

The Gift of the Good Question

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, January 28, 2018

“Religion is born out of questions, not answers.” ~ David Dark

“It is very likely that the universe is really a kind of a question, rather than the answer to anything.”

~ Kevin Kelly

Story for All Ages

[A Roomful of Questions](#) - by Tracy Gallup

Reading

“A Gift” - a poem by Denise Levertov

Just when you seem to yourself
nothing but a flimsy web
of questions, you are given
the questions of others to hold
in the emptiness of your hands,
songbird eggs that can still hatch
if you keep them warm,
butterflies opening and closing themselves
in your cupped palms, trusting you not to injure
their scintillant fur, their dust.
You are given the questions of others
as if they were answers
to all you ask. Yes, perhaps
this gift is your answer.

Sermon Reflection

“What does it mean to be a people of intention? That is the question we have been exploring and wrestling with in our worship services throughout this month. It is a good question – it asks more than a yes or no response, it is not a judgment masquerading as a question, it is not defensive. It is a question that invites deeper reflection. It is an open and generous question.

Frederick Buechner once wrote that:

“We are much involved, all of us, with questions about things that matter a good deal today but will be forgotten by this time tomorrow — the immediate wheres and whens and hows that face us daily at home and at work — but at the same time we tend to lose track of the questions about things that matter always, life-and-death questions about meaning, purpose, and value. To lose track of such deep questions as these is to risk losing track of who we really are in our own depths and where we are really going.”

It was a short blog post by Quaker teacher and writer Parker Palmer that inspired today’s reflection. In it he asks:

When was the last time someone asked you an honest, open question — one that invited you to reflect more deeply on your own life, asked by a person who did not want to advise you or “fix” you but “hear you into speech,” deeper and deeper speech?

For most of us, that’s a rare experience.

In our culture, we tend to ask each other questions that are “fixes” or advice in disguise. “Have you thought about seeing a therapist?” is not an honest, open question!

But when we share a problem with someone who wants to listen and knows how to ask honest, open questions — such as, “Have you had a problem like this before? If so, what did you learn then that might help you now?” — something in us comes alive. Now we have a chance to learn from our own inner teacher, to tap into own inner wisdom.

[...] Denise Levertov’s poem “A Gift” [...] celebrates the power of good questions to evoke that which is deepest and truest in us. As Levertov says, “Yes, perhaps/this gift [of questions] is your answer.”

It was the poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s words about holding questions, living questions that caused the first crack in my own need for certainties when I was in my early twenties – I carried his words with me like a talisman until I learned better to live them.

[...] Rilke said we should love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.

Don’t search for the answers which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them.

And the point is to live everything.

Live the questions now.

Perhaps then someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

It has taken me a long time in ministry work – and it is an ongoing learning process – to realize that this work is not about having all the right answers as much as it is about asking good questions...particularly if I’ve spent sufficient time in discernment and ask them at the right time. This, of course, involves listening - listening deeply and with intention. As a religious leader the question I

ask myself often is “**What are the open and generous questions I can ask that will lead us into deeper dialogue?**” And what intention must I hold to facilitate this practice?

I think the intention needed is akin to what Frederick Buechner termed “Intentionally Perceiving One Another.” He wrote once of how he believed the greatest commandment given by Jesus had everything to do with **being willing to pay attention** – “If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must [first] see our neighbors. With our imagination as well as our eyes, that is to say like artists, we must see not just their faces, but the life behind and within their faces. **Here it is love that is the frame we see them in.**”

The first part of our UUFCM mission statement is “to be a religious community **guided by love**”...that is a statement of intention. That is the intention I (we) must hold to both live our questions and to live into our answers. And it is our covenant as a religious community that provides the framework for our relating – our covenant that invites us into the quality of relationship that makes room for the asking of open and generous questions and for the deep listening required in the process.

Sometimes I wonder if we really grasp the power inherent in being a covenantal community of faith and how that covenant can serve as a mechanism for spiritual growth as individuals and as a community together.

Lisa Ward once penned an exquisite articulation of the power and wisdom to be found in the covenantal relationship...she wrote:

A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; **it is the framework for our relating**. A covenant leaves room for chance and change, it is humble toward evolution. It claims: *I will abide with you in this common endeavor, be present as best as I can in our becoming*. This calls for a level of trust, courage and sacrifice that needs to be nurtured, renewed and affirmed on a regular basis.

A creed creates a static truth, something that does not incorporate new insights and realities. *A covenant is a dance of co-creation, keeping in step with one another in the flow of our lives.*

A creed seeks uniformity and a unison voice.

A covenant seeks harmony and a shared voice. Sometimes we may arrive at a unison, but it is not required.

A creed gives authority to the statement.

A covenant gives authority to shared intention.

A creed creates an “us” and “them.”

A covenant invites relationship.

A creed is a prescription that must be relied on.

A covenant relies on the treasures of shared truth.

The overall trust within this covenant is in the Truth (Capital T): something which no one person can fully see, yet something which each and every person can come to know—in glimpses, in another's story, in epiphanies. Truth is ever changing in our seeking to understand because of our limited perspectives—we grow into a deeper sense of the meaning of all things when we take our journeys seriously, with full heart and mind.

The courage within this covenant is in the acceptance and celebration of life, with all of its challenges, pain, ironies and joys. And the sacrifice within this covenant is in the letting go of dogma, of assumptions, of control—**and giving over to a greater wisdom which comes to us in bits and pieces.**

The task of this covenant is to take responsibility for the freedom we espouse. We know that we are interconnected and that what we do creates ripples of hope or despair, of affirmation or negation. What we do with and for one another is powerful and beyond our imagining.

<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/covenant-invites-relationship>

Some questions for consideration:

What does covenant mean to you? How does being part of this covenantal community of faith lead to transformation in our lives and our living? What are your intentions as a member of this community of faith? What changes have you experienced as a result of your engagement here?

Closing Words

“There is a debt between us even now
that our autonomy cannot remove:
a bent toward something more than tolerance,
older than kindness, oddly akin to love.”

~ Claire Bateman