

## **“Our Message”**

**a brief reflection  
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, March 4, 2007  
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church  
Cincinnati, Ohio**

One of the curses, if you will, of being a minister, is the inability to drive past a church – any church – and not take a look at what they have to offer – their building, their landscaping, their parking, their playground – and definitely, most definitely, their *sign*.

A sign says a lot about a congregation; it is the very definition of the public face of the church. How does the church want to be known in the community? What impression does it want to make? For the answer, just look at its sign...

So, there I was, a week or so ago, on my way home from work, when my attention was attracted to one of those pithy sayings that are often included on church signs. I know I’m a little weird, but I have to say, I simply *love* reading those things! Sometimes, a good church sign can make an otherwise miserable trip worthwhile. Plus, they’re a great place to get ideas for sermons.

Take today’s sermon, for instance. That sign I saw last week gave me the idea for this morning’s reflection. And let me be sure to give credit where credit is due: It was Clough Church, near my house, where I got the inspiration. Their sign that day read simply: “Sign broken. Message inside.”

I love that! “Sign broken. Message inside.”

It got me thinking – while I believe I have a pretty good idea what message might be offered inside, there at Clough Church – I wonder how many passersby would know what message would be offered here, in this sanctuary on Sunday, if they saw those words outside on *our* sign.

Just what is *our* message, as a Universalist, Unitarian church? What is our message as part of Anderson Township, and the Greater Cincinnati community? And why haven’t more people heard it?

If we had put those words on our sign this week – “Sign broken. Message inside” – and if someone came inside, in search of a message – what message would they hear?

They would come in, and see a choir, and a minister, and a pulpit, and a congregation. They would hear us singing hymns; they would watch us passing the plate for outreach. In short, on the surface, they might see and hear many of the same things they would at any other church in town. But I submit to you, too – they would hear, and experience, a very different message – a different *kind* of message – in this sanctuary, than they would at an orthodox church.

In their “Roots and Branches” orientation program for newcomers to Unitarian Universalism, Reverends Brent Smith and Suzanne Meyer make a distinction between *orthodox* churches and *free churches*. The word “orthodox,” in Latin, literally means right or correct belief – and we know that most churches are, in fact, based on the presupposition that there is one correct way for people to believe, religiously – and that the purpose of the church is to teach, and to promulgate, that right belief.

On the other side of the coin are those congregations we call “free churches.” You hear the phrase “the free church tradition,” often, in a UU church – because we descend, historically, from those dissenting congregations where people gathered together not around a commonly held belief or creed, but around a common *purpose* – where what held the community together, over time, was not uniformity of opinion, but a *covenant*.

Thus, in a free church such as ours, rather than offering this or that particular religious doctrine or dogmatic belief, we offer – and at our best, exemplify – a *way of being in relationship* with one another. That is the first part of our unique message – our way of committing to each other, our covenantal relationship, our way of being together – one church, with many paths.

The second part of our unique message is the way we embody something that is very precious in our modern world of competing religious ideas: religious freedom, and the protection of individual freedom of belief. Certainly, you have heard me preach, on many occasions, about such topics, for they are the very lifeblood of Unitarian Universalism.

Community. Freedom. Two of the messages we offer, here at HUUC. Yet there is third, even more foundational, message – a message that distinguishes us from even our UU brothers and sisters in Cincinnati. By nurturing our Universalist roots, we are keeping alive a message that is, far too often, lost in what are, frankly, more Unitarian-oriented congregations.

Back in January, Rev. Chuck Thomas alluded to this, and reminded us to take pride in our Universalist traditions – and the message they embody.

Theologically speaking, that message is much as it has been since Alice Holabird carved this beautiful altar, as a communion table, back in 1880. It is the same message as that preached by Hosea Ballou, back in 1803, when he articulated the Universalist position; it is the same as that preached by Jesus, two thousand years ago:

All are loved by God.

*Philosophically* speaking, our message – based on an understanding of the divine as all-encompassing love – is one of *radical inclusion*. All are welcome here. *No one* is excluded from this communion table, where the joys and the sorrows of our lives are shared, where we bring waters from our summer travels, and flowers in the springtime; where we receive light at the darkest time of the year.

Yes, perhaps our most important message – the message embodied in Heritage Church – is that the spirit of Universalism is still alive and well, in 21<sup>st</sup> century Unitarian Universalism.

I know this, because I witness it, over and over, as I minister to this congregation. I know this, because last Wednesday night, I saw it again – perhaps more clearly demonstrated than I ever have.

At the beginning of our “Deepening Your UU Faith” class, I asked the long-time Unitarian Universalists gathered there to describe how, and when, each had known – really known – that he or she was a Unitarian Universalist. But what happened surprised me (I don’t know *why* these things surprise me, but they still do!).

What happened was that many of the people in the room spoke not of when they became a Unitarian Universalist, but of when they became a *Universalist*. Among those who shared was Karen Rush – and Karen’s story was so beautiful, so moving, so quietly eloquent that I asked her permission to share it with you today.

When Karen spoke, it was not the proverbial “elevator speech,” but instead words from the heart that left hardly a dry eye in the room. And so I asked her, if she could, to try to recreate what she had said, and she emailed me the following:

Originally, Universalism was built on a belief that all people share a common destiny in heaven – *all* people, regardless of race, class, behavior, even religious belief. When I first heard this idea, I thought it was the most loving, spiritual concept I had ever heard. Picture this: a God loving enough to make room, in the afterlife, for a man like Hitler, right there alongside all

his victims – what a powerful idea! This was truly universal love, truly compassion for the human condition.

Today, of course, Universalism is different. A Universalist need not believe in heaven, or any kind of an afterlife, but the legacy of love remains – and it is alive and well at Heritage Church. We are the same people, in modern clothes – still aware of the common destiny and common love we share, striving to be loving and compassionate toward all humanity, our hearts filled with spirituality and hope.

Friends, there's really nothing else I can add.

What is our message? That is our message.

It is a message, I think, that can be boiled down to one very powerful, very freeing, very liberating word: inclusion. Ours is a message of inclusion, of all-embracing love – a love that truly treats all of creation as equal, as worthy, as having both a common, divine source, and a common destiny.

The trouble I've always had with orthodox religions, is the fact that they are based on a God who offers only *conditional* love. The love preached by Universalists, the love preached in a free church – the message you'll hear here, in one form or another, each and every Sunday – is one of unconditional love.

And so, we gather to celebrate life, to create community, and to seek justice. As we do so, we offer to the world – and to anyone who might happen to notice our sign out on Newtown Road – a message of inclusive love, for all to share.

May it ever be so. Amen.