

What Do We Do and Why Do We Do It?

Jamaica Plain, October 28, 2001, Rev. Terry Burke

This is a sermon about our Sunday morning worship service. In our readings today we heard the story of the call of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah has a vision in the temple in Jerusalem of the six winged angelic seraphim. The angels touch his lips with coals: Isaiah is transformed and able to answer God's call by saying "Here I am. Send me." This passage has been seen as a model for worship: we enter into Divine mystery, experience transformation, then go out into the world to do God's work.

Our second reading from Luke relates Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The tax collector, working for the Roman overlords, would have been seen as a traitor to Judaism. It's also useful to remember that the Pharisee doesn't necessarily refer to a particular religious group, but rather to respectable people in religious communities, people like us. This passage from Luke reminds us that being involved in a congregation and attending worship doesn't necessarily make us better people. Peace activist Jim Forest also suggests that we read the parable substituting ourselves for the Pharisee and our particular enemies in place of the tax collector.

What we do on Sunday morning at First Church, Jamaica Plain is what is referred to as "ordered worship;" we use a standard liturgy. During the 1970's when we didn't have a settled minister, student ministers would come to Jamaica Plain from the First and Second Church of Boston to lead our Sunday service. Our Music Director Ellen McGuire remembers that many of these seminarians would become confused by our worship service, often leaving out whole sections of it. Ellen would then wonder, 'Should I continue where we should be, or jump to where they seem to be?' Having a set liturgy and a tradition of musical excellence helped keep the congregation going during the period when we didn't have a regular minister. I believe that having an ordered liturgy also makes it easier for congregational participation. For example, people know that every Sunday they can share concerns for a loved one during the pastoral prayer.

While we follow the broad outlines of the church calendar, celebrating Christmas and Easter, Advent and Lent, we also have our own idiosyncratic style. We also celebrate the High Holy Days, Passover, All Souls, Mothering Sunday, and Gay Pride. Our worship service, created in its basic form by Dr. Frank Holmes in the 1920's (I conducted Frank Holmes' memorial service in 1983), has its origins in the worship of Reformed Protestantism and the synagogue. Our ministerial role is a teaching one, as is shown by wearing academic robes; I also wear a stole as a sign of a pastoral office.

The most distinctive aspect of Unitarian Universalism at this time is our tradition of congregational polity or governance. Like such other religious groups as Baptists and Quakers, we give enormous authority to local congregations. We govern ourselves, call and ordain clergy, because we worship together as a community. What are the elements of what we do on Sunday morning for worship?

As befits the Reformed Protestant tradition with its emphasis on music, we begin with an organ prelude, played by Ellen McGuire on our magnificent E. and G.G Hook three manual tracker organ (recently, over 100 organ builders gathered in our sanctuary to hear a demonstration on our instrument). We light the chalice, a traditional Unitarian symbol with its origins in the martyrdom of proto-Protestant Jan Hus, and ask for peace for our congregation and humankind. An introit by the soloist, Janna Frelich, continues the process of entering into worship and a sense of the Holy. The call to worship is followed by Jesus' prayer for the Kingdom or Reign of God, the Lord's Prayer. In 1983 I changed "Our Father" to "Our Father and Mother" because of concerns about gender inclusive language.

Then we sing a hymn. The opening hymn is usually a "praise God" sort of hymn. We follow the broad tradition of Protestant hymnody by singing rhymed, metrical songs. Then we repeat our Bond of Fellowship, what is known as the Ames Covenant, written by 19th century Unitarian minister Charles Gordon Ames. This is meant to be a broad, inclusive statement of the purposes of our congregation. Traditionally, those who joined

the church were expected to "recognize the covenant" as the basis of the community; clergy were expected to "own" or affirm the covenant.

Our responsive reading follows the Protestant tradition of reading the psalms responsively. In recent years we have tried to reclaim part of that tradition by going through the psalms numerically for use in the service. Currently we are drawing upon a biblical "Book of the Month" where we use passages from a particular book for readings, anthems, responsive readings, or calls to worship. This is also the part of the service where we have a children's sermon, or the occasional christening.

An anthem is sung by the choir, or by the golden voiced Janna Frelich. Janna Frelich and Ellen McGuire make a great effort to relate solo and choral anthems to the topics of the Sunday sermons. Readings or lessons are spoken from a large lectern that once was used by the church school. Readings usually include one biblical and one non-biblical lesson. Often, these are read by church members, especially the seminarians. Sometimes the biblical lesson is taken from the Common Lectionary, a cycle of lessons followed by many Protestant churches and the Roman Catholics.

Prayer is a central focus of our worship. Versicles between the soloist and minister begin the prayer sequence. The pastoral prayer usually mixes personal, congregational, and global concerns, and includes an invitation to the congregation to share prayers during a period of silence. When I started at First Church, this silence was about 30 minutes long; now it's about 3 minutes. A Quaker friend called this "an egg timer silence." Silent and spoken prayers are concluded by a sung Sanctus; its words come from today's Isaiah passage. A Unitarian Universalist colleague who exchanged pulpits with me described this prayer sequence as "a weekly communion service."

Announcements, announcements, announcements! We explain to visitors that we are an official Welcoming Congregation of the UUA, extending a special welcome to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender persons. The congregation is invited to greet those around them – a Unitarian Universalist version of "passing the peace." Members of the

congregation give church announcements, sometimes at length. The offertory is received, drawing on the ancient tradition of sharing gifts (in the early church it would have included food, oil, and fuel for the needy; nowadays we hand in Guest at Your Table boxes for the UU Service Committee). We sing a doxology to the psalm tune "Old Hundredth" and the minister says a brief prayer over the offertory – "May we use these gifts wisely."

The minister announces the "sermon" hymn, which usually relates to the topic of the preaching. This hymn is the first part of the "hymn sandwich" of hymn – sermon - hymn. I now preach from the high pulpit. When I first came to the church, I used the lectern for preaching, but people complained that they couldn't see me. In the Reformed tradition, the sermon takes the place of the Catholic communion service; the sermon becomes the sacrament, putting a heavy burden on the preaching. Typically, sermons are topical, biblical, or biographical. Twice a year, for World Communion Sunday and Pentecost, we have communion during the 11AM service and not as a separate service; sermons are shorter on these special Sundays. The closing hymn is an upbeat, going out into the world sort of song, and completes the "hymn sandwich."

The benediction or "good words" that close the service are followed by a choral amen. The postlude is moving out music; in our congregation we don't sit through the postlude. Our Quaker friends regard their business meetings as part of their worship. Likewise, I regard our coffee hour as a continuation of the worship service. Perhaps we should sing the Unitarian Universalist hymn parody that goes, "Coffee, coffee, coffee, we praise the strength of coffee, early in the morning our thoughts they rise to thee..."

For years, we have had an ongoing debate whether the church school kids should be in the Sunday adult service for all or part of the service, or whether they should attend children's chapel and church school. We try to do both, with the children's chapel ably led by Peter Connolly and John Bianco. Some people miss non-church announcements in the service; we haven't figured out a way to share those during coffee hour.

Recently, an extensive survey on our worship life found that, while you could find someone who didn't like any one thing that we do, most people like our worship. Our living traditions of worship are a great gift to share; I believe especially that we have an important ministry of presence to share here with one another. While we shouldn't feel proud or better than others because we participate in Sunday worship, our time together is an important tool to grow in relationship with God and one another. Our worship helps us enter into the mystery of the community of God and what it means to be a human person, so that we can serve others by answering the call, "Here I am. Send me."