

16th January 2022 – Finding shared purpose

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC Widerstehe doch der Sünde, BWV 54 (Transcr. by Víkingur Ólafsson),
by Bach https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGXBudB_reM

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome. Welcome to all of you here in the church and everyone joining us online today. A hello to everyone in Brighton – a belated happy new year to you! And also to anyone joining us for the first time. You are very welcome here.

I'm going to open with some words from Bridport Unitarians.

Here is quietness for the healing of our spirits;

Here is contemplation for the nurturing of our minds;

Here is fellowship for the warming of our souls and of the world around us;

Here we may take positive steps together which manifest love, compassion and generosity in everything.

And now, as is our custom, let's light our chalice candle as a symbol of our free religious faith and our beloved community. *If you're at home I invite you to light a candle with me now.*

And some words from Jennifer Gracen

We come together every week

Bound not by a creed,

Or a mutual desire to please one God

Or many Gods

Yet we are drawn together

By a belief, that how we are in the world,

Who we are together

Matters.

We light this chalice,

together in the knowledge

That love, not fear, can change this world.

The theme of today's service is 'Finding shared purpose'.

Let's sing...

HYMN 158 (P) The flame of truth is kindled

The flame of truth is kindled,
our chalice burning bright;
amongst us moves the Spirit
in whom we take delight.

We worship here in freedom
with conscience unconstrained,
a pilgrim people thankful
for what great souls have gained.

The flame of thought is kindled,
we celebrate the mind;
its search for deepest meaning
that time-bound creeds can't bind.

We celebrate its oneness
with body and with soul,
with universal process,
with God who makes us whole.

The flame of love is kindled,
we open wide our hearts,
that it may burn within us,
fuel us to do our parts.

Community needs building,
a Commonwealth of Earth,
we ask for strength to build it –
a new world come to birth.

Words © Clifford Martin Reed

PRAYER [Katie Kandarian-Morris](#)

O God of many names, the personal and mysterious,
We come now to a quiet time, an interior place,
a place for deepening of the spirit, and enrichment of the soul.
We seek to know ourselves by knowing you.

Let us have the courage to sit in unknowing,
the openness to find answers in unexpected places,
the willingness to be authentic with ourselves,
ready to bring our face to the world.

May we be willing to know others by what's genuine in them
By welcoming them into the world,
By appreciating the beauty that comes from seeing wholeness and truth.

Let us sit for a moment in that quiet depth.

May it be so. Blessed be.

Pause to bring to mind those who are suffering at this time...we pray for comfort, courage and guidance for the way ahead for all who are lost, suffering, alone.

STORY told by Bob Greig – has been joining us on Zoom for some time. He lives in Totnes but today he's here at a service in person for the first time, and he's going to tell us a story, which relates to finding shared purpose.

Morning everybody and thank you to Kate and my fellow Zoomers, hello.

I felt challenged by Kate's talk last week and I told her a story about community which she thought I might repeat to you today and I said I would. Just by way of brief introduction, I do a very small part-time role with the NHS which involves working with profoundly disabled

young adults. I pick them up in their wheelchairs and take them to a community care facility in Paignton.

On the morning before Christmas - this Christmas - I picked up the minibus and drove off to pick up my helper - I have someone who helps me on the bus. I was on the main road. It was dark. It was about half past seven in the morning. I found myself behind a cyclist. He was in full club gear but he was clearly an elderly chap.

Driving behind him I noticed the bike slowed down and he collapsed onto the bike and then onto the road. I knew immediately something terrible had happened so, with hazard lights on, I parked up so that no one could drive into him. I jumped out of the van, my phone went flying.

The car in front of me I could see had stopped and a lady was getting out and I flagged down the car behind me and immediately asked her to phone 999, which she did.

So within a few seconds of all this happening um there were two ladies and myself at this chap's side and we had the emergency response lady on the phone starting to give us instructions.

The man wasn't talking or breathing and we started CPR. His head was on the road, his body was half on the road, half on the pavement. I took my sweatshirt off and placed it under his head. The lady in the car who was behind me ran back to her car and pulled out a puffer jacket from the boot and wrapped that round his legs and waist. It was freezing cold. I was trying to check his pulse and to see whether he was breathing, the rhythm of one two three four from the telephone instructions was ongoing. Time starts to pass. On a roadside it's hard to feel a pulse or breathing. We swapped roles. There was no conversation really, there was a little 'come on fella, breathe for us' and then quietly to each other 'come on, where's the ambulance?' There was eye communication between all three of us and we continued this task of being with this man 20 or 30 minutes.

Later we heard sirens and the blue lights seem to be bouncing off the heavens on that dawn morning and our task was almost complete.

The chap died later that day, but there are many positives to take away from this story. He didn't die alone, he died on his bike which it came out was clearly something that he loved doing, it was good that people were there to care for him in his last moments.

But the story I told to Kate was the story that I don't tell to others, I'm going to share with you.

Five minutes after the ambulance arrived I was back in the minibus. I had people to pick up, jobs to do.

I had to park up again and I burst into tears. I'm not one for bursting into tears, but I did. I appreciated that shock had got to me but there was another thing which I recognized then and I recognize now and I recognized after last Sunday's service. I experienced what I can only describe as an overwhelming emptiness that that cocoon of love and care, which I was in for 20 or 30 minutes, that small community of love had gone. The intensity of purpose and focus of that community was gone.

I said I felt challenged by Kate's talk last week.

Personally speaking my own spiritual journey

has been something of an individual endeavor and I think at the age of 57 I'm beginning to realize that individuals can't heal themselves.

Thank you for listening.

Last week I asked how we might live with intention together, as a beloved community, in a way that is aligned with our shared values. With a sense of collective shared purpose. One of those ways could be to covenant with each other. Covenant is an idea that goes back to the Jewish and Christian traditions, of making an agreement between God and God's people.

Myron will read for us now...

READING What does it mean to be a people of covenant? Rev. Gretchen Haley

Covenant is one of those words that can initially sound kind of stuffy, academic and out-of-date. But when you unpack its meaning and its practices, covenant holds a whole vision for how to live in this complicated, beautiful and broken world. It is a vision that says we are most human when we bind ourselves in relationship. But not just any relationship – relationships of trust, mutual accountability and continual return.

This is not what our culture teaches us. Our culture teaches us that what it means to be human is to be an individual – self-defined, self-determined, separate even. But UU covenantal theology affirms that being human comes down to the commitments we make to and with each other – the relationships we keep. We become human through our promises to and with each other.

And even more than that: covenantal theology doesn't just say that we become human through our promising, but also when we break those promises, and yet somehow find ways to reconnect and begin again – when we repair the relationship because we know we need each other, even when we think the other isn't doing enough, even when the other is annoying us, or isn't listening well, or isn't doing things the way we want them done – even then. When we realize right then, that we are still connected, and we can't give up – and so we return, and begin again. This beginning again, says our faith, is when the holy and the human meet.

Let me tell you right now, sometime in the next year, maybe in the next few minutes, the people you most believe in and care about are going to disappoint you. Your church is going to disappoint you. This world is surely going to disappoint you. Like, all the time. We all are walking wounded and weary from the way this world can – and does – break our hearts.

And what our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other, keep on opening our hearts with greater love. And, right then, our covenantal faith says – we will feel not only most human, but also most whole and most at home.

STRETCH/BREATHE/SILENCE

I'm going to invite you now to move. To stand, if you like, to stretch perhaps, to take some deep breaths. And when you're ready to sit in silence for a little while, and listen to some beautiful music suggested by our member Kate Snewin.

INTERLUDE Sanctuary, Carrie Newcomer

<https://youtu.be/HjOioWTVAl4>

ADDRESS

'And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.'

Words from Genesis chapter 9.

A covenant is a promise, a commitment, to a way of living and being with each other, with the world, and with our god. It doesn't require us to believe the same things, but it does ask us to agree on a framework for our relating. On an arc of intention under which we might feel held and sheltered, loved and encouraged. Under which we can know we belong.

Very soon after I arrived in Plymouth – from Brighton – over 7 years ago now (I know!) I asked the congregation (some of you were here then) what you thought was the purpose of this church. I wanted to know what motivated you and why you thought we were here. [I'm sure Brighton is going through some reflection about who and why you are as you embark on finding a new minister yourselves.] Well I kept the answers I got then and had a look back through them this week, and I'll share just three of the shorter ones. They were anonymous so I don't know who wrote them.

To be a place that accepts ALL people, challenges received wisdom and provides solace and hope in the face of the world outside.

To be a welcoming community, providing loving encouragement and support to all seeking a place to explore their religious thinking and worship according to their consciences – free from creeds and dogmas. To continue this in perpetuity. (We'd better find a treasurer pretty quickly then.)

To build inclusive spiritual/religious community that fosters i) deep personal relationship with the divine, ii) loving community with each other, and iii) compassionate interdependence with the wider world, both locally and globally.

The word 'community' or fellowship came up a lot. A sense of welcoming and embracing all who walked through the doors was important – then the only way in then was, literally, through the doors. But the third example was the only one that used the word 'build'. 'To build inclusive spiritual/religious community'. That feels significant because community is more than simply being in the same place at the same time. Community *may* arise spontaneously in specific circumstances, as in Bob's story, where there is a particular shared and focused intention, for a limited period of time. But to be an ongoing community, in perpetuity, no less, any group needs to know what it's there for, what the point of it is, and to work towards that. In order to become beloved community, it really needs to understand its soul purpose and be committed to that.

As I said last week, the world desperately needs communities based on love and integrity. And early Christians, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, were committed to such a way of life: of quiet contemplation, prayer, simplicity, charity and forgiveness. They were focused far more on putting the teachings of Jesus in to practice together than they were on theology.

A spiritual community may not – does not – need a creed, or a dogma. But it does need *something* to hold a diverse – disparate – distanced community of freethinking people, often fugitives from other faiths, together under its umbrella. And though the general intention to be welcoming and supportive and to enjoy freedom of conscience is a lovely one, I'm not sure it's quite enough. In any case it clearly hasn't been enough for our wider movement, which has steadily lost numbers, and currently it's clearly not quite enough here either. Some sort of promise, agreement, covenant that provides a framework for a shared understanding of what we're about could really help.

I was given Carlo Rovelli's latest book for Christmas. You may know he's a quantum physicist with a remarkable knack for explaining the inexplicable. I just about managed to follow it, sometimes only clinging on by my fingernails. But towards the end of the book he writes, 'And so finally I can get to the point:...quantum physics is the discovery that the physical world is a web of correlations: relative information. The things of nature are not collections of isolated elements, in haughty individualism. There is a continuity between the world of meanings in our mental life and the physical world. Both are relations.'

We too are not collections of isolated individuals. We don't exist except in relation to everyone and everything else, which is another way of saying that we are interdependent, and part of the interconnected web of existence. It is only through our relationships with each other and with everything around us that we find ourselves, and what we may call God.

Like Bob, I'm guessing many of us have experienced a sudden and unexpected feeling of community, maybe in similar or in very different circumstances. A sense of purpose, a feeling of belonging, of working as a team, with an implicit understanding of what needs to be done. Perhaps we can remember or imagine what that feels like. It's wonderful. And transporting. And the sense of loss when it's over can be deep grief. Something like the feeling that another Bob – Bob Geldorf – expressed after managing to pull off the extraordinary feat that was LiveAid. He found himself wondering 'was that it?'

And then Myron's reading considered what it would mean to be a people of covenant, with a shared vision for how to live in this complicated, beautiful and broken world. A vision that believes we are most human when we bind ourselves in relationship. Not just in any relationship, of course – but in relationships of trust, and honesty and mutual accountability, relationships based on love.

What a covenant might look like for us would be for us to decide. One of the simplest and most frequently used by UU congregations is this:

Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its prayer; this is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

But as Rev. Victoria Safford says, whatever the wording, what matters most is that it's a living, breathing aspiration, made new every day, and regularly reviewed. Not something to

be enforced, but rather to be reinforced by a culture of forgiveness, grace and compassion, whenever we stumble or forget, as inevitably we will.

I hope we will try to create a covenant for ourselves, I think the process could lead us into a rich conversation and a sharing of ideas about why we are here together, and how we want to be together. How we hope to build our beloved community together. It's a process I hope we can dip our toes into in a couple of weeks' time, to test the water.

It's a process that surely would in itself, whatever the outcome, be a community building exercise worth embarking on.

May it be so.

We're going to sing again now. Just about all of the purposes offered back in 2014 included the words love, or compassion, support or encouragement for each other. So let's sing...

2nd HYMN: 204 (P) When I am frightened

When I am frightened, will you reassure me?

When I'm uncertain, will you hold my hand?

Will you be strong for me, sing to me quietly?

Will you share some of your stories with me?

If you will show me compassion,
then I may learn to care as you do,
then I may learn to care.

When I am angry, will you still embrace me?

When I am thoughtless, will you understand?

Will you believe in me, stand by me willingly?

Will you share some of your questions with me?

If you will show me acceptance,
then I may learn to give as you do,
then I may learn to give.

When I am troubled, will you listen to me?
When I am lonely, will you be my friend?
Will you be there for me, comfort me tenderly?
Will you share some of your feelings with me?

If you will show me commitment,
then I may learn to love as you do,
then I may learn to love.

Words and music © Shelley Jackson Denham (arranged by Jeannie Gagné)

CLOSING WORDS

May the quality of our lives be our benediction,
and a blessing to all whom we touch.

Amen

CLOSING MUSIC 'Nothing more', Alternate routes
<https://youtu.be/UwX905AgdPk>