

## **24<sup>th</sup> April 2022 – ‘Widening the circle’**

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

**GATHERING MUSIC** ‘Side by side’, Wilder Adkins

[https://youtu.be/tm1Ha\\_eyJrl](https://youtu.be/tm1Ha_eyJrl)

### **WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING**

Come, come, whoever you are.

Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.

Ours is no caravan of despair.

Come, yet again come.

Welcome to you all, whoever, however – and wherever - you are. A special welcome if you're joining us for the first time. We're delighted you're here, particularly as the theme of this service is 'Widening the circle'.

Let's begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle. And if you're at home, you might like to light a candle with me now.

### **Chalice lighting**

We open ourselves to worship today.

May the peace of this house bring us calm.

May the joy of this hour make our hearts glad.

May the challenge of this hour awaken our courage.

May the communion of this hour confirm our togetherness.

### **HYMN 172 (G) All are welcome here**

Now open wide your hearts, my friends,

and I will open mine,

and let us share all that is fair,

all that is true and fine.

We gather in this meeting house –  
people of many kinds:  
let us, below the surface,  
seek a meeting of true minds.

For in our company shall be great  
witnesses of light:  
the Buddha, Krishna, Jesus –  
those gifted with clearest sight.

Like them, we seek to know ourselves,  
to seek, in spite of fear;  
to open wide, to all, our hearts –  
for all are welcome here.

*Music by James Turlé, words by Peter Galbraith*

**Prayer** Richard S Gilbert

Universal Spirit

Let us make this place a temple of the heart's desire;  
Built from the hewn rocks of our individuality  
And the sure mortar of our shared understandings.

Let us make it an unwalled, unbounded temple  
Wherein all people may praise the highest things  
that give life meaning and worth,  
and draw us ever onward beyond our known selves.

Let us make of this place a centre of meeting for the lost and uncertain,  
that we may gain renewed hope to face life's joys and sorrows with enterprise and  
forbearance, and that we may know also a deep gratitude for all the opportunities of growing.

And let us make of this place a home in which dwell the spirit of love, peace and  
understanding. In this deep covenant let us join, now, and for evermore.

*Let it be so.*

Pause to reflect on all those who are suffering at this time. Those known to us, including our member Thelma who is still in hospital.

Those unknown, including all those in Ukraine, or fleeing Ukraine, or trying to build new lives outside their country.

We pray for all humans and all creatures whose homes are being destroyed by carelessness and greed.

May we all, together, find our way towards compassion, light and love, for the sake of us all.

Amen

### **STORY: The king's highway (anon) - ANN**

'Once a king had a great highway built for the members of his kingdom. After it was completed, but before it was opened to the public, the king decided to have a contest. He invited as many as desired to participate. Their challenge was to see who could travel the highway the best.

On the day of the contest the people came. Some of them had fine chariots, some had fine clothing, fine hairdos, or great food. Some young people came in their track clothes and ran along the highway. People traveled the highway all day, but each one, when they arrived at the end, complained to the king that there was a large pile of rocks and debris left on the road at one spot and this got in their way and hindered their travel.

At the end of the day, a lone traveler crossed the finish line warily and walked over to the king. They were tired and dirty, but addressed the king with great respect and handed him a bag of gold. The traveler explained, "I stopped along the way to clear a pile of rocks and debris that was blocking the road. This bag of gold was under it all. I want you to return it to its rightful owner."

The king replied, "You are the rightful owner."

The traveler replied, "Oh no, this is not mine. I've never known such money."

"Oh yes," said the king, "you've earned this gold, for you won my contest. "The one who travels the road best is the one who makes the road smoother for those who will follow."

## **READING: David Whyte (read at the GA meetings)**

Vulnerability is not a weakness, a passing indisposition, or something we can arrange to do without, vulnerability is not a choice, vulnerability is the underlying, ever present and abiding undercurrent of our natural state.

To run from vulnerability is to run from the essence of our nature, the attempt to be invulnerable is the vain attempt to become something we are not and most especially, to close off our understanding of the grief of others. More seriously, in refusing our vulnerability we refuse the help needed at every turn of our existence and immobilize the essential, tidal and conversational foundations of our identity.

To have a temporary, isolated sense of power over all events and circumstances, is a lovely illusionary privilege and perhaps the prime and most beautifully constructed conceit of being human and especially of being youthfully human, but it is a privilege that must be surrendered with that same youth, with ill health, with accident, with the loss of loved ones who do not share our untouchable powers; powers eventually and most emphatically given up, as we approach our last breath.

The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability, how we become larger and more courageous and more compassionate through our intimacy with disappearance, our choice is to inhabit vulnerability as generous citizens of loss, robustly and fully; or conversely, as misers and complainers, reluctant and fearful, always at the gates of existence, but never bravely and completely attempting to enter, never wanting to risk ourselves, never walking fully through the door.”

**INTERLUDE** ‘Meditation on a rose’, words by Rev Mark Hutchinson, from Cotswold Group, and music by Josh organist at Dublin Unitarians.

## **INVITATION TO STRETCH**

**ADDRESS: Widening our circle – making space**

Do you remember the first time you came here? How was it? How did you feel? What made you come? What were you looking for?

Every time someone makes the quite possibly terrifying decision to walk through our doors for the first time they take a risk, don't they. They make themselves vulnerable in an unknown space. And the moment they arrive they bring a gift. They widen our circle. Each time someone takes the plunge and makes their first click on the Zoom 'Join meeting' button they too expand this circle. Everyone who comes in brings with them their self, their vulnerability, their particular gifts, and their unique potential to make a difference to this community. And perhaps – just perhaps – they will find whatever it is they are looking for. Maybe, just maybe, this place could be their spiritual home. There is hope in that moment...

Each of us has done exactly this at some point. Every one of us once took the step of coming here for the very first time, and we have all made a difference simply by our presence, by being here and by being ourselves. And perhaps we've found something we were looking for along the way. I hope so.

The story of The King's Highway works on a number of levels. It's a story about the importance of care and compassion for others, which is a central part of any spiritual tradition. It's also a metaphor I think for the spiritual journey itself, and the need to clear away all the obstacles and debris of our cluttered minds - the grudges, fixations and distractions - if we are to live well and in harmony with the spirit. And the King could be a symbol of one of our great spiritual teachers – Jesus or Buddha perhaps – who weren't content merely with their own enlightenment but were committed to building a path, and teaching others how to follow it, and to clearing and smoothing the path for them.

What might the story mean for a spiritual community like ours? Well, we too are committed to care and compassion. We too understand the need to free ourselves from the debris of our compulsions if we are to live fully and well. And we too want others to find the benefits in a liberal religious tradition that we find ourselves. You could say it is part of our duty to clear the path for them, and to offer genuine welcome and hospitality if and when they come.

This week Sheila and Gill and I have been at our Unitarian General Assembly Annual meetings in Birmingham. They were held in the Hilton Hotel near the National Exhibition

Centre (NEC), which is a pretty soulless and bewildering place, to be honest, but it's functional and it's convenient, and the food's OK and beds are comfortable, and there's a swimming pool, which is nice. In fact it's one of the only spaces in the building that has natural light.

I went up a day early for a 'pre-conference' with other ministers, and for 24 hours we were a small group who all knew each other, talking about shared experiences we had in common and catching up with each other's lives, as well as taking part in some quite challenging sessions. It was bonding and supportive.

And then suddenly another 300 people arrived at the hotel, fresh off trains and motorways, which changed the energy completely of course. And for a while it felt as though we had lost something, which we had – we'd lost the intimacy and easy camaraderie we had enjoyed. But of course immediately we gained something else – the buzz and the excitement and the activity, the joy of meeting new people and making connections, and all the energy and life and inspiration that came with that.

We needed both, of course, the small safe group for shared concerns, and the much wider more generous circle. Church can and should offer both, and they should feed into each other in both directions.

Our Sunday services are public. I hope they feel properly held and safe. However, doors are open and anyone can come in. These weekly acts of worship are our most consistent offer, and we offer them not just to ourselves, not just to a known group, but to the world. That sounds a bit grandiose. But it's true. Though our building has a fixed location, our online community does not. Not only do we broadcast these services live on zoom but we also record them for YouTube. Hello to anyone watching us that way! Anyone can enter the building if they can get here, and anyone with access to the internet, anywhere in world, can join us online. So what we do here, at this time, is definitely not just for ourselves. This is service is not a small group activity, even when there aren't many of us here. What we do here is for anyone and everyone who might be watching and who might one day come.

Erica Hewitt, who teaches worship leading in the US led a very good workshop at GA (there were a lot of workshops at the GA). Hers was on 'revitalizing worship'. And one of the things she said is this: 'I teach all my students to preach as though everyone – young, old, black,

white, gay, straight, differently-abled, neurodiverse, joyful or broken-hearted – I teach them to preach as though everyone is *already* here’.

As though they everyone is *already* here. Because not only might they be – we simply don’t know who watches our services online, or reads the scripts on our website. But because this is how we remove the rocks and debris and smooth the path. This is how we offer genuine hospitality that goes beyond simply a greeting at the door. This is a genuine *widening the circle in advance* so that the space is already prepared for whoever comes, by whatever means.

That might sound like a big ask. But if you think about it, we’ve already made steps towards doing that for people with physical disabilities. We have a ramp, a disabled loo, and loop system. We have these facilities in place for anyone who might need them, *whether they come or not*. There’s more we could do, of course. In an ideal world we’d have a signer for people who are deaf, whether or not there are deaf people actually present.

We have done reasonably well at removing obstacles for LGBTQ+ people. For example we have registered our church for same-sex marriage, even though we’ve not yet held a same-sex ceremony here. But we have made ourselves ready to do so, and we can offer this for any couple who comes here who might want it. Again, there’s more we can do.

In other areas we have done less. We have not employed a Sunday school leader, so we are not ready for parents with young children. We have not considered what would make people of colour feel more welcome in this space, other than to include music and videos that show diversity, which is not enough. And we have not begun to work out how to make those who are neuro-divergent feel more at home here. Apart from mention on social media that this month is Autism Awareness Month. Did you know that? Well you do now.

If you think trying to cater for the needs of diverse groups sounds too ‘woke’ for your liking, then I refer you to Jesus who actively sought out all those who were marginalized and had no truck with judgmental temple authorities or their rules and regulations.

Our Sunday services are public spaces. But we do still need smaller spaces too. Safe spaces where it is possible to share our vulnerability; small groups where we can explore our spiritual journeys in greater depth. Playful spaces in which we can be creative and sociable.

We have some of those already – we can keep creating more – both in this building, online and out in the wider community. Church is where we take it – in the café, in the pub, in nature, anywhere.

Talking of being sociable, in one of the workshops I attended a young man made an interesting observation about coffee after the service. He said he'd noticed that when new people came to his chapel they usually wanted to ask questions spiritual questions. Whereas those who'd been there for years were more likely to be talking about the boiler. Sobering but true.

Widening the circle can be an ongoing spiritual practice. It's something we can each do personally. In our inner work we can consciously create more space for silence, for prayer, for meditation. We can practise compassion and kindness. We can breathe more deeply, pause more frequently, be more fully present. We can choose times to share more of our vulnerability and take a few risks. We can allow our lives to expand rather than contract.

But it's also something we can do collectively in church. How do you think we could smooth the path and widen the circle? How could we offer greater hospitality to those who are not yet here? What would have made it easier for you to come here for the first time? And what might make *you* feel more at home here now?

Hospitality begins by expecting *everyone* to come and preparing the space in advance, not waiting until visitors turn up and then wondering what to cook.

Let's get ready.

May it be so. Amen.

### **HYMN 195 (P) We sing a love**

We sing a love that sets all people free,  
that blows like wind that burns like scorching flame,  
enfolds the earth, springs up like water clear.  
Come, living love, live in our hearts today.



We sing a love that seeks another's good,  
that longs to serve and not to count the cost,  
a love that yielding finds itself made new.  
Come, caring love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love, unflinching, unafraid  
to be itself despite another's wrath,  
a love that stands alone and undismayed.  
Come, strengthening love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love, that wandering will not rest  
Until it finds its way, its home, its source,  
through joy and sadness pressing on refreshed.  
Come, pilgrim love, live in our hearts today.

We sing the Holy Spirit, full of love,  
who seeks out scars of ancient bitterness,  
brings to our wounds the healing grace of Christ.  
Come, radiant love, live in our hearts today.

*Music by Alfred Morton Smith © Estate of Doris Wright Smith.*

*Words by June Boyce-Tillman © 1993 Stainer & Bell Ltd*

## **CLOSING WORDS**

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere.  
Its temple all space, its shrine the good heart,  
Its creed all truth, its ritual works of love.  
May it be so.  
Amen

**CLOSING MUSIC** Wider circles, by Rising Appalachia

[https://youtu.be/wPE\\_atiTdA0](https://youtu.be/wPE_atiTdA0)