Whose Are We?
The Rev. Paige Getty
UU Congregation of Columbia, MD
Sunday, May 8, 2011

Call to Worship – from A Deeper Faith by Jeff Golliher, p.12-13 (Whose Are We, 13)

Chalice Lighting – from “Mama Fierce” by the Rev. Parisa Parsa

Reading – “That Which Holds All” by Nancy Shaffer

Sermon – Whose Are We?

A colleague tells the story of an “interfaith clergy organization [in Seattle that] has a tradition of asking senior colleagues to share their life odysseys”.

On this particular occasion, a Roman Catholic Priest was telling his story, and he said that his life had been in large measure a failure. He remembered the heady days of Vatican II and how hopeful he and his generation of liberal priests had been that real change was coming to the church he loved so dearly. And yet; these many years later he felt that the church had if anything become hardened and deeply conservative, and his dreams had not been realized.

Now, this priest was someone who was valued among his interfaith colleagues, and they were somewhat hurt and stunned by his revelation. And yet; one colleague noted, despite the severity of his words, his demeanor seemed quite peaceful and content. “How can you claim that your life was a failure, and yet appear so calm and serene?” “I know who I am.” replied the priest. “I know whose I am.” (Whose Are We 4-5)

“Whose are we,” this colleague was led to ask? “We [Unitarian Universalists] who claim so many diverse approaches to what is of ultimate truth, and yet gather as a unified one? What or [whom] do we serve, beyond the narrow interests of ourselves? What transcends our small individual being, connecting us to the pulsing life of the universe we are a part of? Is it energy, is it God, is it Love or Justice, is it the people who surround us, the cloud of witnesses whose lives passed before us? Whose are we?” (Whose Are We 5)

The Rev. Victoria Safford reminds us of a Quaker teacher who

says that the ancient question, “What am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one, “Whose am I?” – because there is no identity outside of relationships. You can’t be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose Am I?” is to extend the questions far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your
choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways? (Whose Are We, 11)

For two-and-a-half days this past week, I gathered with forty other Unitarian Universalist ministers to explore answers to this question. Whose are we? It was some of the best theology I’ve done since finishing seminary more than a decade ago. We weren’t learning about theology. We were doing theology with one another. We journaled, we talked, we sang, and we prayed for one another.

We started with a simple exercise in pairs to get us thinking about our personal relationships and connections. Facing one another, each of us had five whole minutes to answer the question “Whose are you?” by saying, “I am ______.”

Over and over again, for five minutes I kept filling in the blank:

I am Graham’s spouse.
I am Hallie’s mother.
I am Sara’s mother.
I am UUCC’s minister.
I am the Earth’s.
I am a child of the Universe.
I am the product of my choices.
I am mine.

Imagine what happens when you have five full minutes simply to answer the question, “Whose am I?” over and over again. I started with the easy stuff, and then had to move beyond the obvious relationships. In five minutes I began to recognize my relationship with some of my less appealing characteristics. (I am self-centered. [And then...] I am – hopefully – self-aware.) I began to recognize the complexity of my relationship with myself. (I am an occupant of a mysterious body.) I began to recognize the different ways in which I relate to people. (I am one who dances with others. I am one who sings and makes harmony.) I began to recognize my contradictions – or perhaps it’s my flexibility. (I am a leader. I am a follower.) I began to recognize the breadth of humanity with which I am connected. (It was Monday. I said, “I am a citizen of the world in which Osama bin Laden’s people also are citizens.”)

And I, the proud agnostic, eventually said, “I am God’s.”

Whose am I? The message for me was clear: I am no one thing. I belong to no single One. I am a complex being, living a complex life, and I cannot be confined to a single, simple definition. I am beholden to many different persons, commitments and ideals. My life is intricately bound up with yours and yours and yours, and with every living being with which I share this world. My life will impact the lives of persons and beings that I will never meet – while I’m alive, and likely long after I am gone. I do not live for myself alone.
As our retreat progressed this week, we considered many questions... Whose am I? What sustains me when I’m weary? What encourages me when I feel despair? How do I experience whatever it is? How do I name it? And how does it help shape my Unitarian Universalism? What calls me into being, into service? And how do I respond? (After all, a call is meaningless if there is not also an accompanying response.)

As part of the process, I confronted my own personal issues with the concept of God as a being – a concept that does not resonate well with me. And yet my religious devotion is founded in the belief that reality is not limited to that which I can articulate or understand. There is a holiness, a sacredness that is greater than my human experience, and it is that which calls me into wholeness, into right relationship, into meaningful, loving existence.

As I – the proud agnostic – wrestled with ‘God’ this week, I found myself saying to my colleagues (with a bit of trepidation), “I don’t think God is a noun. I think God is an adjective, or an adverb. A how, not a what. I think God is a quality, a concept, that represents how I should be in the world – compassionate, kind, just, loving, patient.”

But I wasn’t sure about this idea (and I’m still not), and that’s the other great part. We are Unitarian Universalists, and as religious people we are defined by our approach to religion, not by our definitions or expressions of it. If I am a devout Unitarian Universalist, then as I wrestle with these big questions, I am considering a lot of different input: my own experience, sacred texts of many religious traditions, other people’s prophetic words, the Earth. Our religion teaches us to wrestle, to question, to experiment and test out our theories. Each of us is evolving, just as Unitarian Universalism has evolved over time... and will continue to evolve.

Whose are we? It’s a question for each of us to consider, and one for us to consider collectively. Even though – or maybe especially because – we are not going to come to a common understanding or articulation of the answer. Our religious devotion is expressed in the wrestling – in the mere consideration of the question. It is a call-and-response that never ends.

And, as my colleague Sarah Lammert suggests, “If we cannot make ourselves vulnerable enough to speak of such things, if we muffle one another’s expression of the holy, or of that which stirs us and moves us to want to love more fully, we do damage to one another as whole human beings. If we ignore the transcendent, never pausing long enough to fill the cup of our being, we do damage to ourselves as whole human beings.” (Whose Are We 7)

When we talk about being a “transforming spiritual community”, it is experiences like the one I had this week that come to mind for me. They’re not the wildly dramatic moments of transformation that are epitomized by the biblical stories of Moses and the burning bush or Paul blinded by the spirit on the road to Damascus; nor the kinds of
transformations that make a person abandon everything she seemed to hold dear in exchange for inexplicable religious devotion. Rather, it’s experiences that bring insight, a sense of deepening, a renewing of one’s commitments to values. Experiences that open us up to new questions, new ways of understanding, and parts of ourselves that have been unnecessarily quiet. Every once in a while, a Moses will see a burning bush and his life will be changed. But more likely – and more frequently – we will have moments in which we say, “Oh, yeah. That’s why I make the effort. That’s why I am committed to civil rights for all. That’s why Julia Ward Howe’s Mother’s Day proclamation moves me. I have a renewed sense of what is most meaningful, most sacred, most holy.” And then we adjust our behavior a little bit, act a little more mindfully, feel a little more connected to the source of our being. Maybe it’s unnoticeable from the outside, but here, internally, we’re changed... for the better.

And when we do this work together – openly, vulnerably, honestly – not muffling one’s own or one another’s expressions of the holy, but celebrating them – then we are more fully embodying the calling of the spiritual community, and we are poised to experience transformation.

Whose are we? The answers we provide to that question are of ultimate importance, even as there is no single answer; even as the answer varies with its context. So our task is to keep asking the question – inside oneself, within one’s family, within the community, as citizens of the world.

“Who needs you? Who loves you? . . . Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?”

Keep asking. Keep answering. And in this way, live.

Amen.

**Benediction** –
from Rainer Maria Rilke, “A Walk: Muzot, March 24”. *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, p. 177 (Whose Are We, 21)

**Bibliography** –
http://pastorprayers.org/2011/05/07/mama-fierce/