

“The Question Before Us”

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, November 11, 2007
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

“Prophetic church, the future awaits your liberating ministry. Proclaim the truth that makes us free.”

This morning, I want to challenge us – all of us, myself included – to more intentionally proclaim that truth – we have no right to be lukewarm – and thus to recommit ourselves to speaking out and living out the radical message of Universalism – a message of all-embracing love, of true *inclusion*, of hospitality, and of welcome. It is the message so eloquently expressed in our Covenant – words that, year after year, generation after generation, have reached out to those who seek a free and responsible faith, those who wish to become an integral part of a supportive religious community – just as Scott and Stephanie Bisselberg, Kathy and Mike Dunsmore, have done today.

It is because we have been blessed with an influx of *many* good people such as them – a blessing, I believe, that’s a direct result of our message, and our willingness to share it with the world – that for many years now, this church has been experiencing slow, but steady, growth – to the point that, today, our church membership is as high as it has been in nearly a century. This is great cause for celebration. This is truly – *good news*.

But with growth, as we know, come challenges. With growth, come questions. And so, I am here this morning to lift up one particular question for your consideration – one question that, I believe, is the most critical question before us, as a congregation:

Can we *make room* for all who want to be here?

This is not an idle question. How we answer it will have profound ramifications not only for the life of this institution, but for countless *individual* lives as well. How we answer it, will define what kind of church we want to be, and therefore, what kind of church we will *become*, in the generation ahead.

It seems this is not the first time our congregation has faced this question. While flipping through some files in preparation for a retreat with Board of Trustees this weekend, I came across some documents that I found rather interesting. On paper now colored in varying degrees of yellow, rather than white, were phrases like “parking crunch” and “seating capacity” and “growing number of children.” The dates on those pages were telling; they spanned a good deal of the past half century.

No, we’re not the first group of people, in this church, to experience a loss of elbow room in our church home. Last Sunday, we heard about some of the important moments in the history of this congregation, when choices and decisions were made that led to renewed vitality and growth, increased outreach and hospitality.

We know that many of those choices involved what to do about a church building that was no longer able to fully meet the needs of its community. And so, last week, we heard about the selling of land, the construction of new buildings, the giving up of comforts that could serve a few – comforts such as swimming pools or captain’s chairs – in order to make more room, for the many. In order to make more room, for many of us.

And now, a generation later, I submit to you, my friends, that we are at a similar crossroads. We have come to an equally important time of decision. The question before us – is will we make room, for all who want to be here?

I hope that most of you saw, and took the time to read, my column in the Heirloom this month. In it, I related a few stories, both personal and anecdotal, about the crowding in our Sunday School classrooms, about the difficulties many are having finding a place to park on Sunday mornings. I described, also, the so-called “80 percent rule,” which is church-analyst jargon meaning simply this: Research, time and time again, has indicated that it is human nature, when entering a space that is more than 80 percent full, to feel that there isn’t enough room there. Notice I said “*feel*” – for while it could be logically and objectively argued that there is, indeed, room for 20 percent more – the *feeling*, the experience, the often unconscious, emotional response, to entering a room more than 80 percent filled, is one of being pushed out. Of, literally not *fitting* in. The feeling is that there is no room here, for me. And *that* is an uncomfortable thing to feel.

I ask you to imagine how different your life would have been, if – when you first walked through those doors – you had felt there was no room for you here. I ask you to consider what would have happened, and how your life might have been different, if, when you arrived, you had gotten the message that this community was not open – that it was already, somehow,

complete. I ask you to consider what it would have been like, if you had felt that *you* weren't needed here.

And so, I say to anyone who is with us for the first time this morning, or who has taken the, perhaps even braver, step of coming back for a second, or a third time, to worship with us today – you are welcome here. You are needed here.

And I make that assurance to you, in spite of the fact that, on some Sundays, you may have to step over some folks to get to that empty seat in the middle of a row, or – even worse – have to sit in the very front! By the way, I want to applaud the members of our Board, who, this weekend at their retreat, agreed to take the lead in sitting in some of those (let's face it) “less desirable” chairs, in order to make more room for newcomers – much like we do out in our parking lot, with the reserved spaces near the front entrance. Hopefully, other church leaders and long-time members will follow suit. Hospitality can be contagious.

But no matter how hospitable we are – like a game of musical chairs, when you get to a point where it seems there are less chairs, than rumps – you've got a problem. Which is why, as part of our strategic plan, a Master Facilities Task Force was appointed this fall by the Board of Trustees – its charge, to gather information and make suggestions regarding our facility, and both its current, and its projected needs.

I will remind you that this is not the first time this congregation, founded now 180 years ago, has faced such issues. And, I will remind you, also, that when it has faced those challenges with creativity, intentionality, and broad-based support, the congregation has thrived. On the other hand, when it has shied away from facing those challenges, the congregation has stagnated, and even declined.

Common sense, right? And why should we be any different?

Yet it is certainly much easier said than done, this growth thing – which is why the question before us today is not only an important question, but a difficult one: Can we make room for all who want to be here – and all that that will entail?

As we consider whether or not to expand our children's classroom space, our adult program space, our sanctuary space, our parking lot, our office space – just to name a few of the possibilities – as we consider whether or not to offer two Sunday worship services or two separate Sunday morning programs for children and youth – to name a few other possibilities – let me pause now, for a moment, because I know I have just raised the collective blood pressure and heart rate in the room, merely by saying these

things out loud – and so I ask you to take a deep breath ... and now another ... and now consider, for a moment, the alternative...

If we cannot, with creativity, and intentionality, and broad-based support, find a way to make more room for those who want to be here – then I assure you, they won't be here. And that will be a *great loss* – a great loss for us, and a great loss for them.

As Jean Vanier put it in this morning's second reading, we have no right to be lukewarm. In a world where too many people are lonely, too many spirits are hungry, too many hearts feel empty – it is our *moral imperative* to offer hospitality. Then, he says – only then – “only when the members of a community realize that they are not simply there *for themselves*,” do they “truly [begin to live] in, [and as,] a community.”

Folks, it is time we truly began to live in, and as, a community.

And so, as Natalie Merchant once sang, in her song about Jack Kerouac, “now for the tricky part” ...

The question before us, is can we make room, for all who want to be here – and by that, I don't just mean *physical* room. For I have no doubt that, if we choose to put our minds, and our resources, to it, we can create enough physical space to accommodate those whose paths are leading them to Heritage Church, in ever-increasing numbers.

The much more difficult question before us, is can we make room in our lives, in our leadership, in our *hearts*, for them? What's that great Biblical passage? – “I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me water. I was sick, and you visited me.”

That is Universalism. And *that* is what we are called to do – each one of us, myself included. We are called to make more room, in *our* spiritual community, in *our* church home.

To do so will not be simply to add a classroom or two, a service or two, or expand the sanctuary. It will be to have a party, at our home, and invite not only our long-time friends, but newer folks as well. It will be to attend an adult education class at church, and invite a new member to come along with us. It will be to get our plate at a potluck, and sit down next to a newcomer, rather than someone we've known for years, and start a conversation.

It will be to keep our eyes open, and our ears to the ground, and find out when someone is in the hospital – and then go visit them. It will be to offer someone a ride to church one Sunday morning.

It will be to learn the names of the new moms and dads – and those of their children, back in the nursery and out on the playground. It will be to remember – and then remember to use – full names, as in, “Did you hear that

Sarah Smith got a new job,” rather than, “Did you hear that Sarah got a new job” – which is to acknowledge, and accept, that we now have more than one Sarah here, and that, even though we ourselves know her, not everyone might know who Sarah Smith is.

It will also be to try our darndest to use full names of programs and groups, even though *we* are cool enough to be familiar with the acronyms and what they stand for. “Building Your Own Theology,” rather than “BYOT” – that sort of thing.

It will be to try, with intention and good will, to see this church family – this church family that so many of us are already a part of, thank you very much – to see it through the eyes of someone new, someone who’s not yet a part of that family – but might just *want* to be part of it, some day.

It will be to allow others to take on leadership roles that we, ourselves, may have previously held – and to do so graciously, and in the spirit of Universalism, and inclusion.

It will be to pick up a copy of the new church directory, as soon as it is out, and look for faces we don’t recognize – and rather than bemoan that fact, go and actively seek them out, in the Fellowship Hall, and introduce ourselves to them.

It will be to acknowledge, quite frankly, that someone who has been a member of Heritage Church five or ten years, is *not* an interloper. I hesitate to put it in those terms, but – with all due respect – I have been witness to that attitude, on more than one occasion. I sometimes joke about the time, just last year, in my fifth year here at Heritage, when I was introduced to a visitor as “our *new* minister.” But the sad truth is, I have seen similar things happen to people who are serving on our Board of Trustees. I have seen similar things happen to members of our paid staff, and to some of our hardest-working, and most dedicated, volunteers.

And so, this morning, I ask you – **me** – all of us – to just think a little bit more, before we speak. *Think* a little bit more, before we act. Think about what it means to be truly welcoming, and hospitable – and how we might demonstrate, to others, that they are wanted here, that they are needed here.

Yes, to do so will be to set the bar pretty high for ourselves. Yet as Universalists, we have already done just that. We talk of radical hospitality, and making a place for everyone at the table. But the mere fact that we use the language of inclusion, the mere fact that we can ask the question before us, and consider its implications – the mere fact that we know, in our heart of hearts, that we are better people, and the world is a better place, when we make room for the stranger, when we show to others the hospitality and

welcome that we, ourselves, would expect and hope for – that is only half the battle.

What remains – the other half – is to learn how to openly, and honestly – in love and compassion – remind one another when we miss the mark, or fall short of our ideals. And so, I return to the words of Jeanne Nieuwejaar which you heard earlier today: “To be a religious or spiritual being means to be in relationship with others. The central religious qualities of love and care become real only as they are lived, tested, and deepened, in community... They are learned by being among [those] whose hearts and minds are truly open, to one another. [And] they are learned as we are coached, and held accountable, for such virtues – and as we are *expected* to live them out.”

I have said before – Heritage is a high-expectation church. Perhaps this is the highest expectation, the loftiest ideal of them all. To keep our minds and hearts open, and to hold one another accountable for doing so. To live the love that is the spirit of this church. To treat others as we, ourselves, would be treated.

If we can do this – we can make room, among us, for *all* those who find here, a spiritual home.

May we have the courage, and the commitment – to the ideal of Universalism, and to the people of this church – past, present, and future – to take up the difficult spiritual work that lies ahead. And may we always do that work, in the spirit of love, forgiveness, and compassion.

May it be so. Namaste.