments. But this is also the midnight of the year, the time of turning, the time when the sun turns back from its southward passage and begins its long journey into spring.

It is December. Let this be, for each of us, a time to focus on the future which lies before us, a time for discarding old habits and undertaking the practice of hope, of envisioning new ways of being, new possibilities for community, new opportunities to express our values, our dreams, our faith in the world. That is what this season is about -- a turning into the future, into our future, that the promise of the past may be realized by a new generation.

