

## United First Parish Church in Quincy

### Sermon: “The Pastorhood of All Believers” By Rev. Michelle A. Walsh, 3/29/09

**Hymns:** *We Laugh, We Cry* - #354; *Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire* - #34; and *When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place* - #1008.

**Reading:** “I Call That Church Free” - #591, by James Luther Adams

Good morning! In January, for my Martin Luther King day sermon, I coined a phrase near the end that was called – “the pastorhood of all believers.” I said that ministry is often thought of in three dimensions: the priestly, the prophetic, and the pastoral. I argued in that sermon that the prophetic call to liberate the oppressed is deeply intertwined with the pastoral call to healthy and right relationship – healthy and right relationship with our self, with our church and community, and with our broader world. Some of you said that you would like to hear more on this theme – so be careful what you wish for because here it is.

Let’s start with some basic explanation of terms – what’s a priest, what’s a prophet, and what’s a pastor in the Protestant tradition – and what is this “of all believers” stuff for Unitarian Universalists today? As Unitarian Universalists, we inherit a rich Protestant tradition of language and practices, even if we develop our own slant on that language and those practices. It behooves us to know our own history and sources at a deeper level to more fully claim our identity and to be able to engage with other religious people. I suggest that such historical analysis of our language and practices can also enhance our ability to be more self-critical and thus transformative of our identity.

In both the Orthodox Jewish and Christian traditions, including Roman Catholicism, priests are considered the anointed ones of God and thus the sole dispensers of religious rites or sacraments – such as performing marriage, ensuring ritual purity, presiding over communion or worship, etc. In the Protestant Reformation, however, Martin Luther rejected, in a radical gesture, the idea that only a few were anointed as spiritual by God. He argued instead, based on the New Testament, that *each* person is ordained by the Holy Spirit through baptism and thus *each* person is a priest or minister of God – hence the phrase “priesthood of all believers.” A professionally trained minister may be appointed or called in the Protestant tradition, but this in no way diminishes the authorization of the lay person to participate in administering religious rites, however differently that may be interpreted and structured by any particular denomination.

Here in Quincy, we experience the legacy of this tradition as Unitarian Universalists when lay people participate in or design worship, choose whom to ordain into professional ministry, or obtain a special license from the state to perform an act of marriage. We also continue this legacy when the first of our living tradition sources recognizes the individual’s “direct experience with that transcending mystery and wonder” – the individual is recognized as having direct access to the source of religious experience, whether we term it God today or something else.

We have our most famous social ethicist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, James Luther Adams, to thank for adding in the phrase “prophethood of all believers” to our Protestant repertoire. Historically, prophets were not pleasant people to be around in the Hebrew Bible. They also claimed to be specially appointed by God with a privileged ability to read the sign of the times and to warn and admonish the common people that they were failing to follow God’s desires or conform to God’s standards. A famous Jewish theologian, Abraham Heschel, writes: “Prophecy is the

voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profane riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet's words."<sup>1</sup>

While prophets are often seen in the biblical texts to be rather prickly people who are driven to afflict the comfortable, we as Unitarian Universalists seem to be particularly fond of them – at least in theory. When James Luther Adams coined the phrase “prophethood of all believers,” meaning that we are each equally responsible for reading the signs of the times and directing the social justice ministry of our churches, we eagerly embraced this idea. Our second living tradition source lifts up the “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil.” As I said in my January sermon, Unitarian Universalists are nothing if not a hopeful people of very high expectations, seeking to live out the prophetic dream of eradicating injustice everywhere – at least in our professed ideals.

But if as Unitarian Universalists, our practice and goal is to liberate the sacred worth and dignity of *each* person – to be a free and universal church for all as James Luther Adams writes in our reading today – then perhaps we need to balance the “priesthood and prophethood of all believers” with a little more focus on the “*pastorhood* of all believers.” Adams writes that the “priesthood of all believers” is a ministry of healing – and indeed, that was one of the traditional roles of the priest – to provide healing through the various religious rites performed, through God’s action in the sacraments mediated by the priest. But when the Protestant tradition began, through different denominations, to move away from the use of the word “priest,” the word “pastor” became more prominent in referring to the minister’s role in caring for the life of

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<sup>1</sup> Found on-line in Wikipedia under “prophet,” but attributed to Heschel’s book *The Prophet*, chapter one.

the congregation – for the ethical demands of healthy and right relationship in sustaining and growing the church.

So where did this word “pastor” come from? Well, in its religious use, it comes from the word meaning “shepherd” in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament (in the New Testament, Jesus was viewed as the ultimate Good Shepherd). I literally groaned when I first hear this in seminary because my primary interest as a practical theologian has been in pastoral psychology, and I really could not picture members of my Unitarian Universalist congregation as a flock of sheep. Here, for example, is the Webster dictionary’s definition of sheep when referring to a person: “a person who is meek, stupid, timid, defenseless, and submissive.” OK – so raise your hand if you, like me, want to pitch this particular metaphor out the door as having any religious use for Unitarian Universalists today.

Well, imagine my surprise and delight when my favorite feminist process theologian, Catherine Keller, brought up this very metaphor as a problem and said that, in fact, it’s been a metaphor “lost in translation.” Sheep in our modern day context are domesticated animals. This was not at all how sheep were in ancient agricultural days. Keller writes: “In an ancient agricultural context, sheep had connotations not of penned-in, passive, and pretty obedience, but of a roving co-existence in the wilderness... We are not called to be sheepish,” she writes. “No one sheepish visits prisoners or works for the homeless or challenges the predatory systems that keep some poor that others may have abundance. We are called to ‘flock’ – to congregate, to gather, to con/spire in the original sense: to collaborate in the spirit of just love.”<sup>2</sup>

Being a shepherd in ancient times was a dangerous business. Sheep were wild animals, and they were subject to being preyed

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<sup>2</sup> See Catherine Keller’s text *On The Mystery: Discerning Divinity In Process*, p. 145.

upon by wolves or robbers. A shepherd had to keep a sharp eye on the sheep, carefully herding them, leading them, and guiding them to food and water – sometimes going after the sheep who wandered off on their own, who got sick, or who were stragglers. A shepherd had to be sturdy, tough, and brave to survive during times of limited food and limited sleep and certainly with limited companionship from roving sheep in the wilderness.

Hmmm, come to think of it, maybe this metaphor of pastor as shepherd leading wild sheep does work for most ministers of contemporary American congregations, not just Unitarian Universalist congregations. A complaint lodged against contemporary congregations, regardless of denomination, is that they have become consumer driven, paralleling our capitalistic society. People don't come to church anymore with the intention of giving to their church so much as seeking what their church can provide them – and if they feel a sense of dissatisfaction with the services of one church, they pick up and go elsewhere with little remorse or sense of deep commitment or loss.<sup>3</sup> This has been observed to lead to ministerial burnout as well as a lot of dysfunctional relationships in church governance.

That might seem like a harsh assessment from our perspective here in Quincy – since we don't have problems like this in Quincy, right? But let me share a story with you. Normally, I have very positive stories to tell of my membership in my home congregation in Newton, but this is a less than positive memory. Newton is a significantly larger congregation, probably about 350 or so members now. Each year, we go as a congregation on a retreat to Ferry Beach in Maine, a UU retreat center, over the Columbus Day weekend. We normally have over 100 people who go, including children. For many years, one family and their teenage sons would put on a haunted house for the community, to

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<sup>3</sup> See the works of Wade Clark Roof.

the delight of all of the children. This was a highly elaborate project with lots of decorations and costumes and creation of characters and fright rooms – just imagine cloning the energy of about 5 Claire’s from our own congregation working on a haunted house and you get the idea. We all enjoyed this so much and expected it to go on forever.

But eventually, the teenage sons grew up and went to college and this family no longer wanted to run this particular activity at Ferry Beach for the community. Each year, I had been bringing 3 inner-city girls from the UU Urban Ministry Stand High/Stand United program to Ferry Beach and knew that they looked forward to the haunted house, so, somewhat reluctantly, I volunteered to help to organize it as long as another new volunteer assumed the bulk of the leadership.

Well, this year the older youth decided that they wanted to run a truly scary haunted house *without* the little kids – and the new volunteer, who again was assuming the bulk of the leadership, decided to empower the older youth in their decision. This then resulted in a mutiny by the younger elementary children, who stormed off angrily to their parents about their exclusion from making the haunted house with the older kids. Several of the families of these children were relatively new to the church, and the parents came up to complain about the lack of an opportunity for their younger children to be involved. Now, mind you, none of these parents had volunteered to help with the haunted house originally – nor did they do so in complaining, simply expecting that *someone* was going to provide the service for their children.

Needless to say, this left a rather bitter taste in the mouth of the new volunteer coordinator, who swore *never* to be involved in the haunted house again – as did I. However, ultimately, this pastoral crisis resulted in a highly productive discussion by the church leadership, and a much healthier relationship of overall

responsibility for younger children and older youth in providing age-appropriate activities evolved. Now a group of parents organize a small Halloween party as an alternative for the younger children each year, and this seems to be much less stress and just as enjoyable for all with a greater distribution of responsibilities.

I share this story with you because this is an example not of the priesthood of all believers, nor the prophethood of all believers, in church ministry but of the pastorhood of all believers – an equally crucial function. We are *each* called to be pastors – to be *shepherds* of our church. We are each called to care for one another, to understand our interdependency and to work toward healthy and right relationships – whether this means finding our pastoral gift by teaching in a religious education class, leading a committee, doing care and outreach to sick or elderly members, feeding the flock in our contributions to coffee hour, or being patient with our wild sheep when they sometimes wander off the point or bray in a particularly annoying way in a committee meeting. These are the elements of church life that sustain us and enable us to grow – and we need the gift of each person to do so, no one can do it or bear the responsibility alone. Ultimately, our success in being pastors to one another enables us to be wiser and more effective prophets as well.

I want to stress this point last here because this is where the pastoral and prophetic meet and intertwine. Thich Nhat Hanh understood this very well when he said that the peace movement in this country was often not very peaceful – and, as I said in January, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this when he stressed nonviolence as a political and religious tactic. We heard in our hymn as well that speaking with the bravest fire will do us no good if we do not also have love.

Our congregational life provides us with many opportunities in microcosm to practice how we want to be in the world, to build

our skills in spiritual and democratic life and behavior – right relationships of speech, tone, and actions with an open heart and mind. You may have noticed, to the degree that you tend to read them, the second half of our second living tradition source – the one that stresses that we’re called to heed prophetic wisdom with compassion and love as well. Finally, James Luther Adams also understood this when he saw the capacities of small groups and associational life for “institutionalizing gradual revolution.”<sup>4</sup> He also saw a danger when churches focused solely on an inner pastoral move, rather than specifically linking the pastoral with the prophetic.<sup>5</sup>

It all intertwines. We ARE the ministry of the church – both lay and professional together – and we share in responsibility for all elements of the ministry – being a priesthood of all believers, a prophethood of all believers, and a pastorhood of all believers. But I dare to say this morning, that the most underrecognized but important element and starting place is in being a *pastorhood* of all believers – to our selves and our own spiritual centering practices first, and then to our church and then to the broader world by seeing the pastoral in the prophetic. We role model the vision we want to be. May it always be so. Blessed be. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> See James Luther Adams’ essay “On Voluntary Associations.”

<sup>5</sup> See *Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches*, edited by James Luther Adams and Seward Hiltner.