

Principles, Purpose, Practice and Power

Sermon delivered by UUA Trustee John Blevins

All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church

Kansas City, MO

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Our principles ground us. Our purpose gives us direction. Our practice strengthens and humbles us. Together, principles, purpose and practice create a path to power in our lives and in our communities.

Order of Service

Setting the Theme

Welcome & Announcements

Chalice Lighting: Elizabeth Turnage and Jacob Turnage

Musical response #38 Rise up O Flame

Opening Words: on Principles

We come together today, one week after the retirement of our now minister emeritus, Rev. Jim Eller.

We come together, wondering, wondering, where will, where should, this congregation go, in Jim's absence.

We come together today, with gratitude for our many blessings.

Among them, the blessing of Jim's 10 years of ministry here with us.

We come together, having been given the gift of this day.

Our daily task, our daily opportunity, is to decide how we will use our manifold blessings and the wondrous gift of this day.

This is what we are about.

This is what I wish to ponder with you today.

I begin this journey by asking my daughters, Elizabeth and Susan, who grew up in this church, to remind us of the Seven Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association (the UUA), which were adopted in 1986.

PRINCIPLES OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

So, I wonder, why might we have chosen to enter into this covenant with 1,100 other congregations? What was on our minds then, 23 years ago?

What might be on our minds about this today?

Hymn # 402 "From you I receive" (3 times)

Covenant:

Goodwill is the spirit of this church....

Building Community

Welcoming guests and one another....

Pastoral concerns and celebrations:

- remembering the Knoxville shooting, July 27, 2008

Musical Response #396 I Know This Rose Will Open

READINGS (before the offertory):

Principles. Purpose. Practice. Power.

Principles, Purpose, Practice and Power.

In our opening words a few minutes ago, we reminded ourselves of the Principles that underlay our lives together. The Principles that ground us, and give us roots.

In times of struggle, or conflict, or exhaustion, I often ask myself "how

can I apply these principles in my current situation?". When I find myself feeling angry, if I ask myself "which of these principles am I applying here?", I find that I often can see a new way forward - a way that is consistent with my values. This grounding in principles and values is priceless to me.

The Principles talk about "how" we will be together. How will we treat each other, and ourselves while in relationship, in community?

Purpose moves us from the "how" question to the "why" question. In being clear about our purpose as a community, as a congregation, we are talking about "**why**" we are together. Why is it that we have chosen to be together?

Here are some answers to the "why" question.

First, from a covenant among the New England Pilgrim congregations, written in the mid-seventeenth century, about 1640, that laid the foundations of our covenantal faith:

"We pledge to walk together in the ways of truth and affection
As best we understand them now or may learn them in days to come
That we and our children might be fulfilled
and that we might speak to the world in words and actions
of peace and good will." (1)

That's the pledge from 350 years ago.

Here's a pledge from twenty years ago, by our past UUA President, Bill Schulz, who after 8 years service as President, then went on to serve 12 years as Executive Director of Amnesty International USA. Rev. Schulz's words:

This is the mission of our faith:
To teach the fragile art of hospitality;
To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;
To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;
And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands."
(2)

And here's a Mission statement from 2006, from one of our vibrant large congregations:

The mission of Unity Church

Unitarian is to engage people in a free and inclusive religious community that encourages lives of integrity, service, and joy. (3)

And finally, here's a contemporary view of that "why" question. The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) Board of Trustees, of which I am a member, has worked for some years, meeting with hundreds of congregations, and thousands of congregational leaders, to bring greater clarity and focus to this question. At our April 2009 meeting, the UUA Board adopted a "shared vision", for this Association. This is a statement of how the Board understands **that you wish the world to be different as a result of the Association's existence**, as a result of our work together.

Here are the words of that "**Shared Vision**" of the Association:

"Grounded in our covenantal tradition, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association will inspire people to lead lives of humility and purpose, connection and service, thereby transforming themselves and the world." (4)

Let me read that again, more slowly:

"Grounded in our covenantal tradition, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association will inspire people to lead lives of humility and purpose, connection and service, thereby transforming themselves and the world."

Offertory:

We come together today both celebrating and living in this blessed community. As we offer our own gifts during this collection to make possible the work of this church, I ask that we all give in a way that will insure that our doors will remain open, our programming enlightening, and our justice work vibrant, for the next visitor, and the next, and the next, as they were for you. That is all I ask. Your offerings will now be gratefully received.

Deepening

Silence & Centering:

We've briefly looked at Principle and Purpose. Practice and Power remain for us to explore this morning. As we move into a place of openness and introspection, which some might call worship, I invite you to look at the meaning and place of "power" in your life. Is power an affirming word to you, or a distasteful word? Do you feel powerful in your own life? Why is that? Do you think of All Souls as a "powerful" congregation? What makes this so?

Now, a minute of silence as you think on these things.

PAUSE for about 1 minute.....

Now that you've no doubt sorted out the place of power in your life, I want to delve into **practice** for a bit, and then I'll return to look at **power** again.

When I think of practice, I think of it first in Buddhist terms, of their practice of meditation as a way to seek enlightenment. And I also think of the ball player at practice, the musician at practice, and the dental practice. Are dentists really practicing on me? I hope not. But what does practice mean for us, as UU's and as members of this congregation? In this context, practice means to me the ways we work to learn to live with integrity, in alignment with our values, our principles, our purposes.

Do we do this? Do you practice? Do we practice?

I think we do. Here are some ways that we do:

First, you're here in this place this morning, when you had many other choices about how to spend your time and energy. You made a choice. A choice to practice.

Here are some other examples of our practice:

- a) while we are here together each Sunday, we speak our own covenant together, reminding us of our pledge to each other
- b) we give our offering plate to an outside service agency once each month
- c) we plan and host the distinguished Forum every week, and have for over 60 years

- d) we host the Spiritual Odyssey program every summer Sunday, as we have for 13 years now.
- e) we have offered the documentary film series for years now
- f) we offer educational opportunities for our children, adults and the larger community every week,
- g) we reach out to members of our congregation in times of need, illness and loss,
- h) we support our relationship with the Ward Chapel and Bethel AME congregations
- i) we support our relationship with our Romanian Partner Church
- j) we packed up and went to New Orleans last summer to help with recovery efforts there
- k) we help build a Habitat House every year.
- l) we hosted the national young adult conference last summer
- m) we hosted the national Allies for Racial Equity conference this past March
- n) we have supported the emergence of small congregations in Missouri and Kansas via our work with the SCORE Cluster
- o) we send financial support to the national and district offices, in accordance with our size (at least we do most years. As you probably know we decided not to do this the past two years as we made hard financial decisions)
- p) we have helped develop new ministers for our movement by engaging intern ministers and serving as a teaching congregation
- q) our engagement with the MORE2 community organizing project, where several of our members are filling leadership roles.

And each of us could add to this list.

But the question I begin to ask here is **"So what?"**

Are we bringing about the changes, in yourself, or in our world, that you sought by choosing to engage in one or more of these practices? Did the practice empower you? Or just engage you? Only you can answer.

Before I move on from the "practice" question, I want to take a minute to talk about some practices at the national level.

What are some examples of we UU's practicing our faith and living our principles at the national level?

- a) We support the UU Service Committee, in its life saving work around the world. Katrina relief. Tsunami relief. Gaza. Darfur. Worker's rights. Access to water. And on and on.
- b) We support a United Nations office to speak out on issues in that forum.
- c) We are developing and making available high quality religious education curriculum, and doing it via the internet, at no cost! This is an incredible gift to the world, that you have helped make possible. In fact, there's a lead article in the July issue of Oprah's O magazine, on our highly regarded adult sexuality curriculum. You can't get better publicity than that!
- d) Individual UU's have given, over the past 5 years, in the largest capital campaign the UUA has ever conducted, \$50 million dollars to fund special initiatives like youth ministry and ministerial development and seminary support.
- e) Every year, individual UU's give through the "Friends of the UUA" program, about \$1.5 million, which is about 10% of the general income of the UUA.
- f) We support a Washington, DC office to lobby and speak out on public policy issues. Our folks have been at the table in President Obama's transition planning and policy development work.

And here now, I want to go a bit deeper. One of the jobs of the Washington office is to educate Congress and the public on the issues that you have said are important.

So, you ask, how do we decide which things are important? Well, your delegates vote on them at General Assembly each year. Is this process working?

Are we "**powerful**" and effective in influencing policy & behavior?

Good question!

Since I joined the UUA Board, now 6 short, long, years ago, I have grappled with the idea of addressing the well over 400 "Statements of Conscience" or "Actions of Witness" that have been adopted at GA over the years. It seems obvious to me that no organization can be effective if they have 400 priorities.

This is self-marginalizing behavior.

Are there other ways to influence public policy and behavior? To use our relatively limited resources more effectively?

Well, as you might suspect, I think there are!

**But first, we must decide that we want to change our behavior.
To be powerful.**

One of the primary ways we do that is by sending our own informed and empowered delegates to the decision making meetings, such as General Assembly and our District meetings.

And so, I come back to power.

More than 10% of our UU congregations are now engaged at some level in interfaith organizing work. One of the things I value most about community organizing work is that these folks, including our own Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity (MORE2) leaders, is that they will and do talk openly about power. They've learned that power is not a dirty word. Community organizers see power as a neutral word. Power can be used in the service of justice, or abused in the service of evil. Power is "the ability to act". That's all. "The ability to act". Power is needed to get things done. Organizers often see people of faith (that'd be us, right?) as being ambiguous about power. They note that public officials often call themselves "servants", perhaps to suggest that servanthood, and **not** power, is the motive force for change. People fear being corrupted by power. Organizers think that power does not corrupt, but it does tend to attract the corruptible.

Having power usually means facing conflict, controversy, ridicule, and even defeat, so there is a certain attraction to **not** having power. (5)

So, the question I am wrestling with is, do we, does our UUA, does this association of congregations, choose to be powerful, or not? Are we ready to face the risks of being powerful? The conflict, the controversy, the ridicule?

We are superbly positioned to take on a mantle of power and leadership, if we choose. Demographically, we are very highly educated, we're high on the average income scales, and most of us can communicate effectively. We know how to plan. We know how to dissect a problem. We are eager to engage with diverse communities.

We do also have, however, some natural barriers to the assumption of power and leadership. One of them is called out in the UUA "Shared Vision" I read to you earlier. You may have noted the phrase: "lead lives of humility and purpose". Sometimes, because we

are so well informed, so capable, we forget to stop and listen to those we are working with. And so, we can be seen as arrogant. As the "know it all". That we're just seeking "bodies" to help us implement our vision.

Now tell me, would you want to be a teammate to a person who already has all the answers, who doesn't listen, who doesn't value the contributions you can make, other than your two hands and strong back? And maybe a little money...

So, you find "humility" right in our vision statement. Humility is defined as having a modest view of one's own importance. To me this means that we must ask good questions, and listen deeply to the answers of others. We can't assume that we have the "right answer", or the "best answer". We must provide, through our humble and courageous participation, the fertile ground to let a robust shared vision emerge from the dreams of every participant.

We must then deeply engage others as full members of the team to work on the shared goal, the shared vision, at which we have collaboratively and jointly arrived.

For the past year, I have been working with the UUA Board to explore how we could engage in a deep conversation about our views of power. About the role of the UUA Board in leading our 1,100 congregations toward a more influential place in our country's priority setting process. We've now agreed to embark on this conversation at our January, 2010 meeting. It has been interesting to experience the difficulty in grappling with a question of such strategic significance to our movement. There is clearly some fear and trepidation about opening the door to power. There is disagreement about what power means. There is concern that power can mean "power over", or the power of oppression, rather than "power with" - the power of covenant. Not all agree that they want to be called powerful. Heck, that's what I feel. But at this point, I don't see a way forward without grappling with this question. Do we wish to be powerful?

One tactic I have found that seems to help, at this stage, is to talk about how we can "focus our energy" as an organization. Building on the example of the 400 priorities, the 400+ statements of conscience, the idea of finding ways to focus our energy has a pretty strong attraction. I am willing to go forward with a discussion about "focusing our energy" first. But I am convinced, that to move toward

our potential as a moral beacon, as a leading agent of justice in our communities, that we must learn to speak of power with a clear conscience, and in a humble, focused way, to act powerfully.

As I conclude here this morning, I am thinking about how I will personally continue my own practice of our principles, and how I will focus on our purpose, and our vision.

I am working to find more ways for our congregational leaders to collaborate, and be in covenant with each other, to multiply our influence. I have clearly heard the call from our congregational leaders for this collaboration, and I know we can do this!

I am deeply engaged in the revamp of the UUA's governance, which is focused on reasserting the democratic process in all our work (see our Principles!), and increasing the openness and transparency of our work.

To support the democratic process, I am asking every congregation, including this one, to look hard at how we can help our delegates be informed of the congregation's position on the significant issues of our time, so that they can represent you accurately at General Assembly. This support includes finding ways to offer any necessary financial support to get our delegates to the Association's business meetings. These are your meetings, not mine, and you need to be represented there.

And I dream of our ministers across the region, and even the country, all speaking out in concert on a few focused issues, such as civil marriage, or immigrant rights, or even humility and arrogance, and am working to enable this conversation with the UUA Board.

So, as we leave here this morning, I ask each of us:

To ask ourselves, how can I be a powerful presence? How can I engage in that vision of "transforming myself, ourselves, and the world"?

To ask ourselves, how can I better live out, in my life, the covenant we speak every Sunday?

To look at the shared vision of the UUA, asking how can I help my own congregation to develop the will to "...inspire people to lead lives of humility and purpose, connection and service..." and to do this while remembering that the "people" here is not just the people in this room, not just the people in this congregation - but as Rev. Schulz said "...we must hold the whole world in our hands."

As that famous chef, Emeril, puts it, maybe it's time "to kick it up a notch...."

So may it be.

Hymn # 121, "We'll Build a Land"

Sending Forth:

Closing Words and extinguishing the Flame

From Margaret Wheatley's book, "**Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future**"

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask "What's possible?" not "What's wrong?" Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don't know. Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear.

Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what's possible.

Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something. Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don't fear people whose story you know. Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness. Stay together." (6)

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME

As you leave here today, carry the flame of our chalice in your heart and out into the world, lighting our way together.

Amen.

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Resources:

(1) Our Covenant, The 2000-2001 Minns Lectures, "The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and Promise of Our Covenant", page 43, Alice Blair Wesley, © 2002, Meadville Lombard Press.

(2) Singing the Living Tradition, #459, William F. Schulz, ©1993, UUA, Beacon Press

(3) UNITY CHURCH UNITARIAN, St. Paul, MN, "GOVERNING POLICIES 2006". Reaffirmed 2009.
<http://www.unityunitarian.org/documents/GoverningPolicies2009Jun10.pdf>

(4) "Governing Policies of the UUA", adopted April 2009.
http://uua.org/documents/boardtrustees/governancewg/policy_manual_1_ends.pdf

(5) "Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing", Dennis Jacobsen, page 38 and following, ©2001, Augsburg Fortress

(6) "Turning to One Another", Margaret J. Wheatley, ©2002, page 145, Berrett-Koehler Publishers