

“Because It’s Sunday”

A sermon for All Faiths

Delivered by the Rev. CJ McGregor

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I was having lunch with former President Andrew Jackson this week when he reminded me that one of my favorite films is *Torchsong Trilogy*. My inner prude may be surfacing when I say it may be too racy for some, but I recommend you watch it. It is a joy to watch Anne Bancroft and Harvey Firestein, members of a Jewish family living in New York City. Bancroft’s character, the mother, is grieving the death of her husband. While sitting Shiva, a time for mourning in the Jewish tradition, her gay son, played by Firestein, expresses to his mother that he is worried about her and asks what she is going to do now that her husband has died. The mother begins explaining where the family will be laid to rest. “Thank you for coming on such an awful day. I’ll be here between your father and your grandfather. Phil, you’re here with your wife and children. And you, looking at her gay son, you will be here with.... A nice girl, who knows?” The son says, “Believe me, Ma, I know.” She replies, “God doesn’t know. My son, he knows!” A guest asks, “Why are the mirrors covered?” Mother answers, “So we don’t see the pain in our faces.” “Why are you sitting on boxes?” “To make sure there’s pain in our faces.” “Ma, what will you do?”, the son asks. Are you going to keep the house?” Mother replies “I’ll teach out the term, put the house up for sale, and go live in Florida.” “Why Florida? Phil and I are here.” She replies, “That’s what we do. We go to Florida. My mother did it. That’s what we do. We go to Florida.” “I don’t care what “WE” do. What do you want to do?” Mother replies “I want to die. Till then, I’ll go to Florida. It’s what we do.”

I find this exchange hilarious and intriguing. The act of moving to Florida has become the norm, a ritual, for this family. It’s rarely questioned. It simply is. Years ago I stood at the stove preparing breakfast and found myself eavesdropping on a phone conversation between my son, Antonio, and a friend. Apparently Antonio’s friend was trying to make plans and lure him away for a Sunday morning. Likely another trip to the mall. I overheard Antonio say, “I can’t.” The friend must have asked “why not?” Antonio responded, “because I’m going to church.” His friend must have asked “why are you going to church?” Antonio responded, “because its Sunday.”

Because its Sunday. Of course. What an interesting answer. It was simply what we do. It is like going to Florida. Antonio knew that Sunday mornings, in the case of my family, is carved out for church. No questions asked. It’s what we do. This raised some questions for me. Why do I go to church? Why is it so important to me? Richard and I seek out UU Churches if we are traveling on vacation. Why? Why do we go out of our way to gather on Sunday morning with fellow UU’s? I’ve come up with some answers. Some are obvious. The answer that touched me most was that I am blessed to have the opportunity to retreat to church. Church is my sanctuary. As Unitarian Universalists one of the rituals we can claim is attending worship, finding sanctuary, each Sunday.

A sanctuary is a safe haven. A safe place. A place for living, loving, hospitality, protection, and where we can encounter the sacred—whatever and whomever that may be. A place removed from the distraction, stress, and tawdriness of the rest of the world. A place as described in Taoist text,” where we can all relieve people in distress as speedily as you must release a fish from a dry rill lest it die. A place where we can deliver people from danger as quickly as you must free a sparrow from a tight noose.”

The notion of sanctuary is ancient. In Christian scripture, the Gospel of Matthew we are told “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them.” In the Qur’an “Hold fast, all together, to God’s rope, and be not divided among yourselves. Let there arise out of you one community, inviting all that is good, enjoining what is right.” Sixteenth century Unitarian preacher, Francis David tells us “We need not think alike to love alike.” What is striking about these examples of sanctuary in scripture and writings is that all give us an invitation to step inside and to gather. Gathered in my name, all together and not divided, one community, love alike. Our gathering places become holy, sacred, and places of love. All describe a united community that rejects all that is wrong with the world and helps us envision a blessed place, a sanctified place, a sanctuary of compassion. These ancient texts and writings create a message that is eternal. That is, the places we create to gather, to worship, to serve, to learn, to laugh, to cry, to celebrate, to mourn, and to love are our sacred spaces. Spaces set aside within a fractured world where we can find shelter and safety. My family spent the day yesterday at Ding Darling Wildlife refuge. This space on Sanibel Island has been set aside where the animals, birds, trees, and more can simply be. Undisturbed. A sanctuary. For us, this space, is that space.

UU Minister, the Reverend Tom Schade is a dear friend and writes a blog called the *Lively Tradition*. You may have seen some of his posts on Facebook. Not long ago he wrote something that I’ve been thinking about. He writes “If I was really cynical and smart-alecky, I would say the UUism is a collection of book clubs which can never decide what book to read but still gather for the cookies, coffee and conversation. Maybe that works, but it is hiding the light under a bushel basket.” What is he saying exactly? He’s saying that we need to get out of our own way, put down the banners of indecision, contest, ego, and string up the saving lights of Unitarian Universalism. He’s saying that by hiding our light under a basket which can be viewed as a metaphor for all that holds us back we become nothing more than a club. A club where inspiration, love, justice, positive interpersonal relationships, and vision to change our community and the world are strangers.

I’m grateful to have this place to come to each week. Like you I spend a lot of my time outside of here being hassled and left disappointed by the false sense of sanctuary that lurks in other places of my life. Here is a surprising truth. Sanctuary isn’t necessarily just a place. It can be a way of being. Years ago I was the Director of Religious Education for an urban New England UU church. I remember an annual meeting that I attended. A typical annual meeting with the reports and decisions you might expect. The meeting turned vicious when it came time to elect officers for the Board. Candidates were given a couple of minutes to introduce themselves and their intent. Before the candidate for Treasurer could introduce herself a band of members interrupted the process to let the congregation know the mental health history of this particular candidate. The deepest and most personal part of this woman’s life was being laid out in an attempt to discredit her. The humiliation was heartbreaking. How dare anyone, anyone, be so bold as to think this was acceptable, particularly with a group of UU’s who have principles that

direct them otherwise. As far as I am concerned the group bent on tearing down their UU sister was behaving violently. Greed, ego, fear of not getting what they wanted when they wanted led them to violence. As you might expect the meeting fell apart. The woman could not be consoled, was embarrassed, humiliated and left to die by those who should have been committed not to harm her. Years later, The congregation continues to struggle with issues born at this meeting.

This is an example of the way we relate to one another, a way of being, that brings the evil, the violence, the hassle outside of our doors into our house. We commit ourselves to welcoming all no matter their beliefs or politics. If we walk the talk and truly listen we will find common ground. The way in which we treat and regard one another, the way in which we embrace one another creates sanctuary. If one of us chooses to dishonor and attack our sense of sanctuary then none of us shall have it. We are reminded of the reality of sanctuary and how we can be responsible to create it or dismantle it. We are yanked out of place by the realities and cruelties of life. We desire true sanctuary.

It is not a coincidence I offer you these words. Like many congregations we sometimes struggle with accepting one another if we believe, think or even vote other than what we might expect from UU liberals. As your minister it is my task to hold up elephants in the room such as this struggle. You will find that when I name an elephant I also offer a way to lead that elephant out of our house in a way that is safe and in a way that causes no harm. Elephants and violence have no room in our house. You see there is a train coming through our house. A train that we will board and move slowly toward our destination of greatness, of an even healthier congregation, a train where no boarding pass is required. There is room for everyone, our ideas, our opinions, our differences, our commonalities. However, there is one requirement. Commitment. Today we commit ourselves to taking the journey to our destination. Today we decide that there is no need to fear that we are losing something, today we decide to transform our anxieties into work that will lay the track for our train. Today we decide to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

Say yes to love, life, and truth. These walls keep hate out and hold love in. My, our theology, has no room for judgment. I cannot promise you that you will be saved by Christ and I cannot offer you the notion of hell as a reality and warn you to save yourself. But I can promise you this. Returning to sanctuary will save us. We will be saved from a chaotic, and frightening world. Though we claim our ritual for a short time each week I promise you we will leave with peace---inner peace that will hold us for the week ahead. I take seriously the responsibility to make sure you are offered a message within on Sunday that gives you something to hold onto. It is imperative that we reclaim gathering together for our true selves and avoid being robbed by ego, disagreement, and fear.

Listen to the words of our second hymn: *O come you longing thirsty souls, drink freely from the spring. And come you weary, famished folk, and end your hungering. Why spend yourself on empty air? Why not be satisfied? For everywhere a feast is spread that's always at your side.*

Now is the time, in this place, for us to heal, to care for all souls, to seat ourselves at the banquet that has been spread. Let joy, acceptance, love, reason, celebration of difference replace the aching to belong, indifference, and loneliness of our lives. Let us step out of the storm and on to

the train and into the warmth of holy embrace. Let us allow one another to escape the ill will and pain and make this place sacred. Because, after all, its Sunday.

May it be so.