

Spiritual Leadership

Jamaica Plain, September 15, 2002, Rev. Terry Burke

Our church governing Standing Committee has been on retreat this Friday evening and Saturday daytime at the Alzheimer's Center in Jamaica Plain. The Standing Committee, Rev. Elz Curtiss and I spent time doing planning for the year, did team building fellowship exercises, and prayed and worshipped together. Today, I want to talk about some of the spiritual dimensions of church leadership.

In a few minutes our church will formally install this year's Standing Committee, closing with the laying on of hands, an ancient sign of ordination to a ministry. In our form of church governance as Unitarian Universalists, known as congregational polity, authority comes from the local congregation. Because we worship together, we can govern ourselves as a spiritual community. In this act of installation, we recognize our standing committee as spiritual leaders who are our representatives. Yet we are all spiritual leaders. Protestantism speaks of the "priesthood of all believers;" we are all spiritual leaders who can bring spiritual values to bear upon our lives in the wider world.

There is a private and a public dimension to that leadership. As I have written before, our church community is both sanctuary and meeting house. It is a sanctuary where people have an opportunity to disarm from the divisions of society and explore their spiritual life, to try to learn what it means to be a human being. It is also a meeting house in the tradition New England sense, a place where one goes to encounter the public issues of the world from a faith perspective.

These are challenging times to be a spiritual leader on the Standing Committee. The congregation is doing Master Planning for our building, dreaming how we would like to be using our historic structure for this living community in the next 5 years. We struggle with growth issues as a medium-sized church, such as the need to be less focused on the parish minister and more focused on mission and program. The housing boom is

changing the character of Jamaica Plain; how will we react. We live in an era of anxiety following the September 11th attacks. There is a threat of war with Iraq, and the need for us to respond to that possibility, as well as speak out against targeting of our country's Muslims. It has been said that we live in a "sibling society" in which there is distrust of any authority, however legitimate. Unitarian Universalists often take that one step further, and make a mantra out of "question authority." Good luck, Standing Committee members!

Our first reading today, from Matthew, talks about forgiveness. I spoke last week how in the passage before this one Jesus sets a much higher bar for leaders like Peter – forgive 77 or even 7 times 70 times, depending on the translation. In this subsequent parable, a ruler has a servant who owes him an enormous amount of money. Frustrated that he isn't getting any of his money back, the ruler prepares to sell the servant into slavery and take all his property. But the ruler responds to the servant's pleading, and forgives the huge debt. Yet the fortunate servant doesn't "get it." He soon throws another servant in the slammer for owing him a modest amount of money. The ruler learns from other servants about the injustice, and throws the big debtor into prison. The point at the end of the story – you have to forgive!

We heard a powerful example of what is sometimes called "servant leadership" in today's 2nd reading, the "Last Testament of Christian de Cherge." De Cherge was a French Catholic monk living in a monastery in rural Algeria. During a period of terrorism by Islamic fundamentalists in 1996, he and 6 other monks were kidnapped, held captive for 2 months, and finally executed by having their throats slit.

In a document he left with his family in France before his kidnapping, de Cherge forgives the terrorists. He writes that fundamentalist fanatics should not be confused with Islam – believing Muslims have shown him the 'pure strain of the Gospel that he learned at his Mother's knee.' He makes clear that Algeria and Algerians are not to be blamed for his death, and speaks of his love for Algeria, a country not his own. Finally, with amazing spiritual maturity, he speaks of seeing the face of God in his executioners, and the hope

of seeing them,, "fellow guilty thieves," in Paradise. I am reminded of Dostoevsky's line that 'we are guilty of all before all, and when we realize that, it will be Paradise.'

Here are some other examples of servant leadership closer to home. This September 11th our Jamaica Plain neighbor Justine Liff died at the age of 55 after a long struggle with cancer. As Boston's Parks Commissioner, Liff had been a model civil servant, a "practical visionary" who could get along with all types of people and listen to their needs, even the pols! Thanks to her leadership, our Boston parks are green, well-maintained, and filled with people and activities, one of only three urban park systems in the country to get a four star rating in a recent survey.

Our responsive reading today, "To Be of Use" by poet Marge Piercy, was used in the memorial service for Florrie Povirk, a church member who died six years ago of cancer at the age of 48. Florrie had been a city planner, first for P-town and then for Newton. In Newton she focused on accessibility issues, developing a handicapped-accessible nature path which was ultimately named for her. In our congregation, Florrie worked on planning for our ramp, and served on the Religious Education Committee, though she wasn't handicapped and didn't have kids.

At our weekend retreat, we used the format of the prayer group designed by a great servant leader, Emerson Stamps. Emerson is a spiritual mentor to many in our congregation, and has touched many more through his ministries of prayer, healing, and hospitality (food!). For years he has also had a ministry to our historic building, through the property and building committees. This servant leader first encountered Unitarian Universalism when a UU church provided space for union organizing activities that he was involved in. Trying to do justly in the world can lead us to the inner journey of the spirit, as the spiritual life can lead us to seek justice.

At the close of the Standing Committee retreat, we planned to walk the Jamaica Pond labyrinth, as we had the year before. You probably are familiar with labyrinths, which have enjoyed an enormous revival. Unlike mazes, you simply walk in and out of a

labyrinth, and can't get lost. However, in medieval times, they were seen as a sign of the mystical journey. One went deeper within, finally reaching the center and union with God, so as to return to the world and serve.

Yesterday afternoon was beautiful. We searched for the labyrinth where we thought it should be, near the ruins of the revolutionary John Hancock's summer home. Two men and a woman, black and white, were playing with a soccer ball, and I had a flash of a memory from my 1984 trip to El Salvador: after seeing refugee camps, teenage guerillas, and the place of Archbishop Oscar Romero's assassination, in the rebel-controlled zone of Chalatanango, I saw teenage boys peacefully playing soccer.

The labyrinth was largely overgrown. We walked it a bit as best we could, then Abby Krueger, our chair, led us in a closing prayer... As spiritual leaders, may we seek to forgive, and may we seek to be servants. May we help unclog the path of our congregational labyrinth, our spiritual ways, so as to grow in the inner journey of the spirit, and walk out into a world in need of healing.

Readings

Matthew 18:23-35

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'pay what you owe.' Then his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until

he would pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you? And in anger his lord handed him over until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly God will also do to every one of you, If you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Last Testament of Christian de Cherge

If it should happen one day-and it could be today- that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to encompass all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country...I ask them to be able to associate such a death with the many other deaths that were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value...I could not desire such a death. It seems to me important to state this. I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if this people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder...I know the scorn with which Algerians as a whole can be regarded. I know also the caricature of Islam which a certain kind of Islamism encourages. It is too easy to give oneself a good conscience by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideologies of the extremists. For me, Algeria and Islam are something different, they are a body and a soul. I have proclaimed this often enough I believe, in the sure knowledge of what I have received in Algeria, in the respect of believing Muslims – finding there so often that true strand of the gospel I learned at my mother's knee, my very first Church.

My death, clearly, will appear to justify those who hastily judged me naïve or idealistic: "Let him tell us now what he thinks of it!" But these people must realize that my most avid curiosity will then be satisfied. This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills, - immerse my gaze in that of God, to contemplate with him his children of Islam...

And you also, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, for you also I wish this thank you" and this adieu- to commend you to the God whose face I see in yours.

And may we find each other, happy "good thieves," in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Parent of us both. Amen.