

***Pickup Trucks and Priuses: Are we all truly welcome?***  
**Sermon by Marie Blohowiak, Congregational Life Coordinator**  
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**Appleton, Wisconsin**  
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**Reading:** *We Come Together* adapted from Peter Lee Scott

We come together in an attitude of openness - not knowing quite what will happen, yet daring to receive a new idea, a new experience, sustenance for our minds and our hearts.

We come with an attitude of praise, expressing our thankfulness for the good that has come into our lives.

We come with an attitude of humility, knowing how much we need one another, how alone we can be in the world, how vulnerable if we face life solely by ourselves.

We come in the spirit of love, seeking human warmth and fellowship in the hands and faces of those around us.

We come in the spirit of joy, seeking reconfirmation and renewal of life, of love, and of hope.

**Sermon:**

Some Unitarian Universalist jokes for you...

Q: Do Unitarian Universalists ever pray?

A: Only when they think a Democrat is going to lose an election.

Q: What does it mean if you see a Unitarian Universalist kneeling with her head bowed?

A: It means that she is tying her shoelace.

Q: What's the definition of Unitarian Universalist diversity?

A: Four colors of Priuses in the parking lot.

As all jokes usually do, these have a spark of truth in them. In this country, you will find congregations on all points of the spiritual spectrum-- some that are completely Humanist, like the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis where the words God and Jesus are rarely, if ever spoken. Other congregations that are much more traditionally Christian, like the First Church in Chestnut Hill where you may need to look hard for the obvious Unitarian Universalist aspects. And, of course, there are those like ours, professing a great diversity of spiritual backgrounds.

When we have such diversity with spiritual backgrounds, we'd like to hope that we are truly welcoming of all who walk in the door. But is that true? While I have been on staff for the past 11 years, I have heard many people say they were uncomfortable with aspects of who we are or who we claim to be, and that is of course concerning to me. Are we too intellectual? Too justice oriented? Do people who don't drive a Prius feel uncomfortable? This particular point hit close to home when I was perusing Facebook last year. A photo from the Fellowship parking lot showing a whole row of Priuses along with one non-hybrid. I was quite nervous to read the

comments, especially of whoever owned that van. The van owner actually did see it, and laughingly commented that her other vehicle is a hybrid. This is not the first photo I have seen about the amount of Priuses we have here on what has been dubbed "Prius Row".

If people don't fit the stereotypical Unitarian Universalist look and behavior, they may feel "outside the circle", as Marla put it earlier. I certainly want people to be free to be their true, authentic selves, without feeling the need to hide parts of themselves. Do you feel like you belong? If yes, what happened to make you feel that way? If no, what needs to happen?

I have had long talks with Fellowship members who continue to find much meaning in their Christian faith, but they are saddened by some of the comments that are made trying to restrict Christian language here, while fully embracing, for example, Buddhist and Pagan language. Can someone call the Fellowship a church, if that is meaningful to them? Knowing that many people come hurt by their Christian backgrounds, can we still understand that other people find great meaning in a current Christian label? This is particularly true in our dominantly Christian community, where many people come to the Fellowship ready to fully discard anything that has to do with Christianity in favor of something new.

We also have to be careful of making assumptions on other's economic backgrounds. Often Unitarian Universalist congregations have populations that consist of mostly upper middle class folks. The Fellowship does have a lot of economic diversity, and that is one type of diversity that isn't obvious or talked about. People on both ends, much higher and much lower than the middle class "norm" we have in the greater community and in the Fellowship, have expressed discomfort at sharing those parts of themselves because they weren't sure if they would be judged. This is a hard part of my job- I hear these stories and want to reassure them that they can be fully themselves and not hide any part of who they are, and that they won't be judged for it. But just because I personally haven't experienced that judgment, doesn't mean their concerns aren't valid, and now I am naming it so we can be aware of it and talk about it. While we can try to find common ground in areas that have nothing to do with financial means-- our hopes, dreams, excitements, and even worries and concerns, for some of us, these are tied into our finances.

As the political season gets ever louder and all encompassing, I want to be careful not to assume that we all will vote the same way. Rather than talking about candidates, I would rather talk about issues that are meaningful and important to us. We can likely find common ground, or the possibility of sharing something that you feel passionate about. This brings us back to the Principles for a Healthy Congregation that we all read earlier. This is what we want to do in our interactions at the Fellowship and all parts of our lives- hear each other's stories and share meaning.

I personally have always felt grateful that this was the Unitarian Universalist congregation that I found. I don't know if I would have stayed in either extreme-- a mostly Humanist or mostly Christian congregation. I don't know if either of those would have truly let me discover who I am spiritually. I didn't go to church growing up, so when I got here, I had a lot to learn about

religion and spirituality, and where I continue to find meaning. I have been able to try on different spiritual practices to see what feels right and learn about the world's religions in a completely different way because when I first came, I thought the only options were prayer and reading the bible. I also had to get over my own anti-Christian feelings. Like I said, I didn't go to church regularly growing up, but the few experiences I did were not positive ones. I went to Catholic mass with my grandparents and my most prominent memories include my grandpa pushing me away from the communion offerings. It made me feel like an outsider and not worthy in a way that I hadn't before. Looking back, I better understand why this sacred ritual is performed the way it is, but I also hope that other children get explanations that I didn't.

My favorite metaphor that helped me understand different sacred traditions is Rev. Forrest Church's Cathedral of the World. I first heard it from our previous Senior Minister, Rev. Roger Bertschhausen in the UU101 class I took when I joined.

*You find yourself in the entry of a vast cathedral. In your mind's eye, look around. Contemplate the mystery and contemplate with awe. Above all else, contemplate the windows. In the Cathedral of the World there are windows beyond number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of dust, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Each tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines through.*

*Light of God (or Truth or Being Itself, call it what you will) that is outside of the Cathedral shines not only upon us, but out from within us as well. Together with the windows, we are part of the Cathedral, not apart from it. Together we comprise an interdependent web of being. Honoring many different religious approaches, it only excludes the truth-claims of absolutists. That is because fundamentalists claim that the Light shines through their window only. Some go so far as to beseech their followers to throw stones through other people's windows.*

*We shall never see the Light directly, only as refracted through the windows of the Cathedral. Prompting humility, life's mystery lies hidden, beyond knowledge. The Light (God, Truth) is veiled. Yet, that we can encompass with our minds the universe that encompasses us is a cause for great wonder.*

Many know this story from Rev. Forrest Church. I was immediately drawn to it when I first heard it years ago. It just makes so much sense to me! No one knows the Truth with a capital T, but we all have our own small- t- truths. This wasn't something I was taught, but something that I seemed to have been born knowing, and it was hard for me to understand why others felt differently- why they felt that their window was the only truth, or that they would even consider throwing stones into others' windows.

This metaphor helps me understand why we carry wounds from other faith traditions, and why I need to find ways of helping people heal these wounds. We need each other to learn from, we need to understand that everything we have been through has helped shape our lives and we can celebrate what was beneficial, and set aside what was not. We need to remember ours is not the only window.

The reading this morning was an excerpt from our Principles of a Healthy Congregation. I love this document so much, and feel it is not lifted up nearly enough, but it has been twice this summer! As Jim Coakley shared several weeks ago, this document was created in 2001 at a period of time when the Fellowship was very healthy, but had gone through a time of challenge, so the community realized that there needed to be a set of agreements to help us know how to be together. This is of course, important for our small groups, but also for all of our own personal interactions. When I first got a copy as a brand new member, I put it on my refrigerator. It is how I strive to be in relationship with others. I think this message helps us see how important it is to be welcoming of all. It reads: “We challenge ourselves and each other to grow and be faithful to the truth we find within.” This tells us our truth (with a small t!) is not someone else's, and we should hold our own truth lightly as it always has the possibility of changing. The document goes on, “We listen carefully to each other, seeking both to understand and to be understood.” This means we share our own truth with others, to share of ourselves and know that they may find meaning too, but always with the understanding that they may not. And that is OK.

As I already mentioned, Unitarian Universalist congregations vary widely. Beyond having a chalice as an important symbol, one of the other things you will find at all other Unitarian Universalist congregations is that we affirm and promote the same seven principles, as written in your Order of Service. We live out these Principles within a “living tradition” of wisdom and spirituality, drawn from six sources, also listed in your Order of Service. Our first *principle* is that we respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Also telling, is the encompassing list of where we may find our truth. Our children’s curriculum in religious education is often based on all six sources. While we want to give our children tools to be able to find their own path, we teach them about others’ paths as well so they are understanding and accepting.

I do want to say a word of caution...there are messages, statements, and ideas that we as a spiritual community truly will never agree with. While our boundaries of what is and isn’t ok may be much bigger than most religions, we do still have them. Someone walking in our doors with the **sole purpose** of touting racism, or xenophobia or misogyny will never be welcome to spread their message. That falls outside of our welcoming boundaries. Not only does it “break” 4 of our 7 principles, in my opinion, but these ideas go against what many in our congregations consider a basic value - that love is the doctrine of our faith. We all walk through the doors with our own biases, but we work as a community to educate ourselves and grow. As William Schultz put it, “Unitarian Universalism seeks to heal a fractured world and the broken lines within it by calling each of us to the best that is in us”.

My favorite “ground rule” that I use in every class and group that I run here is that as a spiritual community, we “converse, we don’t convert”. We want to share ourselves with each other--our whole selves. We know that there will be differences, and we aren’t trying to make the other person come to our side, or believe in what we believe. If we question something, we do so with respect and an open heart and mind. What other spiritual home can two people can share their views on God or the afterlife or pick another spiritual topic, and have differing opinions, and that it can be ok? Let’s embrace our differences and be grateful that we and our

kids can see conservatives and liberals be able to have valuable conversations together. People who are vegan and who hunt respect each other's life choices. And, of course, people from truly all spiritual backgrounds come here to grow in mind and spirit, as our mission statement uplifts, and do so without having to hide any part of themselves.

Instead of asking people what they do for a living or if they are going to college, ask them what they are most excited about right now in their lives or what they get out of being at the Fellowship. These are open questions that anyone can answer and help share our stories with one another. Take these questions with you as you enter the Fellowship Hall, looking for cookies this morning and get to know someone in a new way. --May it be so.

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