

History Speaks
A Sermon by the Revs. John Parker Manwell
and Phyllis Lenoir Hubbell
The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church
February 8, 2008

HISTORY SPEAKS

PHYLLIS:

“Don’t slam the damn door,”
My then boyfriend screamed.
A lifetime of screaming
Responded;
slammed the door.
Locked out love.

History speaks.
Guts listen.
Doors shut.
Sealed closed.

History speaks.

But hearts can also listen.
Ears can also hear.
Souls can finally stretch.
Doors open, too.

Intonation

REMEMBERING BURDENS:

Last week, many of us gathered as community to hear history speak. We identified many joys and sorrows that have occurred over the life of this church, many sources of joy, pride, sorrow, even anger. Today, we will reflect on the difficult parts of our history, seeking to open new doors.

We invite those of you here this morning who have been involved in this church to think back over the time you have been in Paint Branch. Is there some issue, some incident, some tension, some sadness that is still slamming doors in your lives? It is five years since the fire. Last April Barbara and Jaco, your previous ministers, announced they were leaving. Or perhaps something else still touches a nerve.

For those of you who are relatively new to Paint or less closely involved, you may choose to reflect on some other place in your own life where history might be speaking to you, some sadness, some betrayal, some anger, that still impacts you, maybe years later.

In a moment the ushers will pass around baskets filled with stones. This is a time to reflect on whether you are still carrying burdens, burdens of “sadness,” “fear,” “denial,” “anger,” “bargaining,” and “depression.” We invite you to pick up a stone to represent each of these emotions. You may not find it easy to recognize some of these feelings in your life. “Denial” is difficult because we may not realize how much we care, how sad or angry we are. But we may pull back from involvement in an activity, pull away from a person or a committee, because of these feeling. We may refuse to talk about the person or incident that caused them. “Bargaining” may take the form of trying to control our situations so bad things can never happen again. And many of us don’t notice that we are angry until some time later when new happened that triggers the feeling.

Please take whatever stones you choose and hold them in your hands during the sermon.

Music –

SERMON

PHYLLIS:

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Last Sunday some 50 of us gathered in this space to share stories of the history of this congregation. Beginning at the beginning, we marked on the sheets of paper taped to the windows behind you, key events of this congregation’s life, and on a parallel line above them, major events of our world, over these 55 years of our life together. It was a rich and rewarding experience.

We heard a lot about challenging changes in the world and at Paint Branch, about exciting ventures in social justice, and about the challenge of the transition from temporary space at College Park to buildings of your own here in Adelphi. If there were few doors slammed, there were occasionally some voices raised and some doors shut firmly and painfully on the way out. We heard about a succession of ministers, most of them serving for long periods -- very different ministers, in some ways, very similar in others. Each of them brought strengths and weaknesses.

As we talked last Sunday, you remembered the good times, and the bad times too. You remembered the ministers who served this congregation. You remembered beloved members, some of them still on the rolls, and others now departed. You remembered how you held each other in the care of this close-knit community, and you remembered how together, and sometimes alone, you served the world around you, and did the work of justice and of mercy.

Today we reflect together on what it all means -- how we can hold the good times of this history in our hearts, and let go of our hurts and disappointments, to build the future we long for.

JOHN: This congregation was incorporated in 1955. Of course, that was not the beginning. Never in life do we write on a clean slate. This congregation's roots lay in what our nineteenth century founders believed was the core of the Christian Scriptures, shaped by a passionate commitment to the right and obligation of each one of us to study, pray, reflect and act on its message of love for all, free from mandatory creeds. But our roots also included many prejudices our ancestors did not recognize. The founders of Paint Branch were steeped in the scientific humanism of the twentieth century, which cherished freedom, reason and tolerance in our religious life and in our society. They appreciated the miracles of nature, the wisdom of many traditions, and the gifts inherent in all people.

At least partly because of Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, white flight from city to suburb became a torrent. The prophetic witness of Rev. A. Powell Davies at an overflowing All Souls Church in Washington encouraged new congregations all around the Beltway to organize and, at least initially, hear the powerful sermons of Davies piped in by telephone line.

The sexual revolution was also under way. Cars sprouted tail fins, and Elvis rocked. The Cold War set in, and the Montgomery bus boycott led the way for a growing civil rights movement. The world was changing dramatically.

Paint Branch like the other new congregations, became a haven not just from the problems of the city, but also a haven for those seeking to cut loose from the narrow Christianity of their early years. These congregations also offered more space for children than All Souls could ever provide -- Paint Branch alone had three or four hundred children enrolled.

Dr. Davies died just two years after the founding of Paint Branch. The congregation soon called its own minister, David Osborn, who would serve for twelve momentous years, culminating in the completion of the education wing. He would be followed by Rick Kelley, who served for twenty years, and who in retirement remains minister emeritus. After an interim year with Virginia Knowles, Rod Thompson served for five years. Rod was followed for another interim year by John Burciaga. Jaco and Barbara ten Hove served for the next nine years until they resigned unexpectedly just last year. And here the two of us are, as your current interim ministers. Nine ministers, in all.

PHYLLIS: Ministers stand at the center of a congregation's life. They share the leadership with a church's members, but both members and outsiders tend to identify the church with the minister, who typically serves full-time, is trained for a leadership role, and often serves for longer in the same role than any one lay leader. For these reasons, the minister is seen as primarily responsible for the congregation's success or failure, and is often a lightning rod for members' feelings about the church – and sometimes about what's going on in the world around us – feelings that can be compounded by a minister's style of leadership, personality, theology, and the circumstances of the minister's departure. Let us take a few moments, therefore, to look back at the ministers who have served this congregation, and reflect on our feelings as we do so.

At the outset we emphasize that all ministers, like all members, have both strengths and weaknesses. The balance of any minister's skills can fit the needs of a congregation as a whole, but no one is a fit for every individual. One person's strength is another's

weakness, and chemistry works, or fails, in mysterious ways. Thus with every new minister, some members leave and others come back. A majority usually form a close bond with their new minister. But the departure of a minister, especially a long term minister, inevitably leaves strong feelings of grief, betrayal, anger, fear, denial and pain – many of the same emotions associated with any loss.

Often, a congregation seeks to duplicate their last minister's strengths, but find someone without their weaknesses. We heard last week one strength, at least, that all your ministers have shared (which may reflect that they were a good fit for you). Each shared an ability to identify and draw out strong lay leadership. Overall, these ministers seemed to fit your desire for a style of ministry that does not impose its authority, but works collaboratively with you, developing, respecting and nurturing strong lay leadership. The word “flexible” came up often, along with a “congregation-based” style. Your most recent ministers were seen as especially good at continuing to coach and support such leaders, but perhaps were not as flexible in other areas.

Preaching traditions in our movement have evolved over these years, and Paint Branch is no exception. David Osborn set the bar high for intellectual sermons; he and Rick Kelley both focused more often on the world around us, and its great religions, than on the “something to get you through the week” style of some ministers, focused on personal and spiritual issues. In keeping with changing times, Rick tended to informality in worship, and Rod Thompson even more so. Barbara and Jaco are both remembered for placing a high priority on worship, and when they were “on,” it was very, very good. They set high standards for quality, and brought well rehearsed, well thought through cohesive services from themselves and from their new Worship Associate program. Intellect may or may not be associated with personal warmth. Rick Kelley was seen as especially warm and approachable, as was Rod Thompson. Between them, Barbara and Jaco provided both.

Always there were high points in a ministry, wonderful services, challenging moments, times of celebration and passage, joy and grief. Inevitably, there were also inevitably disappointments – calls not returned, unmet pastoral needs even with the development of an increasingly strong pastoral program, perceived failures of both lay and ministerial leadership and mutual disappointments

Fortunately, no one has mentioned serious betrayals by any of the staff such as many of our UU congregations have endured such as sexual abuse, fraud, or more recently, massive plagiarism. Inevitably, however, in the life of any community, members will experience lesser wounds from both staff and fellow members, as well. Because this is a year of search for a new minister, we have spoken this morning mostly of feelings about your ministers.

JOHN: Paint Branch has a proud history. All the more reason, then, to recognize that most of the hurts are not a sign of dysfunction but of normal wear and tear in the life of a healthy congregation. They are real, and they hurt – but they are far outweighed by the joys of the shared history.

Our suffering and our loss can bring us gifts of their own, as we realize that they have opened new doors and windows which change the way we see the world. If we can acknowledge and release our feelings, we can begin to learn from them, grow from them. Our minds find new meaning, and our hearts a new empathy for the wounds of others.

We invite us this morning to reflect on our journeys in this place, on our experience of ministry or ministries, and on what they can teach us about our likely experience of a future ministry. What can we learn about our hopes? About what it's reasonable to expect of a minister – and about how we can take advantage of a minister's strengths, and help the congregation to compensate for any weaknesses, so that the ministry of the congregation and its minister together is balanced and strong.

Here at Paint Branch, the bonds of community deepen when you listen to each other's stories, appreciate each other's cultures, and treat each other with compassion and mutual respect. Nothing could be harder. Nothing could be more transformative.

The members and friends of Paint Branch are on a journey together. This congregation consists of a people of faith, faith that love will prevail, faith that together, black and white, gay and straight, Anglo and Latino, you can become the people you dream of being. The members of this congregation can open the doors you may have thought forever shut. You can stretch your souls to create new community. Together you can bend that arc of history a little further toward justice, a little further toward mercy.

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Souls can finally stretch.

Doors open too.

SHARING MEMORIES, SHARING GIFTS

PHYLLIS: Healing hearts isn't done in a day, much less twenty minutes. But it can begin. We invite you to reflect on what gifts you may wrest from painful memories. We do not choose conflict or tension or pain so that we may become more compassionate, empathetic. We do not choose loss so that we may find new meaning in our lives. Yet these gifts and others may emerge from the fire. Please write down in a short sentence what gift you take with you; what door has opened in your life.

As the music is playing, we welcome you to come forward to lay down your stones and share with us, if you like, what you have written.