

## United First Parish Church in Quincy

### Sermon: “Creating Healthier Relationships, Part I”

By Rev. Michelle A. Walsh, 4/19/09

Good morning! My sermon topic is “creating healthier relationships,” but you can really think of this as a sequel to my sermon on “The Pastorhood of All Believers” from last month. In point of fact, this is only the start of a sermon on “creating healthier relationships,” it’s part one – I will do a part two in June. As I have been suggesting in more than one sermon this year, ministry consists of three major elements – the priestly, the prophetic, and the pastoral – and these three elements need to be held in balanced tension with one another. But without a solid grounding in the pastoral – a grounding in how we treat ourselves and one another with love and respect – without such a grounding the priestly becomes vain and arrogant and the prophetic becomes braying and annoying noise just to be tuned out.

I have found myself on the trail of what it means to create healthy relationships in one’s life, and for myself personally, from the time I majored in psychology in college thru my masters’ degree in clinical social work, and then thru the development of a personal spiritual practice grounded first in Buddhism but also in the Jewish-Christian traditions later in my life. Understanding human psychology – who we are as human beings – has been crucial to my spiritual life and development, and it has led me into a deep commitment to Unitarian Universalist community ministry as a pastoral psychotherapist and spiritual director.

The life and ministry of a community minister, such as myself, is typically focused outside of the parish walls. As a Unitarian Universalist community minister, I have also lived among the African American community in Boston for the past 18 years, and, as many of you know, I have an African American goddaughter who is nearly that age herself. When you live amidst people who are significantly different from yourself culturally, if you remain in an open, receiving, loving and respectful relationship – if you’ve created a *healthy* relationship – invariably you find yourself changed – transformed – in both large and small ways by this mutually open and receiving relationship and a deepened appreciation for each other. For me, one such small change has included my sermon style, which tends toward the sharing of stories and experiences. My sermon style

is also a bit conversational and can be relational and participatory on your part.

Now I don't ask you to shout any "amen's" or "hallelujah's" – that is unless you want to – but I do occasionally ask you a question and see if any of you at least raise your hands in response (and sometimes I do hear verbal affirmations and exclamations out of you, too!). That is a very *small* touch of an African American style in my sermons – what's called the "call and response" between a minister and the congregation, and the intent of this style is to invoke a sense of personal witness and public testimony – of relationship – when discussing spiritual matters. It is also an example of the "priesthood of all believers" in worship practices because spiritual wisdom is seen to reside not solely with the minister but also with the congregation, and we give public witness to the spiritual wisdom of our ministry together.

So how about if we give that a try? I have lived through and witnessed *many* unhealthy relationships and unhealthy interactions in my life – whether in my personal life or in my work life. How many of you, like me, have witnessed or lived through an unhealthy relationship or interaction at *some* point in your life? Yes, indeed. We all have some internal Geiger counter that tells us what's a healthy relationship and what's an unhealthy relationship. In a healthy relationship, we feel a sense of peace, of joy, of zest and enthusiasm, of growth and mutuality and respect – all of which ultimately normally makes us *desire* that relationship and pursue that relationship further. In fact, root meanings of the word "healthy" are related to words for wholeness and salvation. When we are in a broken or suffering state, we often seek out relationships that give us a sense of wholeness or which save us from suffering – thus we *seek* healthy relationships.

Now no relationship is perfect, and all relationships take work and some expenditure of energy, but in a *healthy* relationship, the balance of feelings and energy are positive. In contrast, in an *unhealthy* relationship, we feel a sense of being chronically depleted in our energies by unhappiness, confusion, anger and blame, hurt and disappointment, perhaps bitterness, and even addictive cycles of abuse, fear, and revenge. Some *small part* of our self recognizes the relationship as healthy or unhealthy – and that includes not just our relationships with others but also our relationship with *our self*. I suggest that we can think of that small part of our self as the "inner light" or as the "small still voice" of God, including the power of spirit from our hymn, or perhaps, in the feminist biblical tradition, as the

voice of Wisdom also known as Sophia, if you want to think in those terms, or as our Authentic Self and the voice of Reason, if you prefer humanist terms, or the place of emptiness and compassion from which greater mindfulness can arise in the Buddhist tradition.

Regardless of our spiritual terms for it, we *do intuitively* recognize a healthy relationship when we see it, and we naturally tend to seek healthy relationships – but the question is, how do we foster or create healthy relationships more often? What are the barriers that get in our way? Ronald Richardson is a pastoral psychotherapist who frequently writes on this topic for ministers and their churches. In his book, *Creating a Healthier Church*, he tells a tale of two similar congregations on one Sunday morning who behave quite differently when faced with some similar problems. We’ve all faced those cold Sunday mornings when our boiler has broken down here in Quincy – but how did we last behave when faced with this problem?

Richardson creates a story of two different congregations. Here is what happens in the first congregation. At Third Church, the custodian, Wayne, calls the building committee chair, Andy, to let him know that the boiler has gone down, and he has not been able to get it to come back up despite his best efforts, so that the sanctuary is now 45 degrees. Not only that, the daycare rooms are flooded with about two inches of sewer waters, and the church steps are thoroughly iced over. Andy and Wayne commiserate together on their shared feelings about these awful problems, but quickly consult on the best way to tackle them together, naturally including the minister in the process. The minister, in turn, volunteers to shorten his service that morning and to call the day-care director to alert her to the problems. Relationships at Third Church are *healthy* because problems are viewed as shared, and people feel free to commiserate on their feelings and also to support each other as a *team* in facing them. This attitude is pervasive throughout the congregation and its activities.

Contrast this same scenario with what happens at the Valley View Church in Richardson’s second imagined example. The church custodian Larry calls the building committee chair, Stu, and promptly begins the conversation by telling Stu “Mister, you better get down here real soon! You’ve got a big mess on your hands here.” Larry demands that Stu get down to the church immediately to fix the boiler and the sewer filled daycare rooms. Stu, of course, doesn’t like having an entire problem dumped into his lap and secretly resents Larry anyway, thinking that he’s rather

incompetent and was only hired by the minister over Stu's objections so that the unemployed nephew of a committee member could have a job.

Stu finds Larry's chronic helplessness annoying and tends to believe that what Larry really needs is a good kick in the butt. So Stu blasts Larry back and orders him to get busy on all of the problems on his own. Then Stu promptly calls the minister, now blaming the minister for the problems and for not listening to him about hiring Larry or about replacing the boiler for that matter. The minister resents all of this, of course, feeling like he's always being blamed for and told to do everyone else's job when he's got a worship service and two baptisms to do that morning. Stu and the minister end up in a yelling match with each other, and – well, it's all downhill from there, including for any sense of joy and peace during worship that morning at Valley View because this pattern of conflict ripples outward and is sustained by the life of the congregation.

You might have easily detected the cycles of blame and passive aggressive behaviors at Valley View that demonstrate unhealthy relationships at work. But what you may not have realized is that there are two different relational systems working in these congregations – no one individual is “at fault” or has control of the entire system, each is playing a role in a historically established culture grounded in the dynamics of the congregation and its history. At root, these two congregations – meaning the bulk of their leadership and members – have evolved different ideas – different cultural beliefs – about human nature, and this is reflected in the patterns of their relationships with one another.

We might say that at Third Church, the congregation seems to *really believe* in the interdependent web of existence, that we are dependent on one another by our very natures and thus we are all in this together – no one needs to be pushed or blamed for problems, that would be counterproductive to a natural tendency to pitch in and solve the problem together. Whereas at Valley View, the congregation seems to believe that human beings and their problems are not interrelated, that they are individualistic and selfish, and that without blaming and yelling and pushing, no one would feel any obligation to work on any problem.

This then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for Valley View as these behaviors lead to more and more unhappiness and negativity and breakdown of the joyful dimensions of congregational life. I am reminded of a cartoon I

saw recently of 4 men in a leaking boat. Two men are sitting at the top of the boat and two men are frantically bailing water out at the bottom of the boat. The two men at the top of the boat are saying to each other: “I’m sure glad the hole is on their end of the boat!”

While I’ve chosen to use this example from congregational life, I’m sure some of you can think of family systems that operate this way, as well as work environments. How many of you have worked for a company or organization that culturally operated as though you needed to be carefully watched because you might cheat the company. Or how about one in which supervisors felt that the best way to motivate employees is to kick them in the butt and yell at them? [Hmmm, come to think of it, that tends to be the operating philosophy of many prophets, too, for better or for worse – prophets weren’t pleasant people when they took people to task.]

Or have you ever worked for a company that seemed to reward those who managed to look good to others but who secretly did look for ways to cheat the system because that was what was expected of them? Raise your hands if any of that seems familiar at all! I know that *I* have worked in such organizations! When we look at what’s happened to our country, from the Enron collapse several years ago to our current economic crisis and mortgage collapse, we can see this model of individualism and rejection of the reality of the interdependent web magnified before our very eyes. We can even extend this to foreign policy beliefs when one nation’s government believes that waving a big stick will make the world a safer place, though ironically again, this nation’s view becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and others return this negative expectation with even more aggressive behaviors.

The point I want you to take home with you and meditate upon today is how relationships *always* operate as systems, and that these systems are based on beliefs about human nature – what human beings are capable of or not capable of – thus as essentially positive in capacities and natural sources of hope and inspiration leading to a desire for further relationship, or as essentially negative and potentially threatening in capacities – thus beliefs that relationships are to be avoided, despaired of, manipulated, or destroyed. This includes our relationship with *our self* – which is also an interlocking system of beliefs about our own nature as a human being, typically derived from early childhood experiences.

The reality is that we *are* interdependent – we *are* social animals and our behaviors impact on and reinforce each other’s behaviors. Our beliefs about human nature arise out of the behaviors we witness and experience from very early ages, as children at our parents’ feet and within the larger family legacy and cultural community in which we grow and work. Growing up in a working class family that also had a small measure of alcoholism and abuse in its relational history left me with sometimes limiting beliefs about my self as well as other human beings and their capacities, beliefs that were only challenged by the loving attention of other adults in my life over time.

This is perhaps why I have dedicated my life and ministry to working with children and families, particularly those suffering from the impact of poverty or urban trauma – so much starts and gets locked in early through our positive or negative childhood experiences. And once our beliefs begin to formulate – well, they become very resistant to change because they are “*experience-filled beliefs*” about human hope or human despair, and we are drawn to others who reinforce our own “*experience-filled beliefs*” and a relational system is born and begins to crystallize – even to calcify. This is why the cultures of families, work environments, and even churches can be so difficult and resistant to change.

We are created in a relational system that begins with our families and the larger American culture of individualism, and then we are often drawn into work organizations or religious organizations that reinforce the *experience-filled beliefs* of our childhood. That is *unless* we have an alternative experience, a counter-cultural experience. The creation of this alternative experience – this counter-cultural experience – that becomes the creation of healthier relationships is rooted in the experience of being loved – whether that’s by a different member of our family, by another adult mentor, or by some inspirational figure who shows us a different way of being.

As I have said, the prophetic voice becomes unbalanced when it lack a pastoral ground in love. The experience of love nurtures those feelings of zest, energy, joy, and enthusiasm. You may have noticed a not too subtle thread in the focus on a language of “love” in our songs this morning – a focus that is historically very much part of the Universalist tradition. Some think of “love” as a very superficial word these days, overused in its

meaning, as the old Beatles song goes, “all we need is love.” But that is not the sense in which I use the word love – love is not a light-hearted gift.

Love is both an attraction and a demand upon us – love calls us to something or someone *and* it invokes a response, an ethic of right relationship within the relational system, a response of caring and protecting, developing and sustaining through our behaviors, and with our actions and our words. Love is the most powerful and holy place our heart can be in. Love enables us to raise our voices and sing with holy enthusiasm. Love is the passion drawing us together and then out into the world to share with others.

We are entering a period of time here in Quincy that is filled with tremendous hope and possibilities as well as some serious challenges. As we go forward in the next few weeks, I call us not only to seek healthy relationships with one another but also to actively foster and create those relationships by seeking the spirit of wisdom. We will do this if we each first look at and foster and understand at a deeper level our own *personal* histories, and know and surmount our own barriers to giving freely in joy and love – most often this entails first noticing what *gives us* the joy and enthusiasm that creates a sense of abundance in our lives and pursuing those relationships, as opposed to making us feel that we are operating from a chronic sense of scarcity and a lack of choice in our relationships. When you find yourself facing those situations in your family or at work, notice what you find yourself thinking about human nature in the person with whom you are relating, and maybe where those beliefs came from in your own history.

But I also suggest that we need to do this at an even deeper level of congregational analysis, too – of the cultural systems that both foster healthy interactions but also those that create barriers at times as well. Where does our church cultural system demonstrate great health in functioning and where is it less than healthy at times – and more than this noticing of the present, where does this come from in the congregation’s history, minimally over the past 50 years? This might seem like an odd challenge to some of you, but I suspect that a clearer sense of our congregational history will actually improve the overall health of the congregation and reduce tendencies to blame any one individual or group for any particular dilemma, as well as enhance a natural vibrancy and core of enthusiasm and inspiration

that is available for the congregation to capitalize on as it envisions its many possibilities. May it always be so. Blessed be. Amen.