

ONE FOR ALL AND ALL FOR ONE

A Sermon by the Rev. Phyllis L. Hubbell

Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church

March 8, 2009

SERMON

Christene Robinson, senior minister of the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque writes in this month's issue of the UU World about the time a worship committee member mentioned to the committee that she thought it would help her become a better worship leader if they could talk some about the "spiritual" part of worship. "I don't know why you'd want THAT!" someone sa[id] her voice tinged with scorn. That was the end of that topic."

Some of you may know Don Robinson, who is the local UU minister who founded Beacon House, a community center for teens in what used to be one of the toughest neighborhoods in D.C. Don has preached in many area UU congregations. Perhaps fifteen years ago, he told us that often at members of our suburban congregations where he was the guest minister, would ignore him. I might think that he was overly sensitive if I had not heard other African American UU's mention the same kind of reaction from other white members of their congregations.

John remembers a board meeting at one of our large Unitarian Universalist issues during the time of the Tianaman Square massacre of several hundred people. As he recalls it the Chair had scheduled a trip to China before the massacre. Some felt the trip should be called off in protest, but some thought it should continue. The issue came up at a Board meeting. It was a heated discussion. Very heated. Several men stood up from their chairs and shouted at those on the other side of the table, all of whom were women

John's father, a long time faithful Unitarian Universalist, used to say that the task of the church is to keep the saints from killing each other.

“One for all and all for one.” Many have commented that our society has developed a strong focus on the individual at the expense of the group. If that is true generally, it is certainly true of Unitarian Universalism. Theologically we fiercely support the right of individuals to decide for themselves what they believe. Churches are highly independent and often have little connection with the district or association. We are seriously into the all for one, but we may not be so clear about what one owes to all.

One of the most common answers I've heard to that question is that people were looking for community. But we're not clear about what it takes to develop a healthy religious community.

We come to church rather than some secular group because we seek something that lifts our spirits, something that inspires us, something that helps us feel part of something greater than ourselves. We're looking for a minister, a people and a religion we can trust to welcome us with all of our imperfections, with all our questions, and to help us go deeper on our journey. We yearn to be a part of a community that lives by its principles. We dream of being a part of a community that asks us, challenges us to live by them, too.

I suspect that most of us have felt burned in churches some time or another. Someone scornfully dismissed our ideas or our beliefs. Someone rejected us because of who we were – our color, our sexual orientation or identity, our sex, our age. Someone accused us of racism or homophobia or misogyny when we thought we were having an honest disagreement. Leadership tried to ram through policies, ignored their by-laws. Factions develop around

issues or ministers. Worst of all, leaders flouted fundamental religious principles that were the bedrock of our faith.

This congregation is either lucky or very healthy or both. No minister has ever been forced to resign from Paint Branch. There have been no scandals over sexual abuse. There have been no congregational splits. Perhaps in part because of Joys and Sorrows, We Care and the Pastoral Associates, members usually know when a member or friend has troubles and reaches out in wonderful ways. I don't know how you'd do if a family here had octuplets, but there was lots of support for the recently arrived triplets. You have often lived out your principles of compassion and justice for all right here in your own church family, helping older folks who can no longer take care of themselves, mentoring young people, fighting for equal protections for all.

Nevertheless, tensions exist. What we would call trust issues exist. We have heard occasional outspoken criticisms of other members. We have heard of insensitive comments and actions that have been hurtful. You are human. We are human. We bring who we are to church, to choir, to committees. Our goal is not to be perfect. Our goal as a religious people is to move ever closer to being the people our religion, our faith, our God, our values call us to be.

Darwin told us that those who are best adapted to their environment survive. Unitarian Universalists believe in intentional evolution. We can choose to change how we act, who we are.

The last few months, we have been talking to you about congregational covenants. Next Saturday, we have invited you to begin the discussion of who do you in this congregation want to be? How do you want to be with one another? How can we honor and respect who we are as individuals, while recognizing that we are no longer just a collection of individuals. We are 214 individuals, but we are one church. All for each one of us, yes, but each one of us also acting on behalf of the whole.

Many of you don't know much about congregational covenants. But I think of next Saturday is a gift for this congregation. Those of you who accept our invitation will begin together creating a gift to yourselves. How rarely we actually listen to one another's deepest longings. How rarely we talk about them. This is an opportunity for you to have depth conversations with one another about your hope and dreams. This will not be casual Fellowship Hour conversation, but a time for sharing, a time for listening and being listened to. It is an opportunity to move one step closer to the

community you sought when you first walked across that deck. You will not finish the covenant Saturday, for a covenant should be something that is built slowly. The conversations themselves are fully as important as the finished covenant. And the finished covenant will only be useful as long as it is a living covenant, considered and reconsidered as one more expression of the mission and vision of this congregation.

One for all, all for one. Let us raise our arms up high, lifting not swords, but one another's hands. May we treasure these people, this community. May we make here a special place, a place where people laugh and cry, march and vote together.