

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
The Choices We Make
October 23, 2011

Prelude

Chalice Lighting

We light this candle

For the light of truth and reason

For the warmth of love and friendship

For the flame of strength and action

And for the vision of tolerance and justice.

Announcements

John Pepper

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here.

(Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, we have an application form also on the table you can fill out and turn in when you are ready.

Next week Phil Jones will be our guest speaker and his sermon is titled, “Accessing the Point of Love and Self Empowerment”. He will speak about how Breath, Ancient Sound and Harmonics access deep states of conscious connection with ALL THAT IS.

After that service, Phil will also host a workshop. The sermon and the workshop sound fascinating.

Our special collection this morning is for Operation Wildfire. Please make check payable to the charity and put it in the collection basket.

If you can, please stay for our potluck lunch.

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

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Opening Words

John Pepper

Please join with me now in a spirit of worship.

These are the days that have been given to us; let us rejoice and be glad in them.

These are the days of our lives; let us live them well in love and service.

These are the days of mystery and wonder; let us cherish and celebrate them in gratitude together.

These are the days that have been given to us; let us make of them stories worth telling to those who come after us.

Rejoice Together, p4, William R. Murry

Hymn

Please join me in our opening hymn standing as you are able singing hymn no. 346 “Come Sing A Song With Me.”

Joys and Concerns

John Pepper

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

Offertory Statement

You will hear me repeat a common refrain often throughout today’s worship service: “I don’t believe in magic.” Maybe you do, but I doubt it. This place does not run on magic, no place does. It runs on the creativity you provide, the effort you exert, the leadership you inspire, and the finances you give.

So that this place may continue to be a viable component in each of our lives, the offering will now be given and gratefully received.

Offertory Music

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Story for All Ages – “*The Bundle of Sticks*” an Aesop’s Fable

Reading

My reading this morning is titled “Ambedkar’s Choice” and it comes from a book of writings I’m growing to love titled *Be the Change: Poems, Prayers and Meditations for Peacemakers and Justice Seekers* and it was written by Stephen Shick.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born in 1891, an “untouchable” in India’s rigid caste system. He was a member of the Dalit underclass, situated below the four traditional Hindu castes. His parents were devotees of the fifteenth-century Indian poet saint Kabir. Kabir’s famous admonition was to “*Jump into experience while you are alive! Think ... and think ... while you are alive. What you call “salvation” belongs to the time before death.*” This philosophy was a gift Ambedkar’s parents gave to their son. He used that gift well and eventually earned doctorates from Columbia University and the University of London. He became one of the most educated persons in India. After India won independence, Nehru, the first prime minister, asked Ambedkar to write the nation’s constitution.

All his life Ambedkar sought salvation before death for all untouchables. “Educate, Agitate, Organize” became his famous slogan.

He sought justice for his people in many ways – as a government official, law school dean, and newspaper editor. He led sit-ins at public and religious sites opposing the treatment of the untouchables. He differed from his contemporary Mohandas Gandhi, not in his commitment to non-violence, but in his analysis that the caste system, not the British Empire, was the greatest barrier to the independence of all India’s people.

Ambedkar’s passion for justice was interwoven with his quest to find a religion that best represented his belief in human equality. In 1935, after a decade of non-violent resistance to the brutalities suffered daily by the untouchables, Ambedkar announced that he would seek a new religion because he felt that the evils of the caste system could not be separated from traditional Hinduism.

He insisted a change in religion was needed to make the world a better place and for individuals to gain self-respect. He said religion had to be a rational choice and that choice had to take into consideration the imperative of justice for all.

Requests from religious leaders poured in, urging him to choose their faith tradition. Shortly before his death in 1956 Ambedkar announced he had chosen Buddhism and within a day or two, a half million Hindus converted.

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Yet not all Buddhists rejoiced, for with Ambedkar's choice came his interpretation of the core Buddhist teachings. He asserted that his new faith carried a strong imperative to educate, agitate, and organize against injustice. For many Buddhists this approach was unacceptable for it required confrontation and challenge.

For Ambedkar, and for many whose lives burn with a passion for justice, there is a link between the spirit and a religious home to guide and inform their work. Creating that link requires making a conscious choice.

Prayer

John Pepper

Please close your eyes, look out the window, simply relax in whatever way you center yourself for a time of prayer and meditation. (Pause)

Each day I make a number of decisions. They may be mundane, like choosing what to wear, or they may be vital, addressing health, relationship or financial challenges. Even when my choices seem limited, I know there is always a choice that reveals the highest and best in me.

In all my life's circumstances, if I listen closely, I am being clearly guided. The guidance of the universe may show up in many ways – as an unlikely coincidence, a word or phrase that stands out in conversation or an inner knowing that needs no explanation.

I take comfort knowing that I am continually directed to make wise decisions that bless me and strengthen my faith in the Universe's guidance. (Pause) Amen!

The Daily Word, April 28, 2010

Sermon – *The Choices We Make*

I am often frustrated these days. It seems we as a people don't realize what it takes to get the job done. And I'm often just as guilty. Several years ago, after we bought our home, we spruced things up a bit by hiring a contractor to paint and install some new lighting fixtures. Everything was selected by our decorator. It turned out beautifully.

Where once an old recessed ceiling can light had been, now there was a new modern small directional spotlight shining on one of my favorite paintings. Over time that spotlight began to flicker and finally it went totally out. Changing the bulb didn't help, so I concluded it was obviously some complicated wiring failure.

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Now I may be an engineer, but I'm not an electrical engineer and wiring issues intimidate me and quite frankly, electricity scares me. So I simply avoided dealing with the issue for several years by watching it not work at all. Part of me was hoping it would flicker on again just as it had flickered off. But the magic never happened and just recently I realized I had three choices: I could hire an electrician to come and repair it, I could continue to ignore the problem, or I could get over my fears and fix it myself.

I decided hiring someone for this little project made no sense at all and it wasn't going to magically repair itself, so I took on the project. Frankly, I'm embarrassed to tell you the rest of the story, but here goes. I made sure the power to the switch was off, I got out my little ladder, I began to pull the whole assembly apart not knowing what kind of wiring to expect and of course I expected the most complicated system possible.

Instead what I found was that the new little spotlight, which sat in the new fixture attached to the ceiling, was actually attached by an electrical cord which led to a small electrical box which simply screwed into the old light bulb socket. When I screwed the new little electrical box tightly into the socket, magically the light worked.

So, how many engineers does it take to screw in a light bulb? Only one, but first he has to take several years to diagnose the problem correctly.

So this relates to us how? We are all responsible for all aspects of our lives and when something isn't working or needs to be done, we can ignore the problem and hope it will go away, we can hire someone else to take the project on, or we can take care of it ourselves.

Each of us is the steward of our own life and each must attend to the issues that arise in his or her life and often the things we must do to maintain that life aren't as daunting as first we might imagine.

And this applies to our approach to this Church. The truth is we are almost completely a family of volunteers who undertake to bring comfort, enlightenment, and spiritual growth to those within our community, to outreach to our neighbors, and to manage our large and complex physical plant. Those aren't just words. That is the reality of our situation. We the members of this congregation are all the stewards of this Church.

This Church actually reminds me of my lighting fixture adventure. If we want to keep things running or fix something that is broken or offer a new program, whatever the issue may be, it isn't going to magically happen on its own. The issue will require personal effort or financial resources to hire it done or we'll need to stop funding something in order to fund something else or we can ignore the problem and hope it will resolve itself on its own.

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Years ago a good friend of mine was a professional estimator who created estimates for major construction projects.

According to him, there are three optimization principles we must always keep in mind when planning and estimating any project and these principles apply to us here at the Thoreau Woods as well. Each of the three principals has very specific relationships with the other two. The principles relate to time, quality, and money when attempting to achieve a desired result.

If you want to optimize time, that is shorten the time required to do something, you can only optimize one of the other two principles and still achieve your desired result. All three cannot be optimized – something has to give. For instance, if you want to optimize time and quality, you will have to sacrifice more money to get the job done.

Similarly, if you demand high quality and low costs, then you must sacrifice the time it will take to achieve your desired result. And if quality is not important, then you can always optimize both time and money, but then you get what you pay for and none of us really wants an inferior product.

We here at the church must decide how we are going to commit our resources and what the expected results need to be. Will we commit our own personal time and talents? How will we need to spend or raise money? Or will we relax the quality requirements?

The bottom line for me is our choices and our personal commitments dictate the outcomes. If we want something done, my guess is we have very high expectations regarding the outcomes.

But another equally important bottom line is that we are a very small Church. We have chosen to do most things for ourselves. For instance, a hired minister would not only preach, but he or she would also help organize and plan events, teach classes, and probably of most importance, he or she would provide pastoral care during times of death and illness.

As a Church we have pledged as a congregation to manage all of these functions ourselves, individually and in groups. We have pledged individually to give our time, our talents, and our financial resources to keep this place running and to meet our collective needs.

Once again, I'd venture to guess none of us believes in magic and this Church simply will not run or thrive without our collective resources. Nothing magical or mystical is going to step in and get the job done.

When other traditional churches, or even the UUA, bring up the topic of resources, they typically turn the conversation toward the concept of tithing and in my theological opinion they have taken a theological concept and inappropriately taken it over for their own needs.

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Tithing may have something to do with churches, but the concept is much broader and is not limited to only churches. In my opinion, rather than limiting tithing to the running of a church, tithing is more akin to one of our stated beliefs articulated by one of our UU principles – respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Part of respecting something is taking care of that something, and that may include this Church, but it also certainly includes caring for the poor, protecting the environment and seeking to right wrongs. None of these causes magically rights themselves. They all require efforts and resources on our part. And where these and the other causes we believe in intersect with this our Church, we are each obligated to support them here. That is simply why we are here.

Paul Ryan in his book *Giving Thanks: The Art of Tithing* gives us the following point of view. He says:

What exactly is a tithe? Tithing is about saying “thank you,” which always begins with putting some gratitude in our attitude. Giving thanks is about tithing not only with our money, but also with our thoughts, words, actions, time, efforts and possessions.

Tithing provides us with a proven systematic way to multiply our good through a demonstration of our willingness to give back one-tenth of everything we’ve been given. We tithe as a show of gratitude for what we have already been given and as a symbol of our gratitude for the faith in the fact that even greater good is coming to us. Tithing is a way of showing that we are ready, willing and able to embrace that increased abundance. Tithing is a nonverbal way to say we are ready to have omnipresent abundance manifest in our lives now.

The word tithe is based on the word tenth. It is a percentage. Ancient cultures believed that the number ten was a powerful number of increase, symbolic of the whole. When you give thanks for what the Universe has provided you, by selflessly giving back one-tenth of what you’ve been given, you connect yourself to this cyclical flow and your blessings are multiplied. When you are connected to this flow, your tithe increases your service to others, which in turn increases the supply of abundance in your life.

Historically, tithing was considered an act of service and giving the tenth part, or the tithe, was an honorable action. Tithing is not about giving back to God or the Universe out of duty, obedience or necessity, or giving in order to get something in return.

Tithing is not about money, and it’s not a religious injunction created by the Judeo-Christian religions. Tithing actually predates the Bible by centuries and has been practiced in various forms by all cultures.

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Many cultures, wanting their people to be ever prospered, went so far as to make tithing a requirement. The giving of the tithe was written down in a specific legalistic form in the Talmud, the Jewish law, which also forms the first five books of today's Bible. The various written laws created intense debate over what should be tithed, how much and to whom. Questions regarding the particulars of tithing laws still arise today among Talmudic scholars, and among Christian scholars, who debate whether or not the laws of tithing pertain to members of their faith.

Somewhere along the way the intent of the law, the Spirit of the law was lost.”¹ But we don't have to remain lost, we can give back, we can give of our time, our efforts and our resources. Each of us can give in whatever way is meaningful, whether that is our time or our finances. And we can give back to the neighbor next door or to a charity we believe in or even to a family member in need. The choice as always is up to you.

And if we want this place to survive and thrive, if we value what we have here, we must give back here as well. I wouldn't be up here today if I didn't believe in this Church and in this denomination. I truly believe for many we are a fresh respite from the sometimes silly theology practiced by many within the religious community. And we are also a place where other realities can be shared and brought to the light of day. Those realities may have to do with things beyond religion such as economic or justice concerns or a host of other topics too numerous to go into here. And in the words of Ambedkar we do educate, agitate, and organize. We are a forum, a free forum for both thought and speech. And that is very valuable to me and I hope it is for you as well.

I'm going to conclude this morning by reading to you from one of my most cherished books of wisdom and faith, *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran.

Then said a rich man, speak to us of Giving.

And he answered: you give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give. For what are your possessions but things you keep and guard for fear you may need them tomorrow?

And tomorrow, what shall tomorrow bring to the over prudent dog burying bones in the trackless sand as he follows the pilgrims to the holy city? Is not dread of thirst when your well is full, the thirst that is unquenchable?

There are those who give little of the much which they have – and they give it for recognition and their hidden desire makes their gifts unwholesome.

¹*Giving Thanks: The Art of Tithing*, Paul Langguth Ryan, 22-5.

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And there are those who have little and give it all. These are the believers in life and the bounty of life, and their coffer is never empty.

There are those who give with joy, and that joy is their reward. And there are those who give with pain, and that pain is their baptism.

And there are those who give and know not pain in giving, nor do they seek joy, nor give with mindfulness of virtue; they give as in yonder valley the myrtle breathes its fragrance into space.

Through the hands of such as these God speaks, and from behind their eyes He smiles upon the earth.

It is well to give when asked, but it is better to give unasked, through understanding; and to the open-handed the search for one who shall receive is joy greater than giving.

And is there aught you would withhold? All you have shall someday be given; therefore give now, that the season of giving may be yours and not your inheritors’.

You often say, “I would give, but only to the deserving.” The trees in your orchard say not so, nor the flocks in your pasture. They give that they may live, for to withhold is to perish.

Surely he who is worthy to receive his days and his nights, is worthy of all else from you.

And he who has deserved to drink from the ocean of life deserves to fill his cup from your little stream.

And what desert greater shall there be, than that which lies in the courage and the confidence, nay the charity, of receiving?

And who are you that men should rend their bosom and unveil their pride, that you may see their worth naked and their pride unabashed?

See first that you yourself deserve to be a giver, and an instrument of giving. For in truth it is life that gives unto life – while you, who deem yourself a giver, are but a witness.

And you receivers – and you are all receivers – assume no weight of gratitude, lest you lay a yoke upon yourself and upon him who gives.

Rather rise together with the giver of his gifts as on wings; for to be over mindful of your debt, is to doubt his generosity who has the freehearted earth for mother, and God for father.²

Namaste!

² *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran

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Sermon Response

Closing Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 287 “Faith of the Larger Liberty” and remain standing for the Benediction.

Benediction

John Pepper

As we leave this community of the spirit, may we remember the difficult lesson that each day offers more things than we can do. May we do what needs to be done, postpone what does not, and be at peace with what we can be and do.

Therefore, may we learn to separate that which matters most from that which matters least of all.

Amen, Namaste, and Go In Peace!

Rejoice Together, p124, Richard S. Gilbert

Extinguish the Chalice

Postlude